

My Mountain**A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation****By The Rev. CJ McGregor****Delivered on August 7, 2022**

A few years ago, I delivered a message with the same title of *My Mountain*. I've thought about that message for a while now and believe I left something out. I then asked if anyone here ever experienced what is called a mid-life crisis? Someone once said to me, "If it weren't so cliché, I'd think I was having a midlife crisis." A midlife crisis is experienced between the ages of 40 and 60. If you don't fit in that window, you either have something to look forward to or your out of the woods already having had yours. It was first identified by the psychologist Carl Jung and is a normal part of the maturing process. Most people will experience some form of emotional transition during that time of life. A transition that might cause them to take stock in where they are in life and make some needed adjustments to the way they live their life. Most seem to come through the process smoothly without making major life changes. And some of us don't. It gets messy. I once asked Richard if I had had a midlife crisis. He told me that the behaviors of a midlife crisis are my baseline and that it would be hard to tell.

We don't necessarily need to be having a midlife crisis to evaluate who we are and who we want to be. Take for example the pandemic. We all are changed as a result. Carol Elrod introduced me to the book *Second Mountain* by author David Brooks who explains this very well. In *The Second Mountain*, Brooks explains how individuals and societies can transition from selfish individualism to a focus on community. He believes that to achieve solidarity, wholeness and true happiness, we must shift our character from the hyper-individualistic first mountain to the more relational second mountain.

Every so often, you meet people who radiate joy—who seem to know why they were put on this earth, who glow with a kind of inner light. Life, for these people, has often followed what we might think of as a two-mountain shape. They get out of school, they start a career, and they begin climbing the mountain they thought they were meant to climb. Their goals on this first mountain are the ones our culture endorses: to be a success, to make your mark, to experience personal happiness. But when they get to the top of that mountain, something happens. They look around and find the view . . . unsatisfying. They realize: This wasn't my mountain after all. There's another, bigger mountain out there that is actually my mountain.

And so, they embark on a new journey. On the second mountain, life moves from self-centered to other-centered. They want the things that are truly worth wanting, not the things other people tell them to want. They embrace a life of interdependence, not independence. They surrender to a life of commitment. Does this sound like what have may happened to you?

Brooks explores the four commitments that define a life of meaning and purpose: to a spouse and family, to a vocation, to a philosophy or faith, and to a community. Our personal fulfillment depends on how well we choose and execute these commitments. Brooks looks at a range of people who have lived joyous, committed lives, and who have embraced the necessity and beauty of dependence. He gathers their wisdom on how to choose a partner, how to pick a

vocation, how to live out a philosophy, and how we can begin to integrate our commitments into one overriding purpose.

In short, this is meant to help us all lead more meaningful lives. But it's also a provocative social commentary. We live in a society that celebrates freedom, that tells us to be true to ourselves, at the expense of surrendering to a cause, rooting ourselves in a neighborhood, binding ourselves to others by social solidarity and love. We have taken individualism to the extreme—and in the process we have torn the social fabric in a thousand different ways. The path to repair is through making deeper commitments. In *The Second Mountain*, Brooks shows what can happen when we put commitment-making at the center of our lives.

Again, the first being the mountain society lays out for you, a mountain not of your creation. That mountain looks like whatever people tell you it looks like. For me, that mountain looked like going to school, getting a job, having a family, getting that promotion, getting that new title, getting that raise, getting that new house, getting that new car. It is centered around “me.”

The second mountain, however...that's the mountain you were put on this earth for. That mountain is less about the getting and more about the forgetting—forgetting of self. That mountain is what you say it is, not what everyone tells you it should be. The one thing I had forgotten to talk about in that message offered a few years ago was obligation. You see on our first mountain we are cruising along meeting the obligations that society and others have for us. It appears that on our second mountain we are free spirited, and that obligation should fall away. That's not true. As Unitarians we have obligations to think about. We are obliged to create the world we dream about. Sure, it is time to do what has meaning for us, but we must attend to this Unitarian obligation.

You see, we are not part of All Faiths simply to participate in committee work and other tasks. Our greatest commitment is spiritual in nature. Congregations are faith communities. Their ongoing purpose is to introduce people to a relationship with their faith tradition, which can be life changing. The congregation is a faith community and will ultimately find its place by clearly shaping its spirit, not its structure or its programs. We need to remember that some of our most essential learnings are not from our budget reports. We need to understand that the freedom we seek in order to move with confidence into the future will come from the strength of our spirits and not from our track record with attendance or financial giving. And so, All Faiths offers us opportunities to meet our Unitarian obligation of building the world we dream about. Connect with climate action, racial justice, homelessness, projects that bring joy and life to our community. Connect with LGBTQ rights and advocacy. It's all here on top of our second mountain, the mountain that allows us the freedom to pursue that which gives us meaning and that which allows us to fulfill the obligations of our faith.

I'm incredibly grateful for finding my second mountain. I've told you that for decades I worked as leadership in non-profit organizations. I was very good at what I did, developing programs, bringing millions of dollars in for the organization by expanding the organization and its services. I climbed the ladder quickly. But, my ladder was against the wrong wall, I was unhappily going through the motions of doing what was expected of me. I lost passion for the work long before I left it. One day I had had enough. I rose from my desk, said I quit, gathered my belongings and left never to return. I was free. This was a bold move that might seem irresponsible. Maybe it was, but I stood at the base of my second mountain exhilarated. I entered the ministry. I gave up on my individualism and moved toward communalism with the context of

a congregation. I began to live meaning fully and had a purpose. I took the risk and here I am. And now I will soon be off to develop and grow Unitarianism in another country thus fulfilling my Unitarian obligation. I wonder what your second mountain experience was like or will be. Again, I am incredibly grateful for my journey thus far, with all its ups and downs. I have truly been blessed with so many beautiful things in my life. I don't regret my first mountain and to think I don't have more of it left to climb seems egotistical to say. It takes climbing that first mountain to be able to see the second one though. We fight feelings of dissatisfaction—of feeling like we can do more.

Here's the truth. We exist on this earth for some undetermined period. During that time, we do things. Some of these things are important. Some of them are unimportant. And those important things give our lives meaning and happiness. The unimportant ones basically just kill time. Everything involves sacrifice. Everything includes some sort of cost. Nothing is pleasurable or uplifting all of the time. So, the question becomes: what struggle or sacrifice are you willing to tolerate? We all have a tendency to lose touch with what we loved as a child. Something about the social pressures of adolescence and professional pressures of young adulthood squeezes the passion out of us. We're taught that the only reason to do something is if we're somehow rewarded for it. And the transactional nature of the world inevitably stifles us and makes us feel lost or stuck.

Find a problem you care about and start solving it. Obviously, you're not going to fix the world's problems by yourself. But you can contribute and make a difference. And that feeling of making a difference is ultimately what's most important for your own happiness and fulfillment. And importance equals purpose. I dare say the pandemic had at least one practical advantage. It forced us to zero in on what's actually important in our lives and what's just frivolous and distracting. I ask people, "If you had a year to live, what would you do?" It causes people to really think about their lives in a different way and re-evaluate what their priorities are.

You may be coming down off your first mountain or have happily been on the summit of your second mountain. Either way to be healthy in body, in spirit, in relationship and in community we must take stock of where we are, who we are, and strive to be where we want to be and who we want to be living a life of purpose and meaning.

May it be so.