

## **Sermon Transcript**

### **“The Ripening Years” Janne Eller-Isaacs**

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When I was a young girl growing up in Tulsa, Oklahoma, we lived near an Osage elder. I loved the few times I was able to visit Jessie Undersprings because I always learned things from her. I remember visiting her once just before my eighth birthday. I was excited because my mother had finally allowed me to create the guest list and I think 40 children were invited. In response to my excitement, Jessie told me about a Native American tribe that didn't celebrate birthdays for any of its members. Rather, they celebrated the acquisition of wisdom of its members when it was agreed upon by everyone had occurred. Now, I don't know if Jessie made this up to inspire me to think differently about birthdays at a time when I was particularly birthday obsessed, but I have never forgotten her story. Even to an eight year old this made sense.

This service is dedicated to the proposition that we are like a piece of fruit, beginning as a divine seed and growing slowly into greater degrees of ripeness and if we're lucky into greater wisdom. Last week Katie Lawson eloquently described faith development and the challenges that face many of us as we seek to grow our souls, grow a stronger liberal religious movement and help our nation to ripen. This is a service about maturity and the challenges and opportunities that cause a ripening of our souls. Katie examined James Fowler's description of the stages of moral development particularly highlighting the transition from skepticism to a mystical understanding of the unity of experience.

I want to turn my attention to the qualities of spiritual maturation and the particular context and contour of that maturation in a liberal religious framework like our own Unitarian Universalism.

I've been working on this concept for a few weeks now, wondering what the qualities of spiritual maturation are. I have read the faith development theorists and religious wisdom through the ages. Fowler is right: there are certain common perspectives present in all religious systems, there are certain qualities that contribute to a healthy ripening. These qualities are simultaneously challenges and opportunities that face each human being. Once faced they become dimensions of a mature soul.

To grow and mature is the basic task of human beings. Philosopher and writer Erich Fromm posited that we have an inherent capacity for growth. At the same time, we can get stuck and remain fixed in certain stages and perspectives. But we are called by life and love and our way of the spirit to keep opening, to keep working to get it right.

As the poet Peggy Pond Church wrote:

“Love is no longer a theme for eloquence,  
Or a way of life for a few to choose whose hearts can decide it;  
It is the sternest necessity; the unequivocal ultimatum.

There is no way out. There is no country we can flee to;  
There is no person on earth who must not face this task now.”

The qualities of maturity are for me many and varied but interrelated. Howard Thurman, minister and mystic, once wrote that “everything that happens to you in your life is spiritual sustenance. Everything is usable for your spiritual development.” In order for our souls to grow, I believe that are a certain spiritual challenges that we need to face and with which we need to wrestle. These stumbling blocks can become stepping stones in the path of maturation and in the work of growing our souls.

I begin with the ability to absorb and transform suffering – in other words, to live through tragic and difficult times and go on.

Poppies are remarkable flowers. They can flourish in the harshest of conditions. Ground that can not sustain any other plant will host poppies. They are not great competitors, but they can survive where others can't. In barren lands around the globe, poppies bloom.

In the battlefields of Belgium, France and Flanders, red poppies bloom in a landscape still scarred with the ravages of ancient and modern warfare. Looking out over the fields the poppies remind us that we can survive the challenges that life presents us: that life continues after devastating death and destruction. This is the lesson of Easter, of rebirth.

So, I ask, can we continue to grow through the hard times? Can we flourish in times of demanding circumstances with little support or nutrients? And if the nutrients do arrive, can we turn the manure into sustaining life? As every gardener knows, the nutrients that we need for growth are often messy, smelly, nasty stuff. It is the hard stuff of life that teaches us who we are and what we need in times of struggle and despair.

The Buddhists have a concept of *tonglen* which is the ability to absorb and transform suffering. Transforming pain is a challenge of the human condition. We all know people who have succumbed to pain and suffering, or times in our own lives when we have. But when we are able to absorb and transform it, our souls grow. I know in my own life there is suffering that I can transform and then there are wounds that I will probably spend my entire life working on.

Another dimension of the mature soul is the ability to live with paradox and ambiguity. The invitation to live with ambiguity and paradox is at the heart of our liberal faith. We do not provide formulatic answers. We encourage people to embrace the mystery of life. As the process theologians describe it, ambiguity invites us to see the unity in the diversity, the tensions inherent in the whole and therefore the larger truth of life.

Being able to embrace paradox is the ability to hold a larger truth than any one single truth. When we can only see one dimension of life, then we cut ourselves off from the fullness that is

life. There are many truths that contribute to the unity of life. Paradox and ambiguity invite us into the wonder of not knowing, of the power of a larger faith that holds many truths and approaches. It helps us recognize that our individual truths are partial and limited.

A theologian recently studied Unitarian Universalism and he said the one thing that differentiates us from all other religious traditions is our commitment to inclusive pluralism. We want to be with people who believe and practice their religion differently than we do but with whom we share some common approaches and core values. We would actually feel diminished religiously if we were surrounded by folks who believed exactly as we did. This is the liberal way of the spirit.

This past week I heard a program about the history of Supreme Court on the radio. When asked the presenter did acknowledge that there is a clear discernable progression for most Justices to the left. He went on to say that he thought this was caused by continual exposure to many different opinions and viewpoints. It is the same with our liberal faith: it emerges in the encounter with other truths and perspectives.

Another quality of spiritual maturity is the attraction that beauty, mercy and justice hold for us. Harry Scholfield, one of our spiritual teachers and mentors wrote poems of kinship every morning as part of his devotional practice. He referred to them as you poems. One of his favorite poetry subjects was an old dying tree. He meditated on the tree regularly. In his meditations he did not deny the fact that the tree is dying, but he didn't turn away from its inspiring beauty either. He holds the picture of the tree often in his mind and this helped him contemplate his own impending death. Beauty sustains us. A terrible beauty can emerge in the midst of life's harshest realities. Our hearts grow so full from the deeper realities of life in its fullness, we sometimes feel like our hearts will burst into bloom. This religious path can not save you from death or save you from the thorns of life, but it can point you to the rose; to the beauty and sacredness of the rose. Beauty calls us as does the work of justice and mercy. The mature soul understands that more connects us than divides us.

The Latin phrase *Memento Mori* is freely translated as "Remember that you are mortal," "Remember that you will die," or "Remember your death." In ancient Rome the victorious general marching in a victory parade was always accompanied by a servant instructed to call out this reminder.

The core spiritual task of middle life is the recognition of the fact of our own mortality. Life is a gift which we are called to engage, but it is a gift with an expiration date. When I am really struggling with a person, if I step back and remember the tragic truth that both of us are mortal, my petty concerns tend to melt away. No, actually I am not being completely honest. First I think about their impending death and then slowly I begin to entertain my own as well. I do this because it helps me appreciate the compelling power of beauty, mercy and justice. It reminds me that I only have one life, one precious life and I had better work to get it as right as I am able. The fact of my own mortality keeps me in greater balance and more willing to begin again in love and forgiveness.

Jean Piaget describes this as intellectual uncentering which is the ability to imagine a universe without us at the center.

My father who recently survived a cardiac arrest was told by his cardiologist that he is living on borrowed time. "Enjoy your life as much as you can," the doctor advised. Since the arrest my father is more generous of spirit and more forgiving of himself and those around him. He hears the servant loudly and clearly and the servant's voice has helped him grow a larger soul.

Memento Mori contributes to a healthy dose of humility and contributes to a sense of abundant gratitude. The ability to cultivate gratitude for all that is: for the pain and ambiguity, for the beauty, for the small and ordinary paths to the sacred and for the unity of truth and consciousness which hold us all. Albert Einstein remarked that our separateness is an optical illusion. The sense of our mortality and cultivated gratitude for the gift of life contribute to the stripping away of that optical illusion.

Stemming from the heart of life is the ability to see the sacred in all. All is fodder for the spiritual life; all is an expression of the spirit of life. The ability to celebrate and mourn is instrumental in growing a soul, as is the ability to open one's heart in love. This does not need to be romantic love, but is devotional in its essence. It is covenantal in its character and calls forth the deepest parts of ourselves and our highest aspirations. From this love springs another dimension: the ability to commit to something larger than ourselves.

In writing about the seasons of the soul's growth, Parker Palmer posits a question for each season. He ends the seasonal cycle with the bounty of summer. The question for summer is: "Who is the bounty for?" So I ask you, who is your bounty for? What do you dedicate your life to or for?

I have bet my life on this faith. And part of that truth has to also contain the truth that I have also bet my children's life on this faith. Through difficult times, through deep crisis and challenge this faith in all its ambiguity and uncertainty, full of its shortcomings, and I still bet my life on it. I believe that this faith does provide conditions that enable others to increase in stature. My life is challenged and enriched by the demands my faith places on me. Though the vicissitudes of life, the core values of our faith provide a foundation for me.

Lastly I would add two qualities: the ability to risk and change and the ability to repent and forgive. In Judaism the concept of *teshuva* is at the heart of the High Holy Days. It involves the admission of brokenness, of problems, of sin. After the recognition, comes action which is the commitment to make amends or to attempt to heal that which is broken. Where is there brokenness in my relationship with people with my community, with the world? What can I do about it? These are the questions of *teshuva*.

The path of spiritual growth is full of challenges and invitations. In one brief sermon I'm afraid I've done an inadequate job of describing the qualities of this endeavor that I see. So I ask all of you, what do you consider to be the qualities of spiritual maturity? You need to complete this inadequate sermon: your life and the bounty you dedicate to what higher purpose.

There are challenges and opportunities at every stage. There is sustenance at every turn for our spiritual growth. May we have the eyes to see the sacred lessons, the mind to discern and the heart to incorporate the wisdom of the ages which is our inheritance.

May we, though the road may be muddy and rough, walk the path of greater wisdom, ripening over time, knowing that in some small way our growth contributes to the growth of the larger spirit of life.

May it be so and Amen.