

Two Steps Forward, One Step Back: The Never-Ending Dance of Becoming

Rev. Dawn Fortune

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the South Jersey Shore

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I want to share these words with you. They are an excerpt from a larger piece by the spiritual resources collective *enfleshed*.

Litany for Becoming

By [enfleshed](#)

To become is a lifelong process.

Nothing is constant,

not even the self.

We evolve in the midst of narratives meant only for some
and ways of being made narrow by fear and power.

We must, then, have the courage to listen to the truth of our own lives,
to the wisdom that comes from within—

responding without resistance or need to control,
but with welcome and curiosity.

This is what ensures our becoming is an unfolding
of our truest self.

This lifelong labor cannot be carried out alone. It requires help
from friends, and lovers, family, and creaturely companions
who bear witness to what makes us come alive.

And say to us, “Listen. Look. Feel. Pay attention to that.”

This is loving and being loved.¹

Growing and becoming does not happen alone; it happens in community. To achieve the kind of vulnerability that Brené Brown speaks of, we must have the courage to listen to the wisdom that comes from within, responding without resistance or need to control.

¹ <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/litany/litany-becoming>

Learning new things without resistance or needing some kind of control is a challenge for me. Sometimes the things that I learn require me to dismantle things I thought I knew, truths upon which I built my identity.

In the course of some deep spiritual work I was doing some years ago, I attended a workshop in which we were paired up and encouraged to say to our buddy, “If you really knew me, you'd know...” and then we would fill in the blank and we would do this while sitting very nearly in each other's laps, because these were workshops on connecting and intimacy and trust. And when you're that close to somebody and you're looking in their eyes and they're looking at you, listening to your words and your heart, and open to what you're feeling, it does not take long to get past the safe things such as “if you knew me you'd know that I like coffee ice cream” and deep into the really tender places where we would say things like “if you really knew me, you'd know that I'm scared a lot of the time.” “That I'm afraid people won't like me.” “That I'm afraid people don't really love me, they're just being nice.”

As you and your buddy sit, each taking two minutes – which I must tell you is a very long time to speak uninterrupted in this exercise – as you sit together, open, encouraging each other to be vulnerable, it can feel as though your heart is cracking open and letting in sunlight for the first time in a very long while.

For these workshops to be the sort of magic safe place that they can be, it requires that all of the participants be as open as they are able, but not necessarily all open in the same way. Each person has a journey that is theirs. Some are practiced at emotional sharing and have a high level of emotional intelligence or emotional literacy, and for them these sorts of conversations are a fun exercise. For others, though, it can be really scary.

When we commit to spiritual growth in a community such as this congregation, it works best and achieves that magic when each of us is able to approach the process with as much openness and honesty and vulnerability as we can muster. I don't have to tell you that spiritual growth is generally easier if we are willing to let go of things we think we understand, but that letting go is not always easy.

Sometimes we feel like all of this learning and growth and becoming is too much, is moving too fast, leaving us behind. I tend to feel this way about technology: it is advancing at a pace I don't feel able to keep up – and I often respond with resistance or a need to control.

Being in community means that we rely on one another. We are committed by a covenant to one another: to care for one another, to assist one another, to help each other grow, to respect each other's process and each other's search, and to engage in our own search in an open and honest, inquisitive way. We commit to being as open as we are able.

Sometimes when things are uncomfortable, our resistance gets our backs up. Instead of doing as the Buddha suggests and letting go of that which cause us anxiety, we dig in and we distance ourselves from our community that we love and that loves us. Sometimes we are even willing to hurt what we love in our effort to distance ourselves emotionally from it.

You've heard me mention the book "The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together," by Heather McGhee. In that book she talks about the fate of public pools in the United states during the 1960s. In the post war years, cities in the United states built public swimming pools. These pools were wonderful oases of relief from summer heat and an opportunity for children to learn how to swim, and they were generally free so everybody could go.

Well, not everybody of course, because this was the 1950s and 60s and segregation was still a thing. Once the Supreme Court declared that all public facilities had to be available to all people, which meant Black children and Hispanic children and Asian children, white leaders in those cities, rather than share their wonderful resource with people they deemed "other," simply filled them in with dirt or cement. Sometimes they were turned into a public park where you could still see the ladder that was never taken off the side of the pool before it was filled in and sodded over.

White people were so resistant to this change, they were willing to deprive everyone of the pool in order to exclude people they did not like.

It's a good thing that sort of thing doesn't happen nowadays, right? Oh, if only it were that simple.

People use a lot of different things as leverage to get what they want. Sometimes we call it negotiating, sometimes we call it boycotting, right? Everybody gets mad at Jeff Bezos, we all drop Amazon Prime, got it.

Now this happens in congregations all over. Ministers all around the country are struggling with this just as I am today. Because sometimes when people are angry about something, and maybe they complain but things don't get resolved to their satisfaction, they withdraw their support.

I'm not sure what they expect to happen if they starve the organization in an effort to change policy or direction. I am pretty sure that the institution will not get stronger when its funds are cut.

We must remember that we are in a covenanted community here, so when we don't like something and try to express that dislike with our money, that hurts the whole community. A congregation is not a corporation. It does not sell widgets; it changes lives.

In a covenanted community, we are committed to relationship. We are committed to taking turns speaking, to hearing everyone's voice, and to leading and being led. That's in your covenant. Nowhere does it say every single person will always be satisfied or comfortable. A religious community is not a candy store. We are not a gumball machine into which you put your quarter and turn the crank and get a prayer or a gumball. This is not a *transactional* relationship, it is a *covenantal* relationship.

In our families, sometimes decisions go the way we like them and sometimes not, but that's no reason to boycott the grocery budget or the electric bill.

When significant donors withhold their support, it hurts the whole and it gives an unfair amount of leverage to a small number of people. That goes against our democratic principles. Each person has a voice and each person has a vote; nobody has two votes or three votes or five votes.

Our covenant calls us to act as one once we have decided. If you're really not comfortable with the Black Lives Matter movement, then you certainly don't have to march in the parade with the Black Lives Matter banner, but to withhold funds because this congregation does support Black Lives Matter is misguided. That is not how congregations work.

And if that is the breaking point for you, then that is the breaking point. There are times when the prophetic work of a congregation makes people uncomfortable. But the discomfort of a few cannot postpone or derail the overarching goal for justice. If we waited for unanimity, we would never make progress. There would always be somebody who was too scared or unwilling or too resistant to go along with the larger body.

In this week's program the VUU, Church of the Larger Fellowship team leaders Aisha Hauser and Christina Rivera and frequent host Quiana Denae Perkins laid down some serious truth that sometimes made me uncomfortable.

These three women of color were responding in part to the recent guilty verdict for white Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, who murdered George Floyd, an unarmed Black man. They were expressing their frustration with the hesitation or resistance of white liberals to get on board with the movement to radically restructure, or in other words *defund*, policing in the United States.

Christina Rivera said "This idea that we are going to wait for everybody to get on board before we move along is ridiculous. Are we committed to liberation or not?"

Rivera went on to describe liberation as a boat upon which people would travel to reach freedom, or the promised land, or liberation.

I treasure the discomfort that I feel in those weekly broadcast talk programs. I can really feel myself respond to ancient lessons that I carry in my bones, that I am often unaware of, but that stiffen up and get resistant when I hear those women of color speak truth.

When I first started with the program I would sometimes try to defend or explain my point, but I have discovered that I learn more when I listen.

I don't have to intellectually understand the intricacies of what they're describing. I merely have to trust that they are the experts on their experience and I love them and I want to support them, so I believe them. And I believe them even when it means that I'm uncomfortable, that I'm traveling faster than I want to, when I didn't realize how wedded I was to my old ideas and that I need to go do some serious thinking. This happens almost every week. God bless them, they think I'm worth investing the energy in having that conversation, so I listen.

This is a delicate, uncomfortable conversation to have when we talk about people withholding their support for the larger congregation because of something that they do not like. I understand boycotts. To this day I don't buy Exxon gasoline since the Exxon Valdez disaster.

A congregation is not Exxon, it's not Amazon, it's not Walmart, it's not Philip Morris, it's not Cracker Barrel. A congregation is a community that relies on each of its members to be willing to be uncomfortable to support things that call us to be brave perhaps beyond where we think we can go.

I am willing to talk to anyone who is unhappy with my ministry, my prophetic witness, or my leadership. I am always interested in learning how to be a better minister. Hurting the whole congregation is behavior outside our covenant, and I invite those who feel so inclined to reach out and talk with me and I will listen.

In the meantime, let us offer a prayer for our leadership, our board leaders, our Finance Committee who this week will be putting the final touches on a proposed 2021-2022 fiscal budget that upholds our values and our commitment to justice and to prophetic witness.

Amen.