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Show who you are.

Showing Up

What does it take to bloom into our best selves? Our fully realized selves? I like to think that an embracing community can be a vital part of the equation.

When our daughter turned thirteen, we attended the bat mitzvah ceremony of one of her classmates. It turned our heads. All the people who had known this girl and helped raise her came together in one great cloud of witnesses—grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, teachers back to kindergarten, babysitters, schoolmates, neighbors, piano teachers, coaches, friends of the family. Everyone you can imagine.

And there, before all those people, not only were the traditional prayers offered and verses from the Torah recited and analyzed, but unforgettably and movingly, the girl's mother and father each stepped up to the microphone and, looking into her eyes, spoke of their love. They repeated to her their favorite baby stories and then little girl stories. They named her gifts and quirks, what made her *her*—all the while praising, lifting up, showering her with love. And they cried, as did we all. The service celebrated all of her. A magnificent beginning to the life before her.

Why can't we have ceremonies like that, I remember thinking. But no, we wait till after people die to speak that well of them! They never get to hear it! How much more meaningful for that girl to feel the love of community—to hear the people closest to her articulate their love.

The bat mitzvah inspired an 80th birthday party for my mother, in which ten dear women friends were asked to create small collages (that became a larger one) about their friendships with her—raising kids, gardening, making music together. We also invited them to say out loud what they loved about her. You can imagine that this put most of those ladies well out of their comfort zones, but they did love her and went along with the plan. Everyone cried that day, too.

A Unitarian Universalist child dedication has something of the bar mitzvah in the intentionality of those who gather and agree to “hold this child.” And in the case of young Niko, as would be true with a baby, the dedication is less a story of his childhood and more a naming of him and a naming of the raw materials he's been given, in personality and DNA, in his people and his heritage. These raw materials set the stage for his blooming.

Once, after a child dedication, UU Rev. Jane Rzepka addressed the infant in her sermon. His name was Jody:

“Jody, I don't know what your hopes were for your ceremony today, and I hope you're not disappointed, but there is a thing or two we did not do. We did not, I'm afraid, wash away your sins. We believe you're a good kid, Jody, worthy and lovely and miraculous, just as you are. We did not “save” you either. We don't know how. We will teach you and tend you and love you, and offer you our very best, but, sadly, we cannot promise you salvation. One more thing we didn't do to you: We did not stamp you with our beliefs.

We might have tried, I suppose, but Jody, we'd rather you use your own little head, your own little heart, and that imagination that's tucked away somewhere inside you. So we didn't stamp you or save you or absolve you, but we did something we believe is better. We gave you a name that you must make your own, and we gave you a religious family complete with noble tradition and wisdom and love."¹

Today, we "gave" Niko a name he must make his own. And isn't that our job, each one of us, to use our head, our heart and our imagination to make our name our own? Isn't that our birthright, to show up in life and to trust it...so that we can be revealed?

Showing the world who we are is easier said than done. Famous people—Woody Allen, Betty Ford, Elizabeth Gilbert—have written that 80% of life is about showing up. But showing up isn't a given. We can't show up when we're going through a rough patch and can barely get out of bed, much less leave the house. It is ours to show up when we can...and let's name that *that alone* can take courage.

It also takes courage to show the world who we are. All day, everyday, we choose how much of ourselves to reveal, how much of our thoughts, hopes, doubts and fears we want people to see. Sure, some people are open books—and some show far more than anyone wants to see. But many people show the world only a slice of who they truly are. For public consumption, we put out a safe version of whom we would like the world to see. Like the resume that puts a positive spin on everything. Or the person so well turned out and polished that we have no idea who they are.

It's one thing to take care not to over-share, but it's important too to not be so careful that you miss out on letting your own light shine.

A few weeks ago when the grays of winter showed no signs of letting up, we invited color into this space through your artwork, projects and music. At first, nothing happened. Was that too big an ask, I wondered? When we throw our energies into a creative project, we can feel vulnerable showing it to people. Even though—and perhaps *because* it contains a part of us we don't always share, we easily go that place of not being enough or not having enough: "It's really not that good, it's full of mistakes, so-and-so has the real talent here."

But then, items began to trickle in. And something shifted. As more projects took their place around the room, the pace picked up. For a while there, people dropped by every day or so with another contribution. I love that Normandie arrived today with her painting, "Canadian Marsh." Something new still appears most weekends. A joy of this unfolding is that, when you share a project, big or small, you show this family more of who you are. We know you better. Thank you.

The personal expression adorning this room feels like a garden in bloom. As we've shown up all winter in our grays and navy blues and blacks, we see each other's buds in various stages of

¹ Rev. Jane Rzepka, excerpted from a sermon at the UU Church of Reading, Reading, MA around 1987.

opening. But with this color and this imagination, with this music, we see and hear *unfolding*— blooming, alive and bright.

UU Rev. Lynn Ungar writes of the blue camas lilies of the northwest:

Consider the lilies of the field,
the blue banks of camas
opening into acres of sky along the road.
Would the longing to lie down
and be washed by that beauty
abate if you knew their usefulness,
how the natives ground their bulbs
for flour, how the settlers' hogs
uprooted them, grunting in gleeful
oblivion as the flowers fell?

And you — what of your rushed
and useful life? Imagine setting it all down —
papers, plans, appointments, everything —
leaving only a note: "Gone
to the fields to be lovely. Be back
when I'm through with blooming."

...Even in sleep your life will shine.²

"Gone to the fields to be lovely." Yes, we say, that little boy *is* lovely. Born good. May his life shine even in his sleep. Let us watch him bloom.

Alas, life is such that few of *us* go about our days energized with the joy of our own blooming! Instead, we see it in others. We see blooming when someone we care about is finally able to take a big step in life. We see blooming when someone living with addiction reclaims a sense of agency. We see it when a friend or partner lets go of a burden and starts again. And now and then—in big steps and in subtle ways—we see our children and children's children bloom.

"Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?"
[You may know these words of Marianne Williamson....]
Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of the Universe.
Your playing small does not serve the world....
We are all meant to shine, as children do.
We were born to make manifest the glory that is within us.
It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone.
And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.³

² Lynn Ungar, "Camas Lilies," *Blessing the Bread*, <http://www.lynnungar.com/poems/camas-lilies-2/>.

UUA moderator Jim Key and his wife once looked for years for a faith community that fit. Finally, in the deep south, someone at a church they were trying out said, “I think you’ll like that church across the street. Unitarian, I think?” At long last, they had found their spiritual home. The problem, Jim said, had been that Unitarian churches didn’t evangelize enough. As he put it, they hadn’t “come out”! You have to come out to be seen.

So go ahead, come out. Shine bright! Let your ideas, your knitting, your music liberate a neighbor to bring in her poem, his watercolor, that high-hat and snare. See how your joy or sorrow unlocks that of another. Notice how, when you show up to serve a ministry of UUFES—a committee, a Dinner Bell, spring clean-up day—people reveal a bit more of themselves. Like Niko’s yellow rose, they open. Trust your unfolding. Know that you are good and know that you are loved...and every now and then, dare to show a bit more of who you are.

So may it be.

³ Marianne Williamson, *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of "A Course in Miracles,"*
https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/17297.Marianne_Williamson.