

“Becoming Who We Are”

A sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
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Take a moment and hold your hands, palms up, in your lap. In your memory's eye, go back, back to the time when you were three years old. Try to remember what it was like to be three. Your feet would have been dangling off the chair, not yet reaching the floor. Someone would have helped dress you this morning and helped you remember to wash your face and brush your teeth. You would not have made your own breakfast. Your ears would still be hearing a multitude of sounds for the first time. Your eyes would still behold your world fresh and newborn. Your nose would allow you to breathe in scents not foreign but wondrously new and strange. Your hands would be ever ready to reach out and explore and resist any signs written or unwritten that warned: “Do not touch!” Your waking hours would hold invitation after invitation to hear, see, smell, touch, and yes taste it all. You were/are a young child, freshly planted, barely arrived on this planet that is the stuff of who you are, this planet that holds all of human history, this planet that will for better and worse be our human home for who know how long.

Hands in lap, consider these thoughts of the past moment. Ask yourself, observing closely these hands that have been as much you as your heart for however many years: Are they at all different from your three-year-old hands, from your 10-year-old hands, from your 30-year-old hands perhaps? Are they at all different from your 90-year-old hands, guessing that you are not yet 90 years old? Are they you?

Many years ago when I was Assistant Minister at the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York City, I was in the pulpit one Sunday morning, which also meant that I was greeting churchgoers on the front steps facing Lexington Avenue. Out of nowhere it seemed came this bright-eyed smiling woman with hair the color of sienna and the consistency of fleece. How familiar she is. I know her. Omigosh, it's Susan! I reached out to greet her. “Susan!” She returned my gaze, but without recognition. A pause ensued. “Jan? Omigosh, Jan!” She arrived with a man I didn't recognize. I knew that she had divorced the husband whom I had known her to be with. We had lost touch. How long had it been? Almost twenty years since we had connected. Yet, I felt a profound connection. She and her first husband and I and my previous husband had been the closest of friends. We had known each other when our children were born. We had gone through joys and crises. How had we lost touch? We immediately made plans to meet for dinner that evening, she with her fiancé, I with my husband, Dan. And then she said it: “You know, we hold one another's history!”

Years had gone by, yet we did/do hold one another's history. Look again at your hands. Whose history do these hands hold? Yours most certainly. And the history of who else, what else? You are your hands as much as your heart, your mind, your nose, your toes. How you are is a statement in the present tense, the only tense that is all embracing. You hold your history. We hold one another's history.

Perhaps the history that we hold and share goes back twenty years, maybe ten years, maybe a few months, maybe 20 minutes. Yet here and now this morning, we hold one another's history. We hold as well one another's future. As we gather and worship, as we consider that which is most worthy of our full attentiveness, that which is our "now" expands in directions that reach into our past, stretch into our future, and claim our present. Paul Tillich, one of the wisest and most erudite theologians of the 20th century, called it "the eternal now." Now is all we have. Now is everything we have. The only real moment is NOW.

And NOW is dynamic. The faith that we share is a living faith, with a symbol that embodies it—a flame dancing and soaring and consuming and illuminating and warming and amorphous—rising from a receptacle ancient with the strength of symbolism—a chalice, a vessel that grounds what it holds while not swallowing up the flame that rises from it. It is a "grounded now." This faith that we share, the hands that we gaze upon, the "I" that "we" contemplate, the "we" of which we are a part, are both grounded and dynamic. So as we welcome new members this Sunday morning, the "we" that comprise this congregation are grounded in history shared and now connected. The "we" that comprise this congregation are dynamic in the change that is inevitable, whenever newness joins with that to which some of us have grown accustomed. The we that comprise this congregation are becoming who we are.

I return to my friendship with Susan and more. How clearly I remember my daughter Shana, now a long-out-of-the-nest woman, as an infant. My then husband and I would enjoy dinner with our friends Susan and her then husband, Steve. With Shana nestled against me in the coziness of a Snuggli, we would leave our Manhattan apartment and head for the subway and Brooklyn and their brownstone in the Heights. Once welcomed into the warmth of their home, we would settle Shana in a tiny makeshift bed in the midst of us. She slept soundly as lively conversation and often Susan's exquisite singing encompassed her.

The years passed. Shana was about to be bat-mitzvahed. It's a long story; ask me later. I wrote her a poem. How I wish I had the text in front of me, but it was a gift given away. My core message to my daughter? "You are becoming who you are." A Bat Mitzvah is a rite of passage, but you are who you are AND you are becoming who you are. You are who you have been, and you are who you have not yet been. You are your own extended NOW.

As we consider who we are as a congregation of faith and practice, we are ever connecting dots that dance. Since the founding of this congregation in 1854, our history has never been linear. I prefer to think of it as a series of overlapping loops [motion], moving, receding, moving again and threading and re-threading and braiding with the unpredicted, with the new who become so a part of this congregation that it is as if they/you had always been in this extended family.

Then there is the living tradition with which this congregation is connected. We began as a Universalist Church. Was it inevitable that the Universalists would merge over a hundred years later with the Unitarians? Probably not, any more than the notion of fate is reliable. Yet through these overlapping loops of connection with past, present, and future, it came to pass. In 1961 the Universalists and Unitarians merged into the Unitarian Universalist Association, and this congregation morphed into the Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden. We can imagine that the Universalists contained the seeds of Unitarians and the Unitarians contained the seeds of Universalists early on, but for every living entity there are infinite possibilities.

We are and will continue to become who we were and who we are. This is not fate, but the phenomenon of possibility.

So many years ago I could have said that my friendship with Susan was becoming what it was, but the specifics weren't inevitable. So many years ago I could have written that Shana was becoming who she was, but the specifics weren't inevitable. As you look at your hands and strain to recall what they looked like, felt like, when you were just three, you could say that your whole body, your whole "you," would become what it was then; though your hands might now seem unrecognizable to that long-ago three-year-old. You are literally holding your history, and you are literally holding your future.

On this New Member Sunday, we stand on a threshold, one of countless thresholds that mark another amazing NOW. We hold one another's history. AND we hold one another's future. We are now, and we are becoming. We hold one another's NOW, and most wondrously, we hold one another.

Let us never stop holding one another, open, ever open, to life that calls us on and on and on into whatever grace of beloved community we find ourselves. May it be so. Amen.