

The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness

Sermon by Rev. Hannah Petrie

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PRAYER

Let us open ourselves to all that may be able to teach us and transform our lives – let us open ourselves to faith.

In a world that is changing so fast, let us find our anchor that provides us with peace of mind, and with clarity of purpose.

We throw out our anchors when we know where we are, and why we want to be there. Let us have the courage to examine the extent of our awareness.

As the world gets more worried, may we allow our spirits to grow more confident. Let us not fear the hard work this entails.

May we remember that our lives are only one moment of eternity, and that it is wise to keep things relative.

In spite of the storms that necessitate rebuilding, life goes on. May we have faith in humanity's capacity to heal itself, to progress, to reach ever higher means of health and sustainability.

Rather than surrender to the fears that can paralyze us, let us surrender to a faith that can remove all limits – a faith of hope, of confidence, and of peace.

And may we realize that we find this faith only in our opening to others, within the beloved community, within the saving grace of our vulnerability.

In vulnerability, may we find our freedom. AMEN.

SERMON

The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness¹

Do you remember a board game from the early 80's – called Opportunity Knocks? No doubt the game surfaced in a time of economic optimism for the country. The board game that would authentically reflect our times now might be called "Anxiety Knocks." With phrases like *financial market crisis* and *troubled asset relief* and *America could be another Argentina* flying around the media waves, it is challenging to *not* be infected with the anxiety bug.

But anxiety knocks, and we have to open the doors of our homes to keep living in the world as it is. How do we confront anxiety? It is symbolic that the heart of the financial market crisis is in the matter of mortgages. To own a home is the quintessential American Dream, and it is distressing that the irresistible, warm idea of home ownership could be the cause of a total breakdown. If home is where the heart is, it is heartbreaking. In this brave new world, the concept of home is changing fast. We may discover that home is in fact in the mind, and in the ways we think about security, and money, identity, even love. Is the question of *how do we confront anxiety* a religious question? It is if we so choose.

¹ The title of this sermon is taken from one of the great intellectual achievements of the 20th century, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, by William James, first published in 1904. In this book James catapulted the field of psychology into religious thinking. The Religion of Healthy Mindedness is one of the chapter titles.

Religions offer a framework for one's worldview, each one based on its historical ties to tradition and culture. Within a framework, we hope to find the home of our faith – but it is important to think of faith as something much more than theological, or creedal. What is faith?

James Fowler, renowned in the field of psychology of religion, offers a helpful definition for us. Fowler does not use the word faith to describe Christian faith or any particular brand of faith. Rather, as he puts it, faith may be characterized as a centering process. It underlies the formation of beliefs, values and meanings that gives coherence and direction to people's lives. Faith links people in shared trusts and loyalties with others, and empowers them to face and deal with the limit conditions of human life.²

Fowler's emphasis on 'limit conditions' is interesting. The current financial crisis is a crisis of faith, of confidence. Will investors have confidence and faith in the American economy? How good is an economic model that relies on faith? Is this crisis trying to tell us something about the limit conditions of a global market economy? Is this a faith we need to re-examine?

Thankfully we don't have to answer *that* question this morning. Today we are thinking about the faith that Jim and I hope brings you here each Sunday morning.

One of the mantras of liberal religion is that an unexamined faith is not worth having³, built upon Socrates' notion that an unexamined life is not worth living. Some go so far to say that even if your faith is correct, if you have not examined it, it is wrong to have it.⁴ Toward the end of examining your own personal faith, I'd like to offer you some tools today that you may find helpful. The benefit of examining one's faith is that faith, then, may become a tool itself, a trusted tool that helps you to live the best life you can live. If we can do this, chances are we will be better equipped to not allow anxiety to get the better of us. The goal is not to be anxiety-free, for anxiety is a part of life that alerts us to danger. Anxiety is often what forces us to move forward in life, to try a new path. My message is that, while the anxieties of our time are real indeed, we can always choose our response to it – a mindful response that is healthy and progressive.

We *all* know about unhealthy responses to anxiety. They are myriad: overeating and overdrinking, relationship tension - depression is a big one. These problematic responses can become very serious. We often forget that faith is one of the best tools to use in ensuring the healthy response to anxiety.

I encountered James Fowler during the Neighborhood Church Board of Trustees retreat that we had in August. Retired UU minister Ken Collier presented Fowler's stages of faith, that Ken said were better to think of in terms of concentric circles – the reason being that, throughout life, we tend to move back and forth between stages; you can envision it as moving in and out of the bigger and smaller circles. Even if you've gone through a stage, you might return to it, and begin again.

So let's take a look at these stages – they begin when we are very young. The smallest circle in the center represents the earliest stages of life. We have heard how developmentally important the first two years of life are; they form the basic rituals of care and mutuality. Learning to trust adults will lay a strong foundation, or indicate ways that faith may have to be rebuilt later in life.

Once language is learned, imagination, stimulated by stories and symbols, and not yet controlled by logical thinking, combine with perception and feelings to create long-lasting faith images, that may be reworked later in life. In the first stage, beliefs tend to have literal interpretations.

² From Faithful Change, by James Fowler, p. 56, but this was taken from a 2006 article from the website, *the journey, navigating the postmodern landscape without losing your mind or faith*: http://thejourney.typepad.com/the_journey/2006/07/stages_of_faith_2.html

³ James Luther Adams said this, and all his writings are worthwhile and recommended. It's good to start with the JLA Reader, a little orange book, by Skinner House Press.

⁴ W.K. Clifford's thought, from an essay that may be entitled, *The Ethics of Belief*.

In the second circle out, older children learn the ability to think logically - the real is sorted out from make-believe, the actual from fantasy. We can enter into the perspectives of others. One sees and knows that others have interests and needs different from one's own, and justice becomes understood in simple terms of equality and moral reciprocity. If there is belief in God, it tends to be anthropomorphic. God is stern and powerful, like a parent, and rewards people when they do right, and punishes people when they do wrong.

This is the stage of the "imperial self," so-called because selfhood is embedded in its needs, wishes, and interests. It's all about you. One does not examine those needs, wishes, and interests; they are simply there. The imperial self can be kept in check by loving restraint – ongoing relations of trust and care make it possible later to reflect on the deeper sources of motivation in self and in others.⁵

Now, the third through fifth circles out is when things start to get more interesting for us, as adults. It's important to note that everyone proceeds from stage-to-stage at his or her own pace. While the third circle out typically begins in adolescence, for many adults it becomes a permanent place of equilibrium. As Fowler puts it, "It is a 'conformist' stage in the sense that it is acutely tuned to the expectations and judgments of significant others - and does not yet have a sure enough grasp on its own identity and autonomous judgment to construct an independent perspective."⁶

This may describe the people that are content to remain in the faith tradition in which they grew up, because they will not significantly critique it. While beliefs and values are deeply felt, there has not been occasion to step outside them to reflect on or examine them explicitly. There is an ideology, but the person is, in a sense, unaware of having it. Authority for belief, religious and moral, tends to reside with one's parents. Their teachings and standards are identified with, and one feels they are his or her own. People in stage three often belong to faith communities that limit questions about belief, and also tend to cling to the notion of being the *only* faith tradition that is "right."

Of course, the UU faith tradition encourages quite the opposite, starting with our Coming of Age program for middle-schoolers. Offering a stimulating and critical environment is what helps ensure that most of us who grow up UU make it to stage four. UU or not, it is the encounter with different experiences or perspectives that lead to critical reflection on how one's beliefs and values have formed, that makes the jump to stage four possible. Leaving home - emotionally or physically or both – often precipitates the kind of examination of self, background, and life-guiding values, that allows us to transition.

And those who grow up UU, and make it to stage four, often do not remain in the UU tradition, as some of you with grown children are well aware.

The transition to stage four can be a frightening and disorienting time of moving apart from one's conventional moorings. Many of you may well remember this transitional stage of your life, or are possibly in the midst of it, for as Ken pointed out at the Board retreat, most Unitarian Universalists are in the fourth stage of faith development.

In this fourth circle out, one can take responsibility for one's own commitments, lifestyle, beliefs, and attitudes, due to critical reflection on both self and ideology. One is conscious of the sources of one's identity, having had given thought to choosing them. It is typically a "demythologizing stage," when symbols are translated to conceptual meanings. While identity and worldview are differentiated from those of others, and these others are tolerated and even respected as being right for others, there may still be a sense of being "more right" and some self-satisfaction in that. Stage four is focused on what we can be conscious of, in the interest of self-certainty.

As Fowler points out, the dangers of stage four are in its strengths. He writes, "an excessive confidence in the conscious mind and in critical thought [can become] a kind of second narcissism in which the reflective self over-assimilates the perspectives of others into its own world view."⁷ In other

⁵ Faith Development and Pastoral Care by James Fowler, pp. 62-63.

⁶ Stages of Faith by James Fowler, pp. 172 – 173.

⁷ Same, p. 182 – 183.

words, we can put *too much* confidence in our faith, at the risk of being arrogant. We can listen to the perspective of another, translate it to make it fit into our own orderly worldview, and conclude that we get it, when in fact we may get very little.

Does this all make sense? I appreciate your patience with all the intellectual banter, and hope that I haven't lost too many of you. Here is a down to earth recap of Fowler's faith stages we have covered so far: In stage one and two, it's all about me. In stage three, I have my belief system and it is the *only* belief system to have. In stage four I have arrived at my faith and acknowledge there are other worthy faiths, but mine is still better.

So what do you think stage five is about? This is the one I want us to think about most, because as Ken said to the Board, stage five should be the level of faith to which UU churches strive.

In the fifth circle out, we are not worried about whether others' faith is correct, and we are also not worried whether *we* get it either. We accept that our understanding of faith is quite limited, and yet this opens the door to a faith that is limitless. Stage five is when we come alive to paradox and the truth in apparent contradictions. I may not be very good at describing it – for while I'm curious about it, I'm only beginning to conceive of it. I turn 35 this week, so I'm grateful I get - I hope at least - another 50 years to figure it out. Fowler's sixth stage of faith is reserved for the prophets, when nirvana and such is reached, so we're not even going to look at that today.

But the fifth stage of faith is worth looking at, because it is a more realistic goal. Stage five represents a surrender of the ego, and can be one of the greatest antidotes to anxiety. In complete acceptance of our limitations, there is peace. Fowler says that "What the mystics call 'detachment' characterizes stage 5's willingness to let reality speak its word, regardless of the impact of that word on [our] security or self-esteem."⁸ This faith is ready for significant encounters with religious traditions other than its own, expecting that truth has disclosed and will disclose itself in those traditions in ways that may complement or correct its own.

What this means is we may get to go back in our lives, and revisit symbols and meanings that went unrecognized in the interest of Stage 4's need for concrete terms. We allow symbolic power, that we may have discarded, to reunite with the conceptual meanings we worked hard to create. We open ourselves again to the possibility of their power.

In other words, we admit that, in stage four, the power of symbols may have been thrown out with the bath water - symbols such as God, or salvation, surrender, or prayer, communion, or any symbolic rituals. So there may be a reclaiming and reworking of one's past. For those of you who grew up in a very different tradition from liberal religion, this can be a sea change – a way to integrate the past so not all is lost. Fowler says, "There must be an opening to the voices of one's 'deeper self.' This involves a critical recognition of one's social unconscious – the myths and archetypal images built deeply into the self-system, by virtue of one's nurture within a particular social class, a religious tradition, ethnic group or the like."⁹

The strength of stage five faith is a capacity to see one's religious tradition's most powerful meanings, while simultaneously recognizing that they are relative, partial, and inevitably distorting apprehensions of transcendent reality. Stage five can appreciate symbols, myths and rituals – its own and others' – because it has been grasped, in some measure, by the depth of reality to which they refer.¹⁰

I could go on, but you may prefer that I do not. ALL of this stuff, these stages of faith, may or may not be helpful to you. It is terribly abstract, and it is only one examining tool to try. And you may or you may not wish to examine your faith. That is up to you. The best thing about a liberal, religious community such as this one, is that you can always come as you are, and be where you are. You are welcome here, regardless.

⁸ Same, p. 185.

⁹ Same, p. 198.

¹⁰ Same.

And for this reason, Jim and I hope that, during these uncertain times of anxiety, Neighborhood Church may be an oasis from the anxiety, a place that is safe, and provides comfort to your spirit each week; a place where you may give attention to what matters most; a place where you may connect with a power that puts all the fervor into perspective; a place where you can engage healthy-mindedness; the place you can call your spiritual home.

You can connect with this power by connecting with others – we grow spiritually in community. The Chalice Circles program at Neighborhood Church is one of the best ways to open ourselves and connect – through small group ministry, it is the way you can minister to each other, by listening to the spiritual journeys and theological perspectives of your fellow church members and friends. Sign-ups for Chalice Circles begin today, on a table in the narthex.

When anxiety knocks, remember that this place, this sacred place, is here for you. Ours is a faith that does not provide answers, but instead hands you tools to find your own answers. Ours is a faith that *knows* vulnerability is more powerful than strength. Ours is a faith that offers peace when we are done trying to understand.

But above all, ours is a faith that is free, and welcomes the mind to dwell where it may dwell, and to soar where it may soar. You are free here, and you may rest here. Welcome home.