



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

### Focusing Our Inner Light

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Throughout written history, many of our most celebrated poets and philosophers have taken their inspiration from nature and trees. Thoreau treated them as learned companions, saying that he "frequently tramped eight or ten miles through the deepest snow to keep an appointment with a beech-tree, or a yellow birch, or an old acquaintance among the pines."

Perhaps you've also had a plant-life-inspired moment of awe or glorious peace and wisdom. Today I want to draw our attention once more to our friends, the tree, the bush, the blade of grass.

Have you ever noticed the different natures of the green of a tree? How there is a deeper, darker shade of green when the sunlight reflects off of a leaf or a blade of grass? And how, if you turn and look at the same leaf once more with the sun shining this time through the leaf, that the green is an amazing, vivacious, delicious, young, bright, joyous shade of green? How interesting. With the light on it, it's a darker ordinary leafy green. With the light shining through it, it's a brighter joyous leafy green. If you haven't noticed this before, I urge you to inspect for yourself when you walk outside today.

So what does this mean? The scientist inside me would tell you that it's simply the difference between reflected and transmitted light and how as light waves hit an object, they transfer energy into the electrons of the atoms of the object which start vibrating, and how those vibrations can be transferred through the bulk of the material or at the surface of the material to neighboring atoms which also vibrate until the light is re-emitted by the object.

But the spirit inside me would draw a different meaning. She would say that of course the light is different when it shines through us rather than on us! Of course something is more luminous, brighter, and lovelier when light shines through it, illuminating it through and through. Of course being in the light and having it reflect from your surface would never be as lovely, never be as meaningful or special as light emanating throughout your being.

Nature's little hidden optical message reminds me of times when I've been in both situations - wonderful times where I let the light shine through me, and not so proud moments where I let it shine on me. I remember reaching out to a friend, distant from his parents, unsure of the need for other people in his life. I remember him telling me that my continued love and friendship made him go up and hug his mother one day, and that he found later that she had spent the day in tears while working her shift at the laundromat, so wordlessly happy to have connected with her son. That moment had nothing to do with me, so much as it had to do with harnessing the power of love through me to another person.

I remember another moment, not my best, where someone walked into a room where I had worked with two colleagues and, impressed with the work, looked at me and said "This was your idea, wasn't it?" Rather than correcting her, I smiled smugly. That fleeting feeling of being important and having the light shine on me... that was most certainly not worth it. Sometimes in my mind's eye I recreate the scene the way I would have liked it to go had I been wiser, more complete, more centered at the time. I imagine attributing the work to my teammates and saying "No, we're a team." What a terrible loss of an opportunity to grow a feeling of kinship and togetherness with my teammates.

Isn't it difficult to rid ourselves of ego? And why should it be so? Is there really any moment of selfishness or pride, any moment where we have been self-serving, that can trump the warmth of positive interaction with another living being, the knowledge that just by being there, we brought joy to someone else?

I'd like to pose a few more reflective questions. What example comes to your mind of a situation where you let the light shine through you, or where you let the light shine on you? And what was the result? Did it provide an opportunity to further a warm relationship with another living being? Or, did it leave you with a

short-lived feeling of importance that faded into emptiness? If you were to re-write that moment, what would it look like?

At this point in our sermon class, one of the other students said to me. "Ooh, Ego. Let's talk about that." The underlying question being: How do we move away from this narrow side of ourselves, and into a deeper, satisfying relationship with both those surrounding us and with our very selves?

Here is a first attempt to frame that important conversation.

What truly separates us from others? In the poem by Alicia Chambers we learned that the answer is nothing. We are made up of and impacted by all the influences in our surroundings, both those that are warm and comforting, and those that make us cringe.

What do you have inside your body?

I have that friend  
Who credits my love as a catalyst.  
He opened up his heart to his mother  
Through the singular act of a hug  
Leaving her joyful tears to wash away the stains at the Laundromat.  
I have that friend  
Inside this body.

But I also have that coworker  
Friendly smile replaced by surprise and then hurt  
At being marginalized  
By my simple, smug silence  
Inside this body.

Who do you have inside you?

Sometimes seemingly simple acts of kindness stay with us. On my commute home, there is a stretch of street that is packed with cars each evening. Drivers anxious to get home and unwind, see their family or cat or dog or favorite show, just as I am. Each day I pull up into the middle lane, parallel to this long line of cars, signaling to pull into my driveway. I don't expect that anyone will let me in.

And each time I am surprised by this row of strangers who are stopped at a red light. By the complex maneuverings several cars take, pulling fwd to cram next to their neighbors, moving in reverse to give me more space, pulling to the side so my bumper can clear... 3-4 drivers working in unison to make my return home happen a few moments sooner. And all I can do is smile and wave, embarrassed and grateful for their efforts on my behalf.

Now I'll tell you a little secret. I've noticed that this magic only happens when I make eye contact with the other drivers. That moment of connection, of shared understanding, catalyzes this complex ballet.

So now I have all of these compassionate rush hour drivers  
Inside this body.

And there is some choice here, in terms of what we want inside us. What memories, people, feelings we want to become a part of us. So the question then becomes, not just "What do you have inside your body?" but "What do you *want* inside your body?"

What do we *want* to become a part of our make up? And how do we make that happen?

I'll share a little bit of an odd story with you here. My husband and I used to have guinea pigs. On a ride back from the vet one day, we were stuck in traffic on the freeway. I had a long-haired piggy, Old Man Winter, sitting on my lap.

As we sat there in traffic, not moving, I looked to my right. In the car next to us, there was a young woman at the wheel with her window rolled down. She had a cigarette in one hand, and a Kleenex in the other, and she was sobbing violently.

I didn't know what to do. It was both difficult and awkward to see another person, a stranger, in so much pain. Do I pretend I don't see her to save her embarrassment? (As if expressing emotion should be embarrassing, and yet in our culture it often is.) Do I do something? What? I don't even know her name, let alone what she finds comforting, or if it's even my place to try.

After some discussion with my husband, I settled on the following. I rolled down the window. Held my guinea pig up, and said "Old Man Winter hopes you feel better." It was really the kind of solution a five-year-old would have thought of.

Apparently that's not a bad thing. The young woman laughed, Old Man Winter and I felt momentarily useful, and just then traffic started moving again. Thirty seconds later she pulled up next to our car and yelled in "Thank you for caring." She was smiling though I'm sure she also still harbored whatever pain had caused her tears.

I never saw this woman again.

But both her pain and her smile are  
Inside this body.

These moments of kindness from others, whether strangers or friends, whether initiated by them or us, they all become a part of our make up. So the question remains, "What do we *want* inside of us?"

As food for thought, I'd like to share with you this quote from American writer and theologian Frederick Buechner: "Compassion is sometimes the fatal capacity for feeling what it is like to live inside somebody else's skin. It is the knowledge that there can never really be any peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy finally for you too."

When we leave here today from this blessed community, let's take a moment to look at our and Thoreau and John Muir's good friends - the leaves, the grass, the trees. Next time we're at a window in our workplace or our home, let's take a look at the sunlight as it filters through the trees. And let's reflect on what the next opportunity might be where we can step outside of our egos to allow the natural light to shine through us as we connect with another person.