

Learning to Be Human
Rev. Cathy Rion Starr
Unitarian Society of Hartford, 1/13/19

“The perfect normal person is rare in our civilization.” Karen Horney

“I think one of the terrible things in the world is that we are so inclined to think in black and white, hero and villain, good and bad.... If we could only learnt hat the world is big enough for all of us.” ~Marvel Comics writer-editor Stan Lee

Reading: Guest House by Jalaluddin Rumi, translation by Coleman Barks (The Essential Rumi)

This being human is a guest house.

Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!

Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice.
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.

Be grateful for whatever comes.
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

Sermon:

Two years ago, Uber's then-CEO got into a heated argument with an Uber driver at the end of a ride. The driver takes the opportunity to talk to Uber CEO Travis Kalanick about decreasing pay for drivers:

Kamel, the driver, points "his finger at the chief executive and telling Kalanick that no one trusts him anymore... 'I lost \$97,000 because of you; I'm bankrupt because of you,'" he said. "You keep changing every day. You changed the whole business."

"Bullsh--," Kalanick said over Kamel's shouting. "You know what? Some people don't like to take responsibility for their own s---. They blame everything in their life on everyone else."

He climbed out of the car, spitting "good luck" behind him.ⁱ

Kamel had a dashboard camera that recorded the whole ride, and, as things do in this day and age, it went viral, thus prompting Kalanick to send an apology email to the whole company for his rude & disrespectful treatment behavior.

The friend who first told me this story said that Kalanick wrote in this apology about how he was still *learning to be human* – admitting that he's not fully formed, still making mistakes ...and learning to be human, in relationship to other humans – with compassion and integrity. My friend's point is that our society doesn't train us to be human – it trains us to do more, produce more, be more, get more – to serve the extractive economy rather than to serve love, justice, joy, and community.

Well, it turns out my friend remembered the story wrong. Travis Kalanick didn't actually say "I am still learning to be human."but I loved that phrase so much that I chose to preach on it anyway!

What he actually said in an email to all employees was:

(to paraphrase) I did not behave in a way that makes us all proud, and that cannot be explained away. ... "I must fundamentally change as a leader and grow up. This is the first time I've been willing to admit that I need leadership help and I intend to get it. I want to profoundly apologize to Fawzi, as well as the driver and rider community, and to the Uber team.

—Travis"ⁱⁱ

It's hard to know when an apology is a real apology in the high-stakes and highly public world of Silicon Valley. Kalanick was forced to resign a few months after yelling at this driver in the wake of several scandals, including a culture of sexual harassment and discrimination within the company.

For the moment, I want to take Kalanick at his word and honor it. He doesn't hem and haw with excuses or deny what he did. He says directly "I can't explain away what I did – I need to change."

It is so seldom that a such a high profile public leader says “I messed up. I am still figuring out this being human thing.” But the reality is that we are ALL messing up all the time. We are ALL still figuring out this being human thing.

Many of you have heard me say (especially when you’re feeling inadequate or not doing enough) that church is a place we come to practice being human – not to achieve perfection, but to be our fully imperfect, beautiful human selves.

William Ellery Channing, the famous 19th century Unitarian minister, wrote that the purpose of life is the “unfolding and perfecting of [our] nature(ourselves).”ⁱⁱⁱ The unfolding and perfecting of our nature – a key part of our UU faith.

I’ll talk about unfolding in a moment – but let’s first take the perfection piece: I don’t agree with Channing. it’s a myth! It’s an impossible lie! As the quote by Freudian psychologist Karen Horney says on your order of service, “the perfect normal person is rare in our civilization.” Not just rare, but nonexistent! None of us is fully normal (whatever that is), and none of us is perfect.

That doesn’t stop me from thinking that I could be perfect if only.....I tried harder, worked harder, exercised and prayed more, studied more, had more time.....slept more! I’m sure some of you, like me, hold the myth of unrealistically high expectations and perfection for yourself – and then constantly fail to meet it. Or we hold OTHERS to those same mythical expectations that we have of ourselves and are mad or disbelieving when they can’t meet them either.

Like when I ask our 6 year old to clean her area at home and what’s really happening is that my own mess is driving me nuts – so I focus my frustration on her mess instead.

The myth of perfection is a setup for failure – but it’s a prolific myth in our culture. Whether it’s beauty advertisements with impossibly thin and air-brushed models, or the seemingly perfect family next door or the colleague who seems to have it all figured out. The grass is always greener and perfection can seem like a possibility.

I love Channing’s concept of the “unfolding of our souls” more than the idea of perfecting them. This is a core UU idea: this idea that we are always works in progress, that we always have the potential for improvement, for learning, for growth. It’s why many congregations talk about Faith Development across the lifespan rather than just RE for children. It’s what we mean when we say revelation is ongoing – your fate is not sealed. As we sang earlier, “all are architects of fate, working in these walls of time”^{iv}

There’s an underbelly to prioritizing the unfolding of human souls: there’s always more I can do to improve myself.....and so I am not enough as I am; I am valued for what I do to improve myself and my community, and if I am not working towards that, then I am not worthy. Personally, I struggle to value myself as made in the image of God, *regardless of my actions*. I struggle to believe in my inherent self-worth rather than justifying my existence through good deeds. I struggle to let go of my indoctrination into

the Protestant work ethic in which “idle hands are the devil’s tools.” My soul is unfolding, so I am not enough *as I am*. Does this ring true for any of you?

“The inherent worth and dignity of every person.” Is our first principle. You are enough. You have inherent worth and dignity. No matter what. It’s a contradiction – to both be enough AND always working to be more fully whole and human.

And wow do we keep learning to be human – keep unfolding our souls – AND recognize that whatever we do is never enough. Never enough to reach our own perfection or fairness and justice in the world?

Our faith puts us squarely in the middle of these contradictions: we have inherent worth and dignity, AND we are always works in progress.

As a community, we balance valuing each person who comes through our doors as whole, beautiful, and welcome with inherent worth and dignity AND managing the impacts of the rough edges that we all have.

We seek to cast as wide a welcome as possible – one where discomfort with someone who is different than I am is to be leaned into as an opportunity for growth and learning. AND our community values of safety, respect, fairness, and justice that sometimes run into the rough edges that some of us bring and force us to reckon with a contradiction between these values and our desire to be inclusive.

“This being human is a guest house.

Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all! “

In her fabulous Sunday morning worship service at General Assembly in 2016, my colleague Nancy McDonald Ladd said this, “The wonderful deep-spirited anti-racist organizer Mickey ScottBey Jones has said that **relationship is the sandpaper that wears away our resistance to change. Relationship is the abrasion that agitates enough to make a way forward.** Relationship, consistent and ongoing encounter across difference, smooths the way for the sacred, even as it rubs us raw.

There is a holy abrasion of the spirit born in deep relational encounters across differences. We, as congregations and as a movement, exist to be instruments of those very encounters."^v

We can choose to avoid the sandpaper – to walk away and not engage, to move away from discomfort or annoyance, but then we don't get to that place Nancy talks about – we're cutting off the possibility of holy abrasion that helps us grow.

Please don't get me wrong – sometimes engagement is not healthy: when a relationship isn't sandpaper but sharp rocks of abuse or harassment, then as a community we have a responsibility to set and maintain boundaries to prevent **un**holy abrasion of relationship. (This is the work that our Safe Congregations Team upholds with as much love and compassion as possible for all involved, and the hard work of living out the great covenant that we say each week)

But MOST relationship has this possibility of sandpaper shaping us. "Relationship, consistent and ongoing encounter across difference, smooths the way for the sacred, even as it rubs us raw."

This.

This kind of connection – of honest, heart-to-heart connection with one another and with those in our wider community. This, helping one another on the continual journey to be human is not easy or comfortable work. This is the journey that I want with you all – of ministry together, bringing our whole, messy, imperfect selves, being gentle sandpaper with one another, smoothing away our rough edges.

My colleague Elizabeth Nguyen is reading Charlene Carruthers book "Unapologetic," and from that she said: "What we're strong at, we're strong at -- so we do more of that (even when that might not be a helpful/healthy response). What muscles do we need to build?"

Kids know this – we ask them to do this: All. The. Time. Learn to read, learn to add, learn to multiply, learn to..... They are strengthening muscles and connecting synapses.

Our adult brains are more rusty – well, we now know that those of you under 25 have brains that are still developing, so rock it while you can! For the rest of us, learning is harder. It feels more high stakes – we're supposed to be good at things!

Ms. Pappa was the head of the math department at Conard High, well into her career when I entered her classroom. Obviously, she was good at math and good at teaching. While I was in her class, she decided to learn to play the cello. She began studying with the same teacher I took lessons from, and so we performed at the same recitals. Let me brag for a moment: I was good. I played concertos and knew thumb position and

won first chair in the All State orchestra (it's been downhill from there). So I'll never forget sitting in the audience while Ms. Pappa played something not much harder than Twinkle Twinkle Little Star. She was mostly in tune, and somewhat tentative.

It was SO COOL to watch this very accomplished and competent teacher so publicly sharing her learning – she was a novice. She was not good. But she didn't hide it – she chose to play in the same recital that we kids played in, and to proudly share her incredible learning that got her to a very basic level of playing cello.

She showed me that learning can indeed be a lifelong endeavor. That it's ok to show your imperfections and things you're not good at. She was working to build muscles that weren't her strong suit.

This is my hope for all of us – that we will drop the pretense of perfection and competence more often.

That we will try new things, make mistakes, say I'm sorry, and try again.

That we will embrace the contradiction that we are each enough (as we are) – AND we are each imperfect works in progress – open to feedback and learning and the holy abrasion of relationship.

May we embrace the lifelong journey of learning to be human.

May we keep opening to the unfolding our soul

May we honor our rough edges and respond to others' with as much grace as we can muster.

For we are all simply pilgrims on the journey.

ⁱ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/03/01/i-must-fundamentally-change-and-grow-up-uber-ceo-travis-kalanicks-big-apology/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.a83a3dd1860d

ⁱⁱ <https://www.uber.com/newsroom/a-profound-apology>

ⁱⁱⁱ Channing 14 – Sourcebook 175 – Seminary reader

^{iv} #288 All Are Architects, Singing the Living Tradition

^v "In All Thy Getting, Get Understanding" with Rev. Nancy McDonald Ladd and Dr. Glen Thomas Rideout, <https://www.uua.org/ga/past/2016/worship/sunday>