

When Does a Hole Fill You Up?
A Porous Coral Reef Full of Twists and Turns
You Are Invited to Join the Adventure!

UU Church of Vancouver 2023 July 30

Welcome:

Good morning! Welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver. Once again Love Guides Us to this place, whether in person, virtually, or in spirit, to build up and be nourished by our Beloved Community.

My name is Alexis Balkowitsch, I use both she and they pronouns, and I am happy to be your Worship Associate this morning. Our own Sue Oshiro-Zeier is leading us in worship today, and we are joined by Acting Director of Religious Education Erin Nugent, and pianist Karen Dale. Our music director, Allison King, will return next week.

Save the Date for the Family Promise Volunteer Appreciation Ice Cream Social on Sunday, August 27th at 3 pm. Bring your lawn chairs and enjoy an afternoon making sundaes, socializing and listening to music from UUCV's finest. Please RSVP via email to Dave Irwin at fpcoordinator@uucvan.org by August 24th.

We will have coffee hour at NEXT Sunday's service, on August 6th. It's also Rev. Kathryn's first sermon after sabbatical and I'm sure we're all looking forward to welcoming her back during coffee hour. However we are still looking for someone with experience to make coffee or clean up—or both!—and help show our new trainee the Coffee Hour ropes. Please let us know if you'd like to help!

Our Change for the World recipient this quarter is King Elementary School. Thanks to your financial support, we can help low-income children and families overcome challenges with a simple, quick response: a warm coat, a raincoat, shoes, a gas card, and other support that can keep a child from falling through the cracks. Please give generously by donating online via our website or with the Mobile App on your phone, with checks to our PO Box, or right here in the sanctuary during the offertory.

And now I invite you to take a moment to close your eyes and center yourself. We all have different preferences for how we like to greet during worship. When I sound the gong, you may wish to take a moment in silence to look around the room and greet with a gesture, a smile, a nod, a bow, or you may choose to remain with your eyes closed, and then we'll join in singing.

Reflection on the Theme -

One day about ten years ago, my Dad and I were in the car driving to our semi-regular lunch date...and I don't remember exactly what we were talking about, but I very clearly remember him telling me this:

"You're the kind of person that if you were drowning, and someone threw you a rope and told you to grab on, you'd shout back 'Don't tell me what to do!'"

I mean, okay, he's not wrong. And at the time, I just kind of chuckled and rolled my eyes. But what I wanted to say was:

"Well, where do you think I got it from?"

Suffice to say, my dad and I have a complicated relationship. I feel like I resemble my mom in all the ways that made it hard for THEM to relate to each other, and I'm like my dad in all the ways that make us butt heads. And of course, through it all, he's still My Dad—who supports me and wants the best for me, who still busts out a comforting piece of advice when least expected, who I love and I know, in his way, loves me.

Complicated, indeed. Years of misunderstandings and resentment, arguments and apologies, have left me frustrated. And then two things happened: I was diagnosed with ADHD in 2019... followed by Covid lockdown, which gave me space to begin a journey of self-exploration, understanding and—as I continue to work—healing.

So how did learning about and focusing on myself help my relationship with my dad? Well, after discovering my own neurodivergence and learning how it presents itself, I find myself noticing many of the same traits in my dad. Now I'm not one to 'armchair diagnose' anyone, but many forms of neurodivergence—like autism and adhd—can have a strong genetic component. Once again, the ol' "Where do you think I got it from"! And with this new context, both for myself and my dad's quirks, I can more easily relate, give grace, and find different ways of approaching conflict that are more in tune with how our brains work.

In a broader sense, taking the time to learn about my own history, my own trauma—both personal and generational—and my biases helped me understand how the unexamined and unhealed parts of myself affect my interactions with others. Going further, I'm also better at stopping to consider the same in others. Understanding that my dad has his own trauma and biases makes it easier—most of the time—to approach conflict from a less contentious place.

Now, does this fix everything in our relationship? Of course not—we're still human after all. But on the whole, I feel that things are better—I have a cooler head, stronger boundaries, and I offer more compassion to BOTH of us when things are hard.

“Heal yourself to heal the world.” It's something I find myself saying a lot these days, but it feels good to have a concrete example of making the world a better place, one relationship at a time.

Sermon by Sue Oshiro-Zeier

“We are all hurting...we are stitching this back together for we, the People...We can make it together through this fight...if we learn to love and listen.” Yes, Nimo, if we learn to love and listen.

We are on an amazing spiritual hiking trail of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver. I see puzzled looks. We are on an amazing spiritual journey or trail together, aren't we? I love hiking, seeing beautiful flowers, your beautiful faces, greenery, the fabulous cedars on our grounds, and mountains or challenges of our church, where we are working to help love grow. All rejuvenate my spirit, keep muscles and neural connections active. My partner, husband, John, will also tell you that besides hiking my other hobby is Unitarian Universalist meetings and events.

Meetings can be joyful, rejuvenating and growth provoking, after all we are revolutionaries of the heart. And yes, sometimes rainstorms occur, boots get muddy, rocks jump out and trip me and I fall! You've been at those meetings where tension rises, disagreements happen, feelings get hurt, and visions differ. Questions of “Do I belong here?” arise or disappointment in relationships happen.

Does this remind you of a marriage, other long-term family relationships, the relationship with your employer, or church? Or perhaps all of them? Or national politics?

When I first met John, he broadened my view of the Freudian concept of projection. I thought projection was something only negative. For example, we readily see the shortcomings in others that we ourselves possess. We project those foibles onto others because we detest that in ourselves. Others provide a mirror for us to see ourselves, a flaw we don't want to admit we have. But I have good news, John taught me that we also see the beauty in others which we also possess. When we see beauty in others or in our community at UUCV, we are also reflecting what is within us.

When we start new relationships, everything looks amazingly wonderful. Do you remember your first kiss? Or the first time you discovered Unitarian Universalism? Or

the first job you loved? Sadly, with the passage of time, that shiny thing, starts to get tarnished or get holes. Sometimes they grow uncomfortably large. Now what? Now that you are waiting for “the answer”, I want to take you on a side trail to see a precious flower. The flower is called being a Worship Associate.

As Worship Associates, our main goal is to assist our minister, Reverend Kathrn Bert, with creating a meaningful worship service. When sharing our reflections, a key question we ask ourselves is: “how will my sharing help the congregation grow?” Being in worship is not “show and tell” but a time of spiritual opportunity.

Before I started my adventure as a Worship Associate, our congregation didn’t appear too big. When I got to stand up on the dais, the room suddenly grew in size and faces looking up at me, multiplied! An Alice in Wonderland experience. I swear I didn’t eat any magic mushrooms!

My mouth would dry up and I would lose my place as I looked at you. I grew up speaking pidgin English and was criticized for how I spoke when I first moved to the continent. Back then, I began to stutter. The scar of “feeling less than” still comes back to haunt me unexpectedly even though I’ve been a speaker at conferences. I am still vulnerable.

Reflections take me weeks to prepare as I ponder, “What can I offer that will help the congregation spiritually?” Challenging and provoking spiritual practice. I will miss that practice as a Worship Associate. Yes, my time as a Worship Associate is ending, as I go down a different path!

Another passion is snorkeling. UUCV reminds me of a coral reef. Huh? Yes, a coral reef. Our faith, our church are not made of cement. We are dynamic. Each of us has a role in keeping the delicate balance of growth. When we as individuals stop growing, the coral reef, the foundation of UUCV starts to die. Doing the same thing repeatedly doesn’t nurture spiritual growth but leads to stagnation.

When I first came to UUCV in 2010, my soul felt rejuvenated after years of being away from Unitarian Universalism because UU churches aren’t in many rural areas. My profession was demanding, at times soul sucking and clawed too many hours from me while at the same time, provided nourishment for who I am. Sometimes life is crazy where truth is present in dichotomies.

Being woven into the fabric of UUCV, and a sense of belonging, took longer than I wished because of work demands, my foibles and peculiarities of the church. However, the more I became involved in the church despite my work craziness, the more I grew spiritually.

My spiritual journey is full of twists and turns, like a coral reef. At times things were jagged, sometimes unnerving, and I hid between the protective coral layers and observed; like many fish in a reef, finding a safe place to hang out while I tried to understand what I was witnessing. And with human dynamics, sometimes I couldn't fathom exactly what I was experiencing. I am guessing you've experienced that, too.

What helped me feel welcome was participating in helping with Religious Education, Chalice Circles, numerous group discussions regarding the church, taking classes offered by Leadership Development and Discovery, and being part of the Beloved Community Work Group.

Each of us carries an invisible bundle of life experiences which colors how we experience the world and interact with each other. Pretend that I cannot see green. Or that my life experiences made it more difficult to see the world like a lot of people do. Someone tells us the answer to a problem is in the circle. Alexis what is the answer?

(Slide image)

Alexis: 6

Sue: What?!?

Look at the circle! I see gray circles of various sizes and shades. Do you see 6? The solution is not 6!! With my own eyes, I have witnessed that there is no easy solution! And it is not 6!!
Now see what Alexis sees or someone with different life experiences than me can see.

(Slide image)

And yes, the answer is 6 (Pause). How can that be!! We are not all exactly alike. We don't always see the same things. Two things can be possible simultaneously.

Have you ever noticed that when your friend buys a car, all of a sudden you see lots of those kinds of cars on the road that you hadn't noticed before?

What does this have to do with coral reefs or UUCV? Imagine yourself in a vibrant coral reef, UUCV with people of different life experiences and backgrounds. Warm, smiling faces greeting each other. Imagine what your role is in keeping this place thriving allowing your soul to soar. What does that look like for you?

Now imagine a bleached out reef or trampled coral where people flung out hurtful words, pollution or kept their talents stuffed into a big black hole.

Holding on to their past pain instead of seeking resolution. Only a moray eel hanging out to grab what it can...I don't want to stay in that bleached out reef. Do you?

Come back to the beautiful coral reef.

Rejuvenating and knowing somehow you helped nurture it. We have a way to be that amazing coral reef full of beauty and diversity.

A new journey or trail, I am embarking on is marked the Leadership Development and Discovery Or LDD trail. I will be joining Dale Gaskill, Joyce Tobias, and Tracy Fortman. Laura Stephens is the board representative. We will be searching for new buds waiting to blossom or other beauties emerging which have been resting next to a lake, waiting for opportunities. You are the beauties I am referring to. I hope in the coming year you will share with us, who you are, your journey at UUCV, and what leadership opportunities you are hoping for. How do you want to grow?

Remember the question I asked earlier, "What do you do when holes start showing up?" You've been there! Either you start problem solving, avoid certain people, freeze, or go elsewhere. I know, I've done all of those things. Conflict avoidance!

However, I have exciting news! I've discovered a new trail for me. Steps to work at resolving conflicts, rethinking my options! I cannot stop the world craziness which keeps repeating itself, but I can work on me.

"Many years ago I was stunned when a fellow congregant asked me "Where was I from? Then, where was I really from?" Today, many of us know that is considered microaggression. Please give this person grace as back then the word microaggression wasn't in our everyday vocabulary. When I am stunned by some behavior, I freeze. I didn't know then that freezing is a common behavior when something shocking happens to us.

I told my friend what happened to me. I didn't know what to do. She encouraged me to tell that individual how it affected me. I recognized that the way to stop them from repeating that particular mistake was to help them to understand how I felt. I knew they weren't being mean; they didn't know.

I talked to them. They listened to me and heard how I hurt. They were embarrassed and apologized. I listened. Our respect for one another grew. The mutual respect remains many years later. I know if ever I need to have a difficult conversation, our respect for each other will get us through. I got their permission to share how this conflict helped us both grow. I still stumble through challenges, but am less likely to just run away.

Do you want to discover this trail, too? What if more of us learned how to resolve conflicts, talk openly with one another when our feelings are hurt or perhaps what is triggering for us. How can we make holes into something that fill us up?

In Terasa Cooley's book, *transforming Conflict: the Blessings of Congregational Turmoil*, she gives strategies on how to approach conflicts differently. Holding onto past pain hurts ALL of us. Like how ocean pollution affects coral reefs, grudges do the same to congregations. And for transformation to happen, it begins with me opening myself up to being vulnerable.

Imagine how much more energy we would have if we could transform conflict into growth opportunities. When Rev Kathryn returns, she will be talking more about our congregational read *transforming Conflict: the Blessings of Congregational Turmoil*. The Beloved Community Work Group and LDD will be providing activities to help us learn new skills. Successful ministries are where congregants actively engage in self-growth to enable the congregation to work together. (Repeat). Do you want to see love rise again? It is the work of EVERYONE, not just the minister. Just wishing for a better world, doesn't make it happen. What will your role be in helping love rise again?

We are still together. Somehow a bond persists in our beautiful but imperfect coral reef. Change begins with me and each of us so we can spread it to our communities.

Let us Answer the Call of Love. Please rise as you are able and join me in singing, Answering the Call of Love.