

Cultivating Spiritual Friendship

UU Church of Vancouver

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Reflection on the Theme by Alexis Balkowitsch

I am a big believer in messages from the universe. Call them signs, or intuition, or maybe even just coincidences. But I find it fascinating when things I need to hear show up in unexpected places...for instance, on a road trip while listening to Steely Dan.

I don't really have time this morning to wax poetic about how I acquired my love for Steely Dan. Suffice it to say, their music holds a special place in my relationship with my partner, Darin...and we have a tradition that at least once year, we take a day-long road trip out through the Gorge and the Klickitat valley into Eastern Washington's high desert country, all while listening to Citizen, the epic Steely Dan retrospective compilation. It's about a five hour playlist, so twice through gets us out there and home again.

We took that trip last Sunday. And from the outset my brain was just...full. Impossible to shut off. I'd been working on this part of the service the night before, looking through quotes and poems and essays on Community to find a reading and some inspiration, but it just wasn't happening. I knew I'd get back to work on it after our day trip, but as usual, I was having trouble letting it go.

So I told myself: Stop. Set it aside. Look at the scenery. Listen to the music. Be present.

And wouldn't you know it...that's when I heard exactly what I needed to hear...in a Steely Dan song. Everything I'd been wanting to express—hopefulness and change, being in like-minded (and like-hearted) community, and even reaching beyond that community with the same sense of hope—all wrapped up in two short stanzas and a snazzy beat.

And so I give you this morning's reading: "Change of the Guard" by Steely Dan.

"If you listen you can hear it
It's the laughter in the street
It's the motion in the music
And the fire beneath your feet
All the signs are right this time
You don't have to try so very hard
If you live in this world

You're feelin' the change of the guard.

All the cowboys and your neighbors
Can you swallow up your pride
Take your guns off if you're willin'
And you know we're on your side
If you want to get through the years
It's high time you played your card
If you live in this world
You're feelin' the change of the guard"

Now, did Steely Dan intend this to be a Church Anthem, to inspire a spiritual community to reach out and be hopeful, both with each other and the wider world? Yeah...probably not. But that's what I think is great about excellent music, or art, or poetry—it opens us up to find our own meaning.

And I like to think the same can be said of our hearts, as well, when we're in Beloved Community.

Cultivating Spiritual Friendship by Jennifer Springsteen

Recently, as I began my studies to go before the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, I've returned to Ralph Waldo Emerson, the Unitarian Transcendentalist. For some reason, I found myself ready to pick a fight with what I would read: old-fashioned, patriarchal. And yes, some of that is there. Yet, I mostly felt butterflies of excitement. I cried a little, and I felt so deeply connected to the history and beauty of our faith. Also, I realized what had been stirring in my heart when I considered this conversation with you today called forth from the pages of Emerson's essays. It felt right to talk about spiritual friendship in light of our Community Sunday—celebrating our volunteers, our bridging youth, and our newest members.

In his essay "Oversoul," Emerson examines what it is that we feel when we feel connected spiritually. He writes, "The great nature in which we rest...the soft arms of the atmosphere; that unity, that over-soul within which every [person's] particular being is contained and made one with all the other, that common heart, of which all sincere conversation is worship."

Worship. To make holy. I interpret it to mean that because we are linked to the all-inclusive web of existence, we see holy worth in everything. Emerson goes on, "Within man is the soul of the whole, the

wise silence; the universal beauty to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE.” He also says that language cannot color that feeling of connectedness, but I think he does a pretty good job.

Can you remember a time—whether the first or the thousandth—when you felt with your whole being connected to the oneness of the world, longing for and immersed in that kinship with the divine? I remember one: I was a child—six or seven— and it was a bright sunshinning morning when I woke. I put on my album *Free to Be You and Me* and opened the window that looked out on the lawn. I felt such a flutter in my heart, such joy. I thought I could fly if I wanted to. I came to recognize that feeling as encounters with the cosmos.

Take just a moment to recall your own memory, your feeling of the holy rippling through your soul. Where were you? How old were you? What did you recognize yourself to be in kinship with?

I find it so amazing that we have this oversoul, as Emerson says, connecting all of us in the web of existence, and yet we also have a very personal relationship with the divine. The source of all love shapes room for each one of us.

I hope you take the time to share your memory of your first connections to the divine with a friend in this next week. You can share it with me if you like.

Our friendship with the spiritual expands far back in time and reaches way ahead of us. Emerson tells us our love is continuous, and our soul understands that the present is infinite. (He sounds a little Zen Buddhist there to me.) When we rest in reciprocal love with all that is holy, there is no future to be anxious over, no past to grieve. We are deeply present in our lives.

My friendship with what I call God has kept me in its embrace for as long as I can remember. Several years ago, on a trip to Virginia to visit my mother, she gave me a stack of enveloped letters to take home with me. The letters, written in my childish hand, were to God. Some were simple requests; some were conversations. What’s best is that God wrote me back. (I noticed we had similar handwriting.) God offered me reassurances for my worries, sometimes advice. I like to think of that as my panentheistic awakening, even while attending the Episcopal church of my parents. Perhaps I had recognized a divine wisdom dwelled in my heart, and I engaged it in active prayer.

There came a time in my life when I walked away from my divine wisdom. I became lost and disconnected from myself, from nature, from the infinite presence of my own soul. These weren’t all dark times, although some were, most often I was yucking it up with my friends and going to parties. Every now and again, I’d feel something reaching for me—that wise silence, the forever friendship, awaiting my return.

There is a Muslim hadith where Allah says, “Take one step towards me, I will take ten steps towards you. Walk towards me; I will run towards you.” That hadith makes my heart swell. It is a true friend who

remains by your side and who reminds you of your affinity with all the world. It is a friendship to hold close.

And as I speak of spiritual friendship, I want to speak of you, too, friends who gather in spirit. My time with you these last nine months—my internship, the same time it takes to grow a life inside a womb—has been so wonderful. How am I able to thank you enough? Having an intern isn't about free labor, you know that. It is about educating a minister, growing a person into ministry with your love and caring. You have shared what congregational life is like. I saw how a community garden is planned and planted and shared with immigrant families. I saw how members pledged their resources to this church, how budgets were made and worried over. I saw how houseless families are invited into the church and tended to. I saw the importance of moving towards a beloved community with a focus on anti-oppression, acceptance of all of people, of our pasts and presence. I have heard beautiful music here and sermons and reflections that stirred my soul. I have read and talked about conflict with so many of you in such personal ways. I have listened to your stories of grief. I have witnessed your pastoral care of each other. I have seen the light of the divine inside you, and felt mine glowing stronger because of yours.

I am more grateful to you than you could know. I will remember you always.

Blessed be. Amen.