

## ***Abetting Creation***

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

October 15, 2023

### **Reflection on the Theme by Emily Layfield**

For the last few years, I've been struggling through career burnout. Being a parent of a young child during COVID while working full time in a demanding job would probably have been a recipe for disaster regardless, but I think mine had already been simmering and 2020 just brought it to a boil. When I finally faced up to it, I tried all kinds of things. I did lots of research and read many books, I worked with my manager to make some adjustments to my role, I listened to so many podcasts, I worked with a therapist, and finally I even took a 3 month leave, but even though I felt very validated that my experience wasn't uncommon, I couldn't seem to actually get past it no matter what I tried.

The thing is, I told myself, this is a great job. People are happy with your work, the company is supportive and has good policies for families, it's flexible and remote, you like your coworkers, you're contributing to a mission you believe in, you're extremely lucky.

My spouse was supportive but baffled. "This is what working is," he would say. "It's not about liking your job, you just do it so they'll pay you and you can do what you want outside of work." And I don't necessarily disagree. I have a family to support, after all, and I can't exactly opt out of capitalism, but I just couldn't seem to get my feelings on board. And it was only getting harder to power through my work days. Since I couldn't pin down why I was so dissatisfied, I didn't know what kind of change would solve it. I just couldn't escape the feeling that I wasn't meant for this. I fought those feelings as hard as I could. I don't believe in being meant for something, after all. I felt egotistical and entitled. Did I think I was special? Why couldn't I just be content when I had so much privilege?

Ironically, the constant loop of worrying about whether I deserved to have my selfish feelings was probably what was keeping my attention so occupied on myself. My brain was latched onto this Unsolved Problem and was constantly turning it over and over hoping a new angle would emerge.

What finally helped me get out of that loop was a metaphor. In ecology, there's an idea of a niche, which is the set of environmental conditions, resources, and relationships that a species needs to survive. So for example, a forest animal might be stressed and unhappy if it ended up living in a savannah, not because there's anything wrong with living in a savannah, but because it can't meet its needs there like an animal better suited to a savannah could. But if it can land in a more suitable habitat, maybe it can benefit from and contribute to the interdependence of its surroundings, maybe it could best use its strengths, and maybe even some of the traits that look like deficits in a savannah could turn out to matter a lot less in a place where it fits. And it doesn't need to sufficiently prove to anyone or even to itself that it's definitely a forest animal before it's allowed to try to leave the savannah. It can be enough to know that living in the savannah is not working.

I think what helped me about that idea was that it made me realize that my discontent isn't necessarily implying that I believe I'm meant for something in particular, it's just that I have a nature. Something about my nature is rubbing raw where I am, but maybe there is a place where my nature can be a fit.

That being said, having the flexibility and access to seek an optimal habitat is a privilege, one I'm still figuring out to what extent I have. But even just figuring out a way to stop fighting my own feelings has

helped me move my focus away from myself and all of the unhelpful questions I had been asking to the kinds of questions I'd really rather be focused on, like, "How can I best contribute?"

And I think a big part of the answer might not just be about exploring my own ideal niche, but also about finding ways to foster the kind of societal ecodiversity and supports that would allow more people to find the niches that suit our natures, even if they don't turn out to look the way we start out imagining they should.

### **Abetting Creation© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert**

Thank you, Paul, for that inspiration. It brought back memories for me. My sister was a big Jim Croce fan. And it really seems to fit with the reading, actually. That was unplanned. But as often happens in worship and life, unplanned things create a pattern in the mind that processes them.

*Like the pine trees linin' the windin' road  
I've got a name, I've got a name*

In his classic, *I and Thou*, Buber draws from the idea of a tree, but is talking about anything in nature, including human beings, with whom we have a relationship. That relationship is determined by how we approach the other – be they a tree or a human being, whether we approach them as an object – *it* – or as a subject – *thou*. Or to use Kimmerer's language – whether we approach the tree as an *it* rather than a *who*.

Giving and having a name is the ultimate determination of a who or an I- thou relationship. Kimmerer calls it the 'language of animacy.' Animacy just refers to being alive and animate, and many languages have a grammatical and semantic features that express just how sentient or alive something is.

In English, she points out, we correct the toddler who is learning language when they speak of plants and animals with the same language we use for people – except that many of us accept that language of animacy with our pets, but not the squirrels in our yard, or the birds that fly free. In fact, we give our pets names – my dog is Chestnut, and we sometimes call her Chester, and we definitely attribute human qualities to her that she may not, in fact, have, because we are human and in relationship with her, and she is a living being.

Sadly, we sometimes don't even attribute that animacy to other humans. We can objectify people by talking about them as a quality or a feature of their person – the color of their skin, or their education or income level, the gender identity or clothes they wear – but of course none of those qualities define the person, they are just some aspects of the person's identity, not the whole person. When we encounter the whole of the person, the uniqueness and full humanity, we call them by name.

I'm not sure Charles Fox and Norman Gimbel who wrote that song Jim Croce popularized and Paul Chandler featured for us had all this in mind, but that is where my mind went. *I've got a name, I've got a name.*

“What's in a name? that which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet,” says Juliet. But names are important, aren't they?

Sometimes it's hard to get past the name. I find social situations awkward when somebody mis-names me. When do I mention to the person I've just met that my name, in fact, is not Kathy? My mother insisted when I went into kindergarten that I be called Kathryn, and it stuck. Kathy is a perfectly good name. It's just not mine. If you yell it across a crowded room, I am not going to look, because you're calling someone else's name, not mine. I'll answer to Kat, when my sister calls me that. Nobody else. KB. I pretty much answer to KB. Kata, si me habla en español. And once, when I was doing some Shakespeare in college, my co-director called me Kate – you know, from Taming of the Shrew, and that worked in that particular relationship and moment in time. But outside of that particular social context, my name is Kathryn.

Naming is an important part of liberation. Choosing names. Names are important. It's one reason you're invited to wear nametags on Sunday mornings. Not because we want to label you, but because we want to call you by your true name – we want to recognize you, and we don't all know each other. Being able to call each other by our names is a gift. And referring to each other by our self-determined pronouns is also a gift. A gift we don't always get in the world out there.

Unfortunately, the history of humanity is full of examples of calling people either wrong names or disparaging names. “Unitarian” was not a positive term. Historically, it was used to disparage a particular sect of Christians. It was calling them – get this – “Jews” – or even worse (in the name-caller's mind) “atheists”. Somehow the Christian belief in a trinity became so central to orthodox Christianity, that anyone who denied a belief in the three in one idea (father, son, and holy ghost), was called, not in a good way, “Unitarian.”

But for most of us, the term carries a positive connotation of a free faith, a liberating tradition of recognizing our interdependence and oneness with God or the Universe. We can thank William Ellery Channing for that. Tired of the name calling, he took back the term “Unitarian” in 1819 when he preached the sermon, Unitarian Christianity and basically said, if you're going to call me that, then I'm going to define it for you and tell you why it's a good thing that I'm a Unitarian.

But I digress. We were talking about trees.

*Like the pine trees linin' the windin' road  
I've got a name, I've got a name*

The song lyrics indicate that the pine trees have a name, and the singing bird and the croaking toad, and the north wind, and whippoorwill and the baby – which sort of flips Kimmerer's thesis on the language of animacy on its head – or tail – flips it over, in any case, attributing animacy to the natural world first and then to the human lives included in that natural world. But it's not an either/or situation. Life begins small and grows. Martin Buber and Robin Wall Kimmerer, at least to my reading, are saying the same thing – that the attitude we adopt in approaching life affects what it is we encounter. Relation is mutual, says Buber. “When we tell them that the tree is not a *who*, but an *it*,” says Kimmerer, “we make that maple an object; we put a barrier between us, absolving ourselves of moral responsibility and opening the door to exploitation.”

Annie Dillard puts in another way. We've been reciting her words, shortened as they appear in our hymnal, each Sunday of October as we light the chalice. But the full quote is this:

"We are here to abet creation and to witness it, to notice each thing so each thing gets noticed. Together we notice not only each mountain shadow and each stone on the beach but we notice each other's beautiful face and complex nature so that creation need not play to an empty house."

"To notice each thing so that each thing gets noticed" – that's the mutuality piece – "so that creation need not play to an empty house." Or as my dad would ask in long car trips when I was a kid, if a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound? If something is noticed, there is also a noticer, and the noticed and the noticer are in a relationship, which Buber tells us is mutual and affects both parties and, ultimately, the relationship.

It matters how we approach the world. How we see others. How we enter into relationship.

This recent violence in Israel and Palestine, on top of the ongoing violence in Ukraine, has me thinking again about we dehumanize others – when we make that maple an object, or that person an it; we put a barrier between us, absolving ourselves of moral responsibility and opening the door to exploitation."

I want to read to you from the statement from UUA President Rev. Dr. Sofia Bentancourt regarding the conflict between Israel and Hamas. She invites us to stop what we are doing and sit with her in the depth of this tragedy. She writes,

"How to reconcile the cost of occupation and of war? How to nuance two very real histories of oppression and violence? I am holding close the words of U.N. Middle East peace envoy Tor Wennesland who said: "This is a dangerous precipice, and I appeal to all to pull back from the brink."

"We as a people of faith can condemn violence against civilians while at the same time engaging the full legacies and histories of oppression that shape such devastating conflict. As a faith tradition, Unitarian Universalists have long worked for peace, and our principles and values call for the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. At the same time, we have not engaged the tangled issues surrounding Israel/Palestine in community since 2018, and our last engagement resulted in severed relationships, and deep pain.

"I pray for the people of Israel and Palestine. I pray for leaders around the globe who must respond to this latest flare of violence and the untenable ethical considerations that abound. I pray for Muslim and Jewish UUs who experience the impact of this long strife acutely. I pray that those of us less likely to know the trauma of unending brutality and harm will not turn away from generational loss, from the devastating realities and their root causes, or from the relentless tragedy of war and occupation. Be gentle with yourselves when you need to be, but do not turn away unless you must. We are one global family living tenuously on the same human-impacted Earth. Let us center ourselves in justice as we call for peace."

Those are the recent words of our UUA President, the Rev. Dr. Sofia Bentancourt.

I just want to explain her reference to our engagement of tangled issues – that was a proposed Action of Immediate Witness about Ending Israeli Detention of Palestinian Children that failed at the 2018 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association. It was held in Kansas City that year.

We abet creation, we assist the world, when we center ourselves in justice as we call for peace. We do that by recognizing the full humanity of the other and entering into an I-Thou relationship, a full encounter with the wholeness, the fullness of life.

Don't make the maple an object or an *it*, but rather encounter the tree itself. "Trust the world and the wild geese who find their way back home." Bring back the language of animacy and extend to all life self and intention and compassion. Fill the world with loving kindness.

I have been thinking a lot about this artificial line that gets drawn between our human species and other forms of life. It's a line we draw in western culture and it is reflected in our English language and other western European languages. It is arbitrary – perhaps arbitrary isn't the right word. Perhaps it's simply self-centered. As we center our selves and humanity, we distance ourselves from the rest of life, from other species other living beings. And by so doing, we cause harm. We allow ourselves to open the door to exploitation. We have caused so much harm. Not only do human beings suffer in times of war, but trees are killed, too.

"In ecology, there's an idea of a niche, which is the set of environmental conditions, resources, and relationships a species needs to survive," Emily told us. Applying that concept to her own life and situation helped her step out of her obsession with thinking there was some other setting she should be seeking, but rather focusing on how she can best contribute in the environment in which she finds herself. Rather than distancing herself from the rest of life, she began noticing each thing so each thing gets noticed.

I can't speak for the trees, for I am not of their species. Nor did I learn the language of animacy – it does not come naturally to me to communicate with trees, though at times I try. (I'm sure it came naturally to me when I was a child, but that was a long time ago.) The way I contribute in my niche is to speak to the people, because how the people abet creation affects the trees and the singing bird and the croaking toad, and the north wind, and whippoorwill...

And like Pinocchio or the Tin Man, Star Trek's Data, or Mattel's Barbie, I believe we are on a journey to become more human. We seek to become better humans, to humanize our lives, to learn how to address the natural world and each other with respect and reverence and that experience of being bound up in relationship, of recognizing and honoring our interdependence. "Together we notice not only each mountain shadow and each stone on the beach but we notice each other's beautiful face and complex nature so that creation need not play to an empty house." Because how the people abet creation affects the trees and the singing bird and the croaking toad, and the north wind, and whippoorwill...

I invite you to take a moment to notice – you may notice a tree outside the window or a beautiful face in the room, the animacy of the flaming chalice, or the intricacy of your own hand. It may not be a visual noticing, but something you hear – a bird singing, a rustle in the chair next to you, a throat clearing or footsteps. It could be a smell or a feeling – the temperature of the air. Notice how you are the noticer and the noticed, and pay attention to the space between. Don't reduce your experience to the parts, but try to take in the whole. Slow your breath and try to notice your own heartbeat. Ground yourself in your chair and the experience. "Remember this: in every corner of the world, there is something to love. And something to protect....Trust the world and the wild geese who find their way back home."