

A Foundation of Love
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
February 16, 2025

Welcome to the 90's Club – Jeanette Enfield

This morning we welcome a new member of the club, Jeanette Enfield. She turns 90 next Sunday.

Born in Springfield, Missouri, Jeannete moved to Oklahoma and finally ended up in Pomona, California. Her brother was her only sibling, but the family kept in touch with aunts, uncles and cousins from their previous homes.

Jeanette played basketball in high school, and piano. She was good student and was chosen to represent her school at California's Girl's State in Sacramento. Norm was a Pomona's Boy's State Delegate. They knew each other from school and wrote each other a "friendly letter". Someone got ahold of the letter and put perfume on it before it was delivered to Norm. Apparently that started something as Norm called Jeanette when they all got home and they started dating that Summer of our Junior Year.

Jeanette attended Mt. San Antonio Community College while Norm went to Santa Barbara. Norm and Jeanette were married in 1954 and made their first home, thanks to the U.S. Army, outside of Fort Benning, Georgia in Columbus.

Their first daughter, Susan was born there and their second was born in Fort Bragg, North Carolina. After leaving the service, they returned to California where Jeanette worked various jobs such as a church secretary at a Methodist Church and she retired as an Administrative Assistant at UC Davis. They moved from Davis to Camas in 2003 to be closer to their daughters, and are grateful to still have two grandchildren nearby.

Jeanette has been a Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist and now continues to be a Unitarian Universalist. Each of these religions helped her understand death when their third daughter died at age 2 of a rare embryonic tumor. Along the way in their life, they have had great friends and great jobs and loving family. Her advice for her 90 years is "if accepting a job, do the best you can" as well as "love your family and help them when you can."

Her photo is on display in the foyer - please check them out. We've now caught up with photos of Arthur, Asa, and Norm as well. Barbara will be bringing Jeannette the gifts which have become traditional for this ritual - flowers and cookies!

Jeannette, we are honored to have you among us, grateful for your presence and pleased to know you. We know that you have weathered all manner of challenge and difficulty in getting to this point, and have taken a great deal of pleasure and satisfaction over the years. You have paid the dues and are a week shy of meeting the rigorous qualifications. We welcome you to the 90 club!

Foundation of Love© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

Thank you for *singing all that fear and hate cannot destroy! Love will rise again.* Amen.

I'm often tempted to just sit down at this point, when the choir has made my point already, but let me just share a few thoughts with you first. This is going to be short this morning as we have a congregational meeting beginning at 10:15. It is important we connect with one another in these times when there are those seeking to isolate and divide – we must not fall victim to their strategies. Resistance comes in the form of love and connection.

So the point I want to make this morning is about how to build that foundation of love, because as Gabor Maté reminds us, we have experienced trauma, big and small. We can become disconnected even from ourselves as a result of the small-t trauma that occurs even in the absence of abuse or overwhelming threat. It is this clash between two essential needs, what Maté calls “attachment and authenticity,” and what family systems theory (Murray Bowen or Edwin Friedman) called “connection and self-differentiation.”

I've talked about these competing needs before – on the one hand, we need connection and attachment because we are a social species who survive with the help of others. A baby cannot survive without a caregiver, but even beyond that – though our culture spreads this myth of individualism and separation – the truth is we remain dependent on others, to a greater and lesser extent throughout our lives.

On the other hand, there is a unique quality to each of us. We are not the same as our caregivers or the families or groups with which we associate, and there is a drive for expressing our authentic, unique selves and differentiating ourselves from those caregivers or others. The example I give, which is sadly common, is the experience of being gay or queer in a family or society that is heterosexist or believes that it is human nature to be heterosexual. The clash between belonging to the family that cares for you and being the beautiful queer person you are can lead to the need to make a choice between that family, that society, or the beautiful self you know yourself to be. I'd just like to raise up the reflection offered to this congregation recently by Tom Shindell when he talked about his relationship to his mother and her belief that being gay was okay as long as you didn't act on it or get into a relationship? And the conundrum that put him in....

I've talked about this before because I do think most of us have work to do reconciling our upbringing to re-build that foundation of love. It's not that our families didn't love us – hopefully, most of them did. It's just that we often inherit cultural and familial expectations that may or may not fit with any particular individual within that family or culture. So, there is healing to do, and as I've mentioned a fair bit recently, we have no time to waste. We must get serious about this healing now if we have any hope of healing the world.

So this is old stuff, I've shared with you before. What's new this morning is that I want to connect these competing needs with the language of James Luther Adams, a Unitarian theologian, parish minister, social activist, writer, and divinity school professor. His life spanned most of the last century (1901 to 1994) and he was the most influential theologian among 20th century Unitarian Universalists and one of the finest 20th-century American liberal Christian theologians. I'm going to read now from the Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography about him. It says,

“In Germany during 1935-36, Adams watched as the Nazi government of Adolph Hitler ruthlessly crushed any and all dissent as it marshaled forces for its coming march across the continent. Interrogated by the Gestapo, he narrowly avoided imprisonment as a result of his engagement with the Underground Church movement. Using a home movie camera, he filmed Karl Barth, Albert Schweitzer and others, including those who were involved in clandestine, church-related resistance groups, as well as pro-Nazi leaders of the so-called German Christian Church. Adams returned to the United States more convinced than ever that the tendency of religious liberals to be theologically content with vague slogans and platitudes about open-mindedness could only render liberal churches irrelevant and impotent in face of the world’s evils, and he stated his convictions loudly and frequently.”

Perhaps you see where I’m going with this? Or at least why I have turned again to James Luther Adams in this moment in time. Around 1980, JLA (that’s what we called him in seminary – he taught where I went to school) Dr. Adams gave a lecture at Andover Newton Theological School. According to Bob Hill, “in response to a question about why people come to our religious communities at all, Dr. Adams replied that they come for ultimacy, to wrestle with (and from time to time actually find answers to) life’s ultimate questions. Who am I? In what or in whom do I trust? In what community do I belong? And they came for intimacy, a safe place in which they are accepted while making connections with others.”

Ultimacy and Intimacy...

And it occurs to me that the healing we need to do to build that foundation of love, is also about this ultimacy and intimacy. The intimacy of which he speaks is clearly the same stuff of Gabor Maté’s “attachment” or Friedman and Murray’s “belonging” – we come to church for intimacy, a safe place in which we are accepted while making connections with others: A place where we belong, where we attach ourselves to others. And if we didn’t quite belong in our families of origin, or the culture of our birth, we can re-work those attachments here at church and belong fully.

Ultimacy, perhaps, may seem on the surface different from family systems’ “self-differentiation” or Maté’s “authenticity,” but I’m seeing the correlation. Adams said that people come to religious communities for ultimacy, to wrestle with life’s ultimate questions: Who am I? In what or in whom do I trust? In what community do I belong? See how those questions are about our identities as individuals? It’s about who am I, really? Authentically? What are my values, as they differ from those of my family or society? In Protestant and Christian language, this is the spark of the divine in the individual – what are my God-given gifts? How has God made me unique from others? Where do I find the Holy?

As we talk about in our UU History and Theology class here, authority, in Christian history, was first found in the church, the priest interprets God’s word to the people, and then the Protestant Reformation moves that authority to the Bible, the Bible becomes the word of God that we can read directly, and then as the reformation continues, we get reformers like Emerson who say that the individual can experience God directly. *Ultimacy*, the connection between God and the individual, is no longer mediated by the church, the priest, or the Bible – we have the spark of the divine in each of us and can determine who it is God created us to be. I think that sounds a lot like “self-differentiation” and “authenticity.”

The reason I find this so exciting is that the theories seem to validate one another, at least as I have learned them. One comes from the science of trauma, another from family systems theory, and the last from the field of theology – they are all pointing to a truth of our existence, a reality of the way we are as humans, which helps us grow and mature and heal beyond our woundedness, beyond our pettiness. And since healing is our project right now, since the world needs our healing, these theories provide us a map that help us build or re-build a Foundation of Love.

Of course, understanding it is just one step, one minor, nearly inconsequential step. What will heal us is the practice of staying connected while self-differentiating, and belonging while being authentic, and seeking intimacy and ultimacy – all things, I might point out, that this congregation can help us do. We no longer have time to heal ourselves and then heal the world. We must do both simultaneously – so you can practice seeking intimacy and ultimacy tomorrow in Esther Short Park while protesting fascism or next Sunday in your Intercultural Skills class or perhaps meeting with those who have left high-demand religions. This is our work right now: healing ourselves and our healing world. We have the tools and we have the company. How great is that? It brings my heart such bliss! What wondrous love is this.