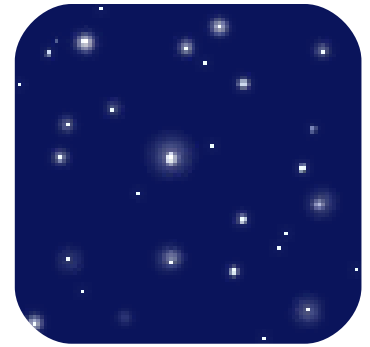




Connections

a creative publication



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH OF THE SHENANDOAH VALLEY | WINTER 2015

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The theme for the winter edition of *Connections* is “Renewal”.

A Few Wrinkles in Time

By Teri S. Merrill

I had lunch the other day with a new friend from my meditation circle. I was excited about this outing, because Sherry is about 10-15 years younger than me. I like having a diversity of friends, both in interests and ages.

Friends who are a bit older can give great advice about what’s to come as children leave the nest, bodies begin to change and age, and husbands start talking about retirement. Younger friends remind me that there was a “me” before my name changed to “mom,” and that life is as busy, fulfilling and focused as we choose to make it.

I told my daughter that morning on the phone that I was going to meet with a new, younger friend and by the way: isn’t that just so cool of her middle-aged mother?

Lunch was great, and Sherry and I shared our histories and learned a lot about each other in that quick lunch hour. As we were starting to depart, I pointedly asked her age. Was she 37? 39?

She gave me a quizzical look, laughed a bit, and told me she was 46. I don’t know if my jaw made a sound as it hit the table, but I was shocked into silence as I considered this information. “You’re 46? You’re only 8 years younger than me?” I asked.

Let me tell you, readers: Sherry looks great. She looks great for 37 or 39. But she looks amazing for 46.

Was it the long hair? The lack of grey? The dangling earrings? Possibly all of that, but even more to my mind, it was the lack of wrinkles on her face that caused me confusion.

As I pondered this reality over the next few days, and peered into the mirror at my crow’s feet and cavernous lines around my mouth, I started to think that what may have made the difference in Sherry and me. And of course, there can be only one certain reason: children! Sherry has no children! *(continued on next page)*

A Few Wrinkles in Time, continued

Mothers wear their children on their faces. Each wrinkle recalls a night with a sick child. Or a teen's missed curfew. Laugh lines have brought on by the inappropriate sounds coming from a ten-year old boy on the way to school, or his sister's love of puns and funny phrases. Or the frowns and laugh lines (at the same time!) that settle in when leaving your first-born for the first time at her college dorm.

Each of my wrinkles tells a story, and trust me, there are a thousand chapters etched on my face since my children were born more than two decades ago.

So I'm definitely going to ask Sherry about her choice in face cream, and then stock up. And I'll continue to avoid the sun's harshest rays, on the days when I remember to think about it.

But I'm also going to look at each wrinkle, frown line and laugh line and send silent thanks to my wonderful family for the multitude of stories they gave me that are now permanently etched on my face.

Teri Merrill lives in Winchester with her husband, Mark. She writes religion and gardening stories occasionally for the Winchester Star, is a board member of the Winchester Education Foundation, and is co-chair of the UUCSV finance committee.

Experiences

By Gabriel Deen

Experiences are life-teaching lessons;
We do experience them every day,
Whether they are good or bad.
They are not to be denied by someone.
They are our road map of reminders,
They are our road map of avoiding mistakes—
Mistakes we cannot afford to repeat,
Mistakes we cannot afford to forget—
Experiences we can learn from.

Gabriel (Gibril) Khalil Deen was originally from Sierra Leone, West Africa. He has lived in Maryland for 30 years and recently relocated to the Valley. He is of Lebanese-African descent. His wife of 30 years passed away in 2008 of ovarian cancer. He has two adult daughters and is a grandfather of two lovely granddaughters. He is a master's level psychologist, he is almost a jack of all trades, likes anything that is classic, especially classic motorcycles, likes to repurpose and create things, and loves all kinds of animals, especially the house cat. He always seeks the truth, and is enormously independent in his thinking. His core principle is: "be all that you want to be, as long as you don't tell me who I'm supposed to be," and that's one reason he loves cats - you can't tell them what to do.

TIME IS A
DRESSMAKER
SPECIALIZING
IN ALTERATIONS

Calligraphy by Miki Leeper

Miki is a native of the Bay Area in California, who has traveled across the country with her husband Charlie, as his work required. She's also been very fortunate to travel to many 'far away places, with strange sounding names', with that same husband. Travel is broadening - in all the ways you can think of. At Charlie's retirement they moved into the Shenandoah Valley, where they've both lived longer than any other place in either of their lives. Raised a Catholic, Miki has explored the world religions, and world mythologies, and found a real 'home' at the UUCSV. She loves to make music (mostly in the car these days) gardening, designing calligraphic works and reading. She is also really enjoying being an 'elder'!

Finding Courage

By Joanne Leonardis



A few years ago, a couple of friends and I bought matching silver “tree of life” pendants for our necklaces. I love the tree of life and it’s representation of a healthy life with strong roots holding to the earth, and healthy limbs reaching for the sky. Later, I added a small charm with the word courage carved into it, and another love charm later from a friend. I treasured my jangling trio, until one day, I reached down and they were gone. My necklace was eventually found, but all three charms were gone.

While talking with my daughter a few days later who was home on college break, I was thinking about my missing charms, and how everything is constantly changing. My children are growing and leaving and my mother with Alzheimer’s disease, has been leaving for years. I’ve decided it’s the transition, it’s the act of changing from one thing to another that is often the most difficult. At 19, my daughter is transitioning from child to adult and her 22 year-old brother, graduating from college soon, is doing the same. Managing this transition is a turbulent and unsteady time of missteps and discovery which can be exhilarating and a little scary. I would imagine it’s the same for my children.

As my children transition and step up to their adult lives, my mother is stepping out of hers.

When I was pregnant with my children, I was in awe of the women who had given birth before me. It seemed I noticed the mothers in the world for the first time. Her and her and her. Mothers. They were suddenly everywhere and they became holy members of the “mother club.” How had I not noticed them before? It’s like this for me now as I notice women whose children are long gone and who have surely lost their mothers by now. Her and her and her. Empty nesters, motherless daughters, carrying on, laughing, living. I’m intrigued and curious how they live without their mothers walking this earth, with their children far away, and with smiles on their faces.

As my daughter shared her thoughts on growing up and the changes this will bring, we talked about how the only constant thing in life is change, and how we can open our hearts, unclench our grips, and flow with, not against the ever changing currents of life. As we talked about letting go, she shared her realization of how difficult it must be for me to lose my mother to Alzheimer’s. In this moment, with a pensive look on her face, I knew she was talking about me — that she was imagining ME with Alzheimer’s and HER saying the long good-bye.

It hit me then — my daughter is watching me navigate my mom’s Alzheimer’s disease just like I watched my mom with her mother. What kind of message was I sending my children in my struggle to let go of my mother and of them? What were they learning from me about accepting change? More importantly, what message did I want to give them? In barely a breath, a subtle shift took place and I told my daughter that letting go and embracing change is what we must do if we are to live in peace.

I realized that letting go and embracing change is what I must do if I am to live in peace.

Maybe it’s peace that I see on the faces of the motherless daughters with faraway children who seem firmly planted in their next chapter. If that’s the case, I like to imagine theirs was a hard won peace that began with a valiant struggle against the tides of change that tossed them about, churned up all the muck, then spit them out into calm and peaceful water once they loosened their grip and let go.

A little lighter, and later in the day, my daughter joyfully tracked me down and announced, “Dad found your courage on the driveway!” We shared a knowing look, then laughed with joy at the fullness of the moment — my courage had been found!! It was beat up but intact, along with my tree of life and love charms which were also on the driveway. It turns out, we had been driving and parking on them for a week.

Sometimes I miss things that have been in front of me all along.

Joanne Leonardis is originally from Minneapolis, MN and has lived in Winchester, VA for 20 years along with her husband and two children Jake and Jordan who are now 24 and 21.

This essay was written in February 2013, five months before her mother passed away at 75 from Alzheimer’s disease.



Front Page, January 13, 2015

By Michael Snyder

On the Front Page of this Daily News, every story on the front page was of “what’s wrong with the world.” This is not surprising to most of us who still read the papers, and, for that matter, still watch the news on TV. I’m not going to list the stories. Just go to the newspapers in the library, one last time, and scan the front pages. Just scan so the horror doesn’t stick in your mind. Compute the percentage of “What’s wrong with the world stories” that appear... There, now—I won’t have to make a list and then apologize for doing that to you.

The point is that every day in the media we are bombarded by “what’s wrong with the world.” I’m sure it’s our selection of the media environment we create for ourselves; but even then, it’s hard to avoid viewing the manifestation of negativity and violence everywhere. Reading articles about these events invites—pressures—you to think that it’s ‘out there’ that makes you feel bad ‘in here.’ And indeed, read the horrors, and you will undoubtedly feel a list of bad—unless, of course, you are already numb.

But, dear ones, your experience is not on the page. Your experience *is* your response, which is everything you can feel, think and emote. Years ago I went to lunch with some friends; we ordered hoagies. When the waitress brought them to the table, we opened them and they were covered with blood. Immediately most of us reacted with horror. But one person immediately said, somebody cut themselves. Is that person all right? We *reacted* with horror, she *responded* with caring.

It’s probably not necessary to do a Likert Scale about your state of being, but here’s one you can try just for the heck of it.

Likert Scale on my State of Being

0 - 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9 - 10

0 (Dispair)— 1 (Depressed)— 2 (Dread) – 3 (Anxiety) – 4 (Scorn) – 5 (Understanding)— 6 (Caring)— 7 (Affirmation)— 8 (Optimism) – 9 (Reverence)— 10 (Bliss)

It’s not scientific. I made it up. Just wanted to pursue the idea that there is a spectrum of human experience possible and all of it is within an immediate possibility; that is, unless you are already numb. So, ask yourself, if you dare, “how have I become numb, emotionally exhausted, empty of energy, just not able to respond anymore?” I asked this of a friend and he said, “What do you mean, I am numb? I’m the most sensitive person you can find.” True, but being sensitive is not necessarily being responsive. In most cases being sensitive is a *reaction*, not a conscious *response*. In the same way, being responsible is not the same quality as response-*able*, that is, having an ability to respond. Having the ability to respond requires a focus of attention, and a field of supporting experiences.

When we think of responsibility we often think of following the rules and taking care of things we care about. And, of course, when we don’t follow the rules, there is probably some kind of penalty or punishment or banishment, or other humiliation. The penalty imposed actually numbs us further, keeps us from responding freely, and generates stress that can eventually build, setting us on survival mode with hair trigger emotional reactions. The front page can push some of those negative hair-triggers; your kids can push some, your partner might push a few, your mother-in-law...well, never mind. Our theme is renewal. So let’s go there.

For people engaged in the arts, renewal is an ever-present result of arts-play. One’s “ability to respond” is a key factor in the enjoyment possible, not only in the arts but in every moment of our precious conscious existence. I sometimes wonder, “Is there very little conscious experience or are we locked into a constant survival mode?” We are clearly distracted by events past and events to come, expectations, obligations—and events sometimes so far removed but now piped into our home via radio and television, and let’s not forget, the Front Page.

I like the familiar statement of Gandhi; “There is no way to peace. Peace *is* the way.” I learn from that statement that we must *be* the state of being we desire before we can have it. When I say, “I love you,” I really mean, I love me. Do I mean I don’t love you but I love myself? I mean in your presence, or even with just the thought of you, I feel so good I love the way I feel...so, yes, I mean I love me. But probably your partner would rather hear you say, “I love you!”

Holding myself accountable for my own experience keeps me from blaming others for how I feel. In the recognition that it is *only my experience* of the other that I know; that may be *all I can know*. I can only know myself.

“Know thyself” was carved into the Temple of Apollo in Delphi while the greatest philosophers of the time were present. Six centuries before the Greeks Lao Tzu wrote; “*Knowing others is intelligence; knowing yourself is true wisdom. Mastering others is strength; mastering yourself is true power.*” William Shakespeare wrote; “*This above all: to thine own self be true, and, it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man.*” You can find dozens of references to authors who explored this theme in the web site: (<http://thyselfknow.com/>) (continued on next page)

(Front Page, continued)

The universal challenge of self-knowledge is the surest way to renewal I know—for in renewing our selves we renew every facet of our being. In becoming attentive, mindful, to my every response, to every thought and emotion, the ripples I choose to send into the world, will not be mindless automatic reactions. If mindfulness is each person's way to renewal, *co-creativity* is our social way to renewal.

Co-creation is something we do anyway, consciously, or unconsciously. Together we create our families, our communities, our cities and our nations. There is a song echoing the ancient *Tao Te Ching*, written by my friend Scott Kalechstein. It goes like this:

*When there's light in the soul there is beauty in the person,
When there's beauty in the person there is harmony in the home,
When there's harmony in the home, there is order in the nation,
When there's order in the nation, there is peace on the earth.*

Renewal begins as the light within each of us, and then with each heartbeat, with each breath, and each thought. Our actions ripple throughout our world. Our senses become a delicious sharing. We find access to ourselves in the arts when we attend to and share our experiences of the arts. Here, we come to our senses. We learn to look and see, to listen and hear, to move and dance, to feel and to express, nurturing our ability to respond—to *all* of life. Doing art, any of the arts, challenge us to be disciplined, to edify our conversations and interactions, creating high states of beauty and joy. How do we renew ourselves? We live in the mutuality of our co-creativity. It's the most basic skill of all basic skills. Creating a thing of beauty, we are renewed and become ourselves, the art of living.

Michael Snyder's professional life as a music teacher began in 1964 in a school designed to be supportive of teaching in teams, learning experientially, and in co-creating learning environments to explore personal and professional transformation through the arts. Working with children and teachers for 35 years and facilitating experiential learning through the arts and co-creativity has shaped his understanding of authentic learning and what it means to be human. Human 'beings' are perfectly suited to experience high states of joy. Those states are amplified exponentially in the arts and in the company of others. His work now is to invite and facilitate these experiences of arts-play where others will discover their deeper selves and create more awareness of life's many gifts.

Where is Renewal for our UUCSV Founder?

By Sandra Lore

Living in a nursing home has daily and even hourly trials. We hear about something being a “challenge” day in and day out—often an overworked word—but not in this case. There are losses along the journey through life, but at this end of the spectrum, they are piled on and on. How can one assimilate renewal into one’s life in such a situation?

Naomi and I have been friends for the 15 years Mark and I have lived in Winchester. Early on, I heard her speak at a meeting after church about the “challenge” of aging. Other congregants will recall her saying, “We have an obligation to our children to die.” Wow! At the time she was 80 years old and explained how she didn’t take cholesterol-lowering drugs as they made arthritis pain worse. She thought that alone would shorten her longevity.

Several months ago, Zeke Emmanuel, a bioethicist professor at the University of Pennsylvania and brother to Rahm, wrote an article for the Washington Post’s Sunday magazine about how he would end his life at 75. Of course, he’s in his early 50s now with young children and can’t foresee how he will feel at 75. Naomi, in spite of professing that parents owe it to their children to die, has done everything humanly possible to keep her demise at bay.

After various housing changes, from the farm to a two bedroom apartment in an over 50s neighborhood, to an assisted living facility (with precious little assist), she and her husband Bob are in the Evergreen Nursing home on Millwood Avenue. Our activities together have been on a downward slide from when we used to meet for lunch, when she tooted up I-81 at 80 mph to celebrate a wedding anniversary in Shepherdstown, to when we played canasta with her church friends. Now it’s a whole new ballgame. Pluck and grit keep her going.

Recently, I watched as Naomi leaned over to toss a used tissue into the wastepaper basket. It was a simple act, but nevertheless, the wheel chair alarm blared. Whenever the chair thinks she might fall out, it screeches. Then, the bed alert chimed in probably thinking, “I hear you.” After several minutes, Naomi’s husband Bob got the noise turned off, returned slowly to his side of the room, and had settled into his comfortable chair when the oxygen tube unhinged itself. Two sirens and no oxygen, yikes! Signaling for help brought no one. Bob returned to Naomi’s bedside to fix the tube. I said something sexist about how males can do so many mechanical things. His ego needed some boosting at that point. There’s one good thing about the Pidgeons’ situation. Bob is loving his food; he couldn’t stand all the carrots served for both lunch and dinner at their last place. On the other hand, all of Naomi’s food is thickened liquid so she can swallow it. I know she’d give most anything for a decent cup of coffee.

She and Bob were assigned a room at the end of the hall on the lower floor. Probably, they will not make new friends because they don’t relish sitting out in the hall to talk and gawk. Their TV located in Bob’s corner is a godsend for him. Naomi wheels over with the oxygen tank in tow to check out the evening news as her computer didn’t make the move. I finally realized during my last visit that much of her world had disappeared without access to her computer. My grandpa had his Pittsburgh Pirates on radio; my dad had C-Span on television; Naomi’s outside link disappeared with her computer.

It has been 15 years since Naomi declared, “We have an obligation to our children to die.” So far she has been one step ahead of what was going to happen to her. Much of this is due to her sharp mind. She has plenty of time for planning what will come next. In these circumstances, where does renewal fit in? Maybe she’ll start another church. She has some spare time these days!

Sandra Lore was born in Sterling, Illinois in the last century. After marrying her peripatetic husband 50 years ago, she got to see the world courtesy of his work with the U.S. State Department. Four continents later, she still speaks some English and writes for her own pleasure. She and Mark have two grown children and one almost-grown, way above-average grandson. Retiring to Winchester in 1999 after they learned there was a neighborhood UU church, they have lived happily ever after in the same house.

Sunday Rituals and Thoughts at UUCSV

By Claudia Martin

Why do I attend UU Sunday Services? It is a colorful mix of joy to see familiar faces and people who wish me well, whose greetings I return. Of professing my basic beliefs, of listening and learning and of being emotionally touched by music and rituals.

I dearly love the silent sharing of joys and sorrows with the pilgrimage of people walking by me when I sit in the front seat, seeing their quiet faces, some deep in thought, some giving me a friendly touch and smile. The stones in the sand are heavy with symbolism. They are many ages old, and represent our human condition of joys and sorrows which have formed generations. Some are still rough with hurt, some are polished like a pearl inside a sea shell, having overcome the first-while pain. The silence signifies that all of us carry our load of hurt and our time of happiness, often unheard and unseen to others.

The speaker's talk almost palpably fills the atmosphere of the church with the intense listening and sharing of thoughts of an entire congregation. And many of us take this home for more consideration, discussion or emotional comfort.

What an enriching Sunday morning we are given! See you in church!

Claudia Martin is a founding member of the UUCSV and a Unitarian since 1955. She immigrated from Germany in 1953. She is married to Hubert Martin, with three children, four grandchildren, four great grandsons, and five dogs over their life times. She is a music teacher and writer as well as a church music facilitator.

Birth

By Mary Haskins



Photo by Mary Haskins

There is a line in Sophia Fahs poem, *For So the Children Come*, that has stayed with me since the Christmas Eve I first heard it. "Yet each night a child is born is a holy night" reminds me of the moment of my children's birth and the beginning of a fresh page in my story. The poem speaks to me because I could not think of a holier moment in my life than that of the moment of birth, whether it is that of my children, my friends' children, or even of the animals that help to provide for my well-being.

I never dreamed that birth would be such an integral part of my life, but in the last year it has. Last April brought the first batch of kids to arrive on the farm. It was our plan to grow our herd, and still it was a surprise to find our first mother doe with her still-wet babes. It was a precious sight, so sweet, a moment of awe to be cherished. These moments bring with them hope. They raise my spirits and frame the day with light; it makes my work joyful.

Most recently, we celebrated the birth of six healthy pups to the farm. Born on New Year's day, they helped begin our year fresh and new. A visit to the pups helps to put a smile on our faces, each and every day. There is magic on the farm at these moments. The joy to us that comes from having a farm fills our lives—it comes from the being connected to nature, the awe that mother nature shares with us, and knowledge that life renews itself every day. Sometimes, when we are lucky, we are present.

Mary grew up in Maine as the youngest of six children. She has been a Unitarian Universalist for the last 20 years, and has made her home in the Shenandoah Valley for the last eight. Seven of those years have been devoted to raising animals on the family farm.

Three Meditations Honoring Brigid and the Coming of Spring

By Justine Beck Rose

Uncovered:
to sweep and clear,
prepare and honor

one motion
moving and removing
last year's fruits and dreams

to discover, waiting unbidden
shoots so pale as mother's milk
holding, sustaining life
as the circle turns

-

The chill of cold and change caresses my face,
as lungs take in the excitement of the season.
The awakening, rebirth; the subtle explosions of creation abound in silence.

-

The bell of silence has sounded, as the earth awakens and begins to share its secrets.
Secrets revealed only to those with ears, eyes and hear tuned in.
Feel the vibrations surround and fill you, as they surround and fill me.

As we experience the power of ourselves,
let us also feel the power of the oneness of us all together.
A force that roots us and sustains our growth.

By these stirrings, we honor Brigid.

Author's note: For a couple years, I attended a women's retreat to celebrate Brigid in early February. She is revered as both a goddess and saint in various spiritual traditions. She is often associated with wisdom, intelligence, poetic eloquence, craftsmanship, healing...amongst other things. During this retreat, we explored various aspects of Brigid. These writings came out one of those weekends. So, it says to me that the poet is within us all, if we get quiet enough to hear that voice.

Justine Beck Rose has been a member of UUCSV since 1996. She lives outside of Strasburg with her husband, Jon, and their son, Malcolm.