

Reading: **Fluent**, by John O'Donohue:

I would love to live
Like a river flows,
Carried by the surprise
Of its own unfolding.

Those of you who have been part of First Unitarian for a while now probably know that my life took an unexpected turn when I was in college, working on becoming a minister. I won a scholarship, a big one, and since I had that and I had good grades, and since getting a master of divinity degree was a requirement to become a Unitarian Universalist minister, I decided to apply to Harvard Divinity School. Why not? YOLO, right? Might as well try. This was a moonshot. I had grown up very blue collar, working class, in fact, my understanding was that we were *low* class. Which is a crappy way to talk about people but that's what people said and that's how I understood myself at the time. So I was very surprised when I got in.

Then, while I was there, I took advantage of the opportunity to cross register into one of the other graduate schools, and signed up for a class at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. I took a class in community organizing from Marshall Ganz, who had worked alongside Martin Luther King, Jr and Cesar Chavez. From there I was recruited to work with him on a project for the Episcopal Church, which led us to their general convention in Anaheim, California, which led to the moment one evening when I found myself walking side by side with my professor in Disneyland. By the end of the night he'd be sporting mouse ears. Everything leading up to that point flashed before my eyes. "This is really surreal," I told him. "That's what's great about life," Marshall said. "You never know what's going to happen."

John O'Donohue's words reminded me of that story. I was so surprised by how my life unfolded in that moment. If we live enough years, we all eventually experience some of those "you just never know what's going to happen" bends in the river. And now we've all had a heck of a surprise in the last year and a half, haven't we. Many surreal moments.

But O'Donohue's words are not just about the things that happen to us, or that we experience on the outside. There is also an inner unfolding that happens in our lives. Inner unfolding... have you ever been surprised by that? Have you grown as a person in some surprising ways?

Sometimes we grow unexpectedly through some kind of adversity. You grow when something painful or difficult happens that requires a change in you, or that knocks you out of your old patterns, or reveals to you your own deepest values and longing in such a way as to lead you to a transformation. Things can happen on the outside that lead to growth, depth, or a depth of joy inside that would not have been possible without loss. We end up "spiritually larger," as

Alice Walker says. Other times you may set an intention to try to change or grow, for example through joining a new community, or coming out, or going into recovery.

Without a catalyst event or a conscious intention, though, our default mode—you know the factory setting humans arrive with?—it makes us prone to getting stuck. There are ways we get stuck in a rut on the inside. And then we end up repeating predictable patterns in our lives, or hanging onto perceptions, that may not serve us. And then we are not carried by the surprise of our own unfolding, but may feel trapped or helpless, almost like the river has been dammed. That's a kind of dam-nation! Pun intended. In our tradition we don't preach or teach about a place called hell or people being damned in that classic sense. Whatever hells exist, I think we create them right here in this life. When the beautiful unfolding of our inner lives is blocked, when that river is dammed by unconscious patterns or projections, it leads to suffering. So perhaps that is one of them.

That's what I want to focus on today. On liberation from that. Some religions teach that in order to avoid damnation you have to become less yourself and more like some perfect standard, you have to cut off or suppress parts of yourself. This is the opposite of that. It's about unfolding in wholeness.

In Buddhism, the mindsets and patterns we get stuck in are described as trances. Trances. A trance is a state of being only half conscious. When we are in a trance, we are not responding to the present. We aren't fully present to the present, to what is. We are only half conscious.

One of the most powerful trances we get caught up in is what Buddhist teacher Tara Brach calls the trance of "not okay."¹ In this trance, we believe that we are not acceptable. That we do not belong, or that we must strive very hard in order to belong. Belonging is defined by the cultures we are in, family culture and social cultures. The one often repeats the other.

The dominant culture in the US prizes what: Independence. Self-sufficiency. Material gain. It prizes intellectual knowledge, rather than emotional, spiritual, or body-based ways of knowing. This culture values the suppression of emotions, and associates that with masculinity. It devalues traits it associates with femininity. It values thinness, tallness, light skin, youth, and a level of physical ability that has only ever been temporary for anyone. This culture values the English language, but only certain forms of it. This culture has also been shaped by a religious belief that humans have fallen from God's grace and must somehow work their way back into it. This translates into seriously dysfunctional and mixed messages about humanness, freedom, suffering, pleasure, and work.

This culture has shaped our minds so thoroughly that it can be hard to identify what is a perception and what is an observation. We also receive some personalized variations on these cultural messages from people in our lives, often people we love and who love us, but who have internalized this stuff and are themselves in the trance.

¹ A common theme in Brach's work. She talks about it, and tells the magician story in her dharma talk on 2/10/2021: <https://www.tarabrach.com/superpower-mindful-witnessing/>

When I was growing up, I heard loud and clear that I was too direct or spoke with too much authority, that my feelings were “too much,” and that I was difficult. Furthermore, I was made to understand that I should try very hard not to let my body grow to look like the bodies of other women in my family—women I cherished and whose DNA is in my DNA. I received that message from many sources, including from the cherished women themselves.

What were some of the frameworks you received, some of the perceptions and messages, that shaped how you see yourself? What do you wish were different about you, and what is the belief underneath that wish? A common experience is that we learn new ideas or come to hold different values than what we were taught, yet still find ourselves operating and even thinking as though those old messages, frameworks, perceptions, and beliefs were somehow hardwired into us. We *seem* to be stuck. But that’s the great thing about life, right? You never know what’s going to happen. We can seem stuck and then... we really can get free. Even from patterns we’ve held all our lives.

Tara Brach tells a story about a magician. The magician had been traveling from town square to town square, astonishing people with a special magic trick. He would point to something, and it would instantly turn to gold. He could do it with any object—shovels, books, you name it. In one town, at the final show of the day, he notices that at the end, everyone is applauding and oohing and ahing... everyone except for one boy. As the crowd disperses, the boy just keeps standing there. He is holding a walking stick, and so the magician points at it and turns it to gold. The boy still does not react. The magician turns the boy’s shoelaces and his belt to gold. But the kid just stands there. “What’s wrong?” says the magician. “I’ve just made you the richest person in town. Aren’t you happy? What do you want?” And the boy says, “What I want is the magic finger.”

We think we want the prize, says Brach, but we lose sight of the source of all that we cherish.

The desire to belong and to be lovable and acceptable is our deepest longing as human beings. In our UU principles, this is behind our words about acceptance, compassion, and inherent worth and dignity. And the notion that we are separate, or are more than or less than others, or that our value lies in how we look or what we achieve or acquire, that is an illusion.

This stuff runs really deep and... it’s sneaky. You know even someone who seems to have all the markers of success is essentially very fragile because it’s all based on transient things and on the illusion that we are in control. That’s how we wind up with a lot of mean spiritedness and bottomless greed and even regular people being very judgmental toward one another. When we are judgmental, it’s just a way of drawing ourselves inside the circle of acceptance—at least for a moment—and drawing the other person out. But that’s still taking part in the illusion.

That’s how sneaky it is. So how do we free ourselves from these beliefs? How do we awaken from this trance? What’s the “magic finger?”

It begins with becoming alert observers of our own minds. When you are half conscious you are not aware of what is happening in your mind. When you are fully conscious, when you're truly present, you are aware of your mind.

This is essentially what meditation is. It's the practice of noticing your own mind. Of noticing what's happening in there. The two-minute meditation we do in these services each week is for that. It isn't very long. I know that sometimes the chime rings and you realize you were distracted the whole time. But that's okay. Let the ritual of it here be a reminder to practice it on your own. Pepper your week with several short meditations, or even just mindfulness moments where you intentionally notice your own thinking and feelings, and it will make a big difference in your life.

Pre-pandemic, I spent a weekend at a meditation retreat with the Zen priest angel Kyodo Williams, and she said something so interesting. She described liberation as a process of excavation. A process of uncovering and studying things in our own minds. "What you're excavating is what's not yours," she said. Our minds are not all ours. They are other people's projections, signals, stories, etc that have shaped us.

So we practice observing our minds. And—this is important— we practice doing so with compassion. It won't do to say, "Look at all the dumb thoughts I'm having!" and leave it at that. If you notice yourself having a thought that is negative or judgmental, instead of distancing yourself from it, try getting curious. What's under it?

For example, when I find myself feeling irritable, often my first reaction is to scold myself. *What's wrong with you? I'll say to myself. The people around you do not deserve your irritability!* When I get curious about that though, I notice that the reason for all that scolding is that I believe my feelings are not okay. That they are "too much." And if I let my curiosity go even further, I wonder how a feeling can be "too much?" It's just a feeling. And feelings just ... are. To have them is human. Furthermore, they don't tend to last long. Feelings come and go all the time. So how did I come to believe they are too much? And what if they are too much? What am I afraid will happen? And now I can see myself as a child, feeling overwhelmed by my feelings as a still-new human, and receiving a scolding instead of compassion. Instead of being taught how to feel my feelings and let them go, I was taught to be afraid that they will cause me to not belong or not be acceptable.

How can I not have compassion for that child? And now that I see that she's still with me, how can I not have compassion for myself?

I don't blame my caregivers, by the way. They were only passing on what they had themselves received. But let me tell you, no one's bad mood was ever improved by a scolding. Compassion softens our edges.

Can you find your edge, and soften?

When you do, when you make it your practice, you will come to know that you are not your thoughts and feelings, or your judgments about your thoughts and feelings, or anyone else's

judgments about them or about you. You are much deeper than all of that. And who you are, who you really are, belongs, is worthy, is lovable, always has been, and always will be. Though these thoughts and perceptions we get tangled up in can make us lose sight of ourselves, they are not us.

Find your edge... and soften.

It's a simple practice.

That does not mean it's always easy.

It's one of the most powerful ways I know to un-dam, unblock. To dislodge old patterns. To dismantle hidden beliefs that don't serve us or that maintain the illusion of our separateness. To awaken from the trance of "not okay." To open ourselves to more joy and connection than we might have thought possible. So that, we live our lives, as O'Donohue says,

Like a river flows / carried by the surprise / of its own unfolding.

May it be so.