

Last Sunday was a boisterous one in this sanctuary. We had the Roots Summer Leadership Academy kids here; maybe 20 kids up on the platform singing “I believe in me, and I believe in you, I believe in we.” Such big energy. And Jane Davis preached, which means I got to sit in the front row during the sermon. Now, you all don’t usually sit up in the front row. Why is that? Is it me??

I don’t think you realize what you’re missing. Up front you can see and hear everything. If the choir is singing, it’s like being bathed in harmonies.

Well last week, because I was up front, I got to sit next to the cutest little baby. I think maybe she was here to see a member of her family in the Roots program. The front is a great spot for babies and kids because, as I said, it’s more interesting to watch up in the front.

She was probably about twenty-months-old, just a wee person, with a little heart print outfit on. I don’t have many little ones in my life right now, so I was really delighted to hang out with her. She was fascinated by my vestments. She pointed to my stole, and I pointed to it back. She touched it, and I turned it over so she could see the other side. We took turns doodling on the order of service. She’d make a squiggle, and then I’d make one... handing the pen back and forth. So sweet. At that age, a human is learning so much.

The developmental psychologist Jean Piaget described the first two years of life as the sensorimotor period- when we are learning to use symbols (like speech), and understand objects, and explore the environment. We do a thorough job of it, too. All that bright baby curiosity. If you want to know just how thorough a job we do, look around this room at all the objects... the chairs, carpet, walls, paper, purses... okay? Now... consider this... I’ll bet you know how every single one of them would taste.

I’m not wrong, am I. You probably already know the texture, temperature, scent, and flavor of everything in this room without touching it. Because you investigated the world so well when you were in the sensorimotor phase, including by putting a whole bunch of it in your mouth. You have even more experience than you remember.

Another thing we learn as babies, which we may not specifically remember, is what kind of place this world is. Is it safe? Reliable? When our caregivers meet our needs, and when we have experiences of safe people early in life, it helps us meet the challenges and danger life will inevitably bring with more faith, less anxiety.

That doesn’t mean we don’t have any negative experiences. When I was a new mom, one time I accidentally hit my daughter’s head on a store shelf as I was walking past it with her in my arms. On another occasion, my son fell out of a shopping cart and I couldn’t catch him in time. I felt terrible when these things happened (I still do), but it’s okay. It’s human. And actually, having a

childhood that is pretty reliably good but not 100% perfect is useful. We need a balance of trust and mistrust in order to thrive as we go through life. The theorist Erik Erikson described this as developing *hope*: an openness to new experience tempered by wariness that discomfort or danger may arise. If we don't have a reliably safe childhood—and many people don't—we can still develop that kind of hope. But it will probably take some additional work, as in therapy or spiritual practice, to tend those places in us that have been hurt, and to discover where we can place our faith. What is trustworthy.

In grade school, we learn to navigate the social world. To play with others, to regulate our emotions. Your particular kind of intelligence begins to show in elementary school. Are you more inclined to words, math, or spatial intelligence? How about music? Or kinesthetic or body intelligence, such as dancers, crafts people, and athletes have? There is interpersonal (reading others) and intrapersonal (understanding one's self) and emotional intelligence. Naturalistic—understanding the natural world. And existential—considering ultimate issues like the purpose of life and the nature of death. If you had a hard time in school, it might be that your environment did not attend to your particular kinds of intelligence very well. I hope you found (or find) your particular way to shine. Maybe there was a place outside of school where you felt seen and valued.

Maybe you'd be interested in helping make that happen for someone else. Did you know that we are looking volunteers to spend time with kids right here at church? We're about to make it easier, too. Starting on Sept 11, our main children's programming is going to happen in between these church services, at 10, instead of concurrent with them. That means you could become a special person in a child's life, without having to miss any of these services. No special knowledge is required. And because some kids are energetic and others are more serious or introverted, we need all kinds of adults as well. If you're interested, just write your name and contact info down and hand it to me or any staff member after the service and we'll put you in touch with Mia Noren. She's the Director of our children's programming.

In our teen years, the work of identity development intensifies, as we begin to differentiate ourselves from others (especially our parents or guardians) and to explore possible paths into adulthood. It's a time of trying on different identities, of experimentation. We learn a lot about ourselves in those years, and if we are paying attention, we also continue with self-discovery and growth all throughout our lives.

There are some things about us that are considered kind of hardwired. When I counsel couples before they get married, I ask them to do an assessment called the Prepare-Enrich inventory. It isn't a test of their compatibility per se, but a snapshot of some of the things that are hardwired, and some things that are deeply wired in that may be hard to understand when two people are different. Like being extraverted or introverted. But humans also have a trait called plasticity, which means we are capable of learning to behave in new ways all throughout our lives, to a certain point.

So, there's this a thread throughout our whole lives, of figuring out who we are and how to be. Have you ever thought about when was the first time you realized you were a self, separate

from other people and objects? When we are born, we don't know this. It's hard to tell exactly when self-awareness occurs. But there's a cute experiment that researchers came up with to investigate. They have moms place a red mark on their baby's nose. They do it in a sneaky way, like while wiping the baby's face. And then the babies are placed in front of a mirror.

Many one-year-olds will reach out and touch the nose in the mirror, showing that they see the mark. But by fifteen-months of age, a shift occurs: upon seeing the reflection, the babies reach up and touch their own noses, showing that they understand that they themselves are the person in the mirror. By age two, almost all toddlers do this, and they use the words "me" and "mine." They are a self! And pretty soon young children recognize the continuity of their selves over time. They know they are the same person celebrating their birthday this year as they were last year. And with each birthday, with each year, the work of figuring out our own identities continues.

By midlife, which is more or less in our forties and fifties, humans tend to have developed their most complex understandings of ourselves, emotions, and motivations. That, together with an awareness of our mortality, can lead to what is popularly known as a midlife crisis. Researchers actually call it a "midlife correction." It's when we take stock and we may make changes to bring our lives into alignment with who we are and what we value.

As a forty-five-year-old person who has been through a lot of loss and change this year, but has also dyed her hair purple, gotten a big snake tattoo, and started riding around on a motorcycle, let me just say that whatever you call it, the fun, liberated part of midlife has been underrated. 10/10: I recommend the fun, liberated part of life. (Snakes are a symbol of transformation and of the divine feminine.)

So, we become more ourselves as we go through life, starting from the beginning. Some parts of us seem to be essential and don't change a lot. Other parts are subject to experimentation and play. And then, there's the way life can hand us a set of circumstances that cause us to make a big change.

I just finished taking a six week long Queer Talmud class that was held over zoom. It was offered by a Jewish learning community called Svava in Chicago. The Talmud is the sacred book of Jewish law. It contains teachings that are not specified in the Hebrew bible, but have been handed down from one generation to the next.

Rabbi Benay Lappe who founded Svava opened the class with a spirited lecture that really stayed with me—and I think it's relevant here. She talked about something she calls "crash theory." She says every religion tells a master story. Why are we here? What's our purpose? How should I live my life? Every religion comes into being to answer these questions. You've heard me talk about this, too. I call them the first questions. Rabbi Benay says a good master story can last a long time. Hundreds of years, even. But eventually, it is going to crash. Why? Well, something could happen that makes the story no longer workable. A crisis of some kind. Or something inside of you shifts, and the old answers don't seem true anymore.

When a story crashes, there are three options. Option 1 is to pretend the crash never happened. You go back to the story, with your head basically in the sand. You build a wall around it and make sure no scary information gets in again. Option 2 is to decide the story is worthless, and throw it out. It's garbage now. You jump into a new story. But remember, all stories crash so that one won't always last either. Option 3 is to go back to the story and update it based on what you now know.

Now this class was specifically about Judaism. It was about whether the Talmud can be interpreted in new ways, and by whom. Rabbi Benay says re-interpreting Judaism through a queer lens is one of the ways of cherishing a master story—Judaism—while updating it based on what we know now.

When I heard Rabbi Benay's lecture, I learned a lot—she talked about even more than this over the course of an hour. And I noticed two things. One is that crash theory applies to other religions, too. The tradition that became Unitarian Universalism used to be very Christian—in fact, the Puritans are the direct religious ancestors of this faith. When our forebears came to understand that the bible is a set of historical texts written down by people and not the literally true word of God, that caused a crash. The faith we have today came to be because some people chose option 3—they believed there was still value in the story of creation and Jesus and everything around it. But they updated it based on what they had learned—that other stories may also be valuable, along with science and other new ways of knowing. That's how we came to be creedless and have such a “big tent.”

The other thing I noticed is that crash theory can apply to our personal master story, too. The story of who we are—of that identity we work so long to develop. Especially as that identity gets woven together with things external to ourselves. When we face the loss of a core relationship, or of a career, or we fail at something that we thought was essential to us, we can refuse to move on (that's option 1), we can write the past off as a lie or ourselves as a victim (that's option 2), or we can do some learning, some discovery, and deepen our understanding of who we are, based on what we know now.

Can we trust life again when that happens? Going back to that concept from a few minutes ago that depends on whether we have learned to balance trust and mistrust. Remember how Erik Erikson defined hope? As an openness to new experience tempered by wariness that discomfort or danger may arise. We know we can't place our trust in things staying the same all the time. But we can trust that there is goodness and love. That we can actively work to meet our needs and to help meet the needs of others. We can say, with the Roots kids, “I believe in me, and I believe in you, I believe in we, our whole community.”

Wherever you are in your life's unfolding today, may you know hope. If you could use a little more of that “we,” I hope you'll consider reaching out to First Unitarian's care team.

And may we each be a blessing to each other's lives and stories, through our manner of being in the world.