

First Unitarian Church

January 23, 2023

I'm going to start with a story told about the great Rabbi Zusha of Hanipol, who lived in the 1700's.¹ It is said that on his deathbed he began to cry and his students and disciples tried hard to comfort him. They asked him, "Rabbi, why do you weep? You are almost as wise as Moses, you are almost as hospitable as Abraham, and surely heaven will judge you favorably."

Zusha answered them: "It is true. When I get to heaven, I won't worry so much if God asks me, 'Zusha, why were you not more like Abraham?' or 'Zusha, why were you not more like Moses?' I know I would be able to answer these questions. After all, I was not given the righteousness of Abraham or the faith of Moses but I tried to be both hospitable and thoughtful. But what will I say when God asks me, 'Zusha, why were you not more like Zusha?'"

--

When my daughter was very little, I was intent on protecting her from gender stereotypes. I dressed her in blue overalls *and* in pink dresses, in brown Merrell shoes *and* bows, played trucks *and* dolls with her, and kept her hair short—I used to distract her by letting her play with my jewelry while I cut her hair myself. I didn't need any guff about it from some hairstylist (this was the 1990's and we lived in a small conservative town). When someone gave her a barbie for her first birthday (her first birthday!) I threw it in the garbage. (It wasn't recyclable.) I hadn't gone to college yet and there wasn't much of an internet back then, but I practically lived in the public library (thank god for public libraries!) and I had read bell hooks, and Gloria Steinem, and Susan Faludi-- and I wanted my daughter to be her whole self.

I brought some of this approach to raising my son when he was very little, too, but I didn't know as much back then about the way misogyny harms *men*, how it boxes them into a certain kind of socially acceptable masculinity; how it forces them to cut off parts of themselves; and the violence they too may face if they do not or cannot comply. At the time I thought the most important thing was for my son to see empowered women and consider that empowerment normal. As both kids grew though, we eventually began to have family conversations about masculinity and wholeness as well.

One of my favorite books to read the kids was "I Look Like a Girl" by Sheila Hamanaka. It starts, "I look like a girl, but..."

I'm going to read it to you in a second. On the one hand, it's about defying gender stereotypes. As in I look like a girl, and you might think that means certain things, but these other things are true. On the other hand, the story is about the richness of being any kind of human, how we are all more than whatever we appear to be to others, and the way our imaginations bring different parts of our selves alive. I wanted to show you

the pictures but unfortunately our projector is still out for repair. So, I'm going to share the words, and you can use *your* imaginations.

I look like a girl/but really I'm a tiger/with a rumble, a roar, and a leap!

I look like a [fill in the blank]/but really I'm a dolphin/with a spin and a splash in the sea.

When you sit at the table/you think that you see me/but the real me has run out the door...

For I'm really a mustang/a wild horse on the mesa/wind across the canyon floor.

As I soar with the condors/the earth spins below me/I know how it feels to be free.

And when I am sleeping/like a jaguar I'm creeping/through the jungle of my dreams.

If you hear me sing sweet songs/please listen again/for the calls of my spirit friends.

With the moon I'll be howling/with the wolves I'll be racing/through a forest that never ends.

Throw out those glass slippers/send the fairies to sleep/no prince is waiting for me.

For if you look twice/past the sugar and spice/the eyes of a tiger you'll see.

I just need the forest/the mesa, the jungle/the stars dreaming over the sea

To free what is wild/in the heart of a child/so I can be me, just me.

They are probably too small to see, but my daughter decorated the cover of the book with—yep, Disney princess stickers. At first I was like oh jeesh, and then I remembered that I'm the one who taught her to *both/and* it.

All our lives our authentic self, who we are at our center, wants to be expressed and loved. And all our lives we receive pressure and messaging from the cultures around us about who others think we are or should be. As we try to meet those expectations, what's on the outside can wind up looking pretty different than what's on the inside.

There are the stereotyping kind of messages—the ones about gender, ability, race, and all the other categories humans try to box each other into. And there are broader cultural messages too that become driving forces—and limiters—in our lives.

For example, we receive the message, "I am what I have." Which puts us in constant comparison with others—do I have enough? Do I have the right stuff? Do I have a car, and the right kind? Do I have a home, and if so is it on a foundation or are there wheels hiding beneath it? (I grew up in a trailer home with wheels.)

Another pervasive message is, "I am what I do." This is about employment, not actions. Our actions do indeed speak loudly about us. But paid employment? Sometimes it

reflects the self but often it doesn't. When we meet new people, instead of asking "What do you do?" we could learn a lot more about a person by asking "How do you like to spend your time? What do you do for fun?" You're more likely to have fun with a new friend than to go to their workplace, right?

And other falsehood we humans are prone to internalizing is, "I am what other people say or think about me."

That's just not always true, right? We are not what other people say or think about us. Other people are wrong sometimes. I wish kids especially knew that. Grown-ups don't you wish you'd known that when you were a kid? That sometimes other people are wrong? Sometimes *grown-ups are wrong*. They might think or say something that is not true, including something about a kid.

A lot of the time, what other people say or think about is based on assumptions, or colored by their own experiences or unmet needs, or just reflects a lack of knowledge, and isn't specifically about us at all.

That's why my old therapist used to say, "What other people think about you is none of your business."

That's hard to accept if you believe that you are what other people say or think about you.

What other people think of you is none of your business! Oh my gosh. It's kind of a relief to take that to heart though, since we are not actually in control of what other people think or say about us.

So those are three falsehoods we are taught about ourselves: that we are what we have, we are what we do, or we are what other people say or think about us. Those lies may cause us a lot of anxiety as we try to live up to them. We may succeed for a time, and that can be satisfying, but it's a fragile way to exist. Fragile because stuff, jobs, and opinions are fickle. We can lose them.

The path to true happiness is not in those things. It's in something you cannot so easily lose: knowing and being true to your authentic self. The self at your center.

The writer Dawna Markova says, "When the inner walls to your soul are graffitied with advertisements, commercials, and the opinions of everyone who has ever known and labeled you, turning inwards requires nothing less than a major clean-up."ⁱⁱ

The thing is: how do you do it? How do you separate the authentic you, the self-center, from all that other stuff that needs "cleaned up?" When we've been buried under all that other stuff, we can lose touch with our deep down selves—we never lose it, your real self is always with you, but we can lose touch with it and lose our clarity about it.

One of the times in life when we are at our most authentic, is in childhood. When we are kids, we have rich inner lives. Thoughts and daydreams, likes and dislikes. When

someone says something about us that is incorrect, we recognize it and will often say so. When grown-ups tell us there are certain acceptable norms about how to think, look, and behave, and it's something that goes against who a kid is in their heart, for example certain gender norms, that kid knows it. They may truly wish they could meet the expectations of their family and community, but they will know if they can't.

When I was little, I was scolded a lot for being too emotional or "oversensitive." I didn't want to be that way, but *I just felt things a lot*—a sock that was put on slightly crooked, a tag in a shirt that was touching my skin. I needed extra time to navigate transitions. I experienced distress and anxiety in really big ways. And no amount of scolding helped with this. What I needed was for someone to recognize that I was wired for high sensitivity, to recognize it as part of human diversity, and to teach me some skills for it—for example how to ground myself or get re-centered in a distressing situation.

Anybody else have an experience in childhood of not being able to be how others said you should be?

One of the signs that our authentic self is running up against "all that other stuff" is that no matter how much we wish we could change, we can't. It causes us distress. But it's a sign not that something is wrong with you, just that you *are* you.

Trying to fit in in a religion that doesn't ring true or feel right to you, because that's what is expected, and experiencing shame, guilt, or fear because of it, is another example of the authentic self-bristling at external messaging that does not fit.

Another thing that can help us notice our authentic selves is when we have the persistent feeling that we are pretending. That you are performing some version of you instead of being you. This is a variety of imposter syndrome.

Not all imposter syndrome is bad—sometimes it's part of growth. It usually takes a while—sometimes years—after reaching adulthood before you *feel* like an adult. Same with starting a new career or becoming a parent—it takes a while to settle in. Who here is a grandparent? Does that happen again when you become a grandparent? Have any grandparents here had a little imposter syndrome? Asking for a friend. (Even though my daughter is turning 27 and getting married this year...)

That's okay. That's part of growing into new roles. But when you feel like an imposter in a well-established life... well. That's something to pay attention to.

In fact, paying attention to that, and to your true self, is some of the most important spiritual work you can do. It might sound selfish on the surface, but it's much deeper than that.

At the heart of it is a deeply religious question: is life sacred or not? If it is, will you take the matter of your wholeness lightly? Your full living in it? When we live inauthentically, we spend a lot of precious energy on things that don't come naturally to us, or help us thrive. We may get stuck in that pattern, afraid of what we might lose if we speak and be

our truth. When we find ways to do so though, whether in small steps or big bold changes, that is a kind of liberation.

I once heard a liberal evangelical preacher say, “We’re all going to die, the question is will you *live*?”

Will the real you live? That is the question I’m inviting you to contemplate this morning.

ⁱ A widely told story. One version of it is on Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zusha_of_Hanipol

ⁱⁱ Qtd. in Soul Matters worship materials for January 2023. <Soulmatterssharingcircle.com> Members of First Unitarian can see the materials by asking a member of the worship staff.