

Gould Lecture 2020 presented by Leah Purcell Transcript

Growing Souls in Congregations, Lessons from Nature and the Pandemic

Thank you for that kind introduction, Frances. I'm honored to have been selected to present tonight. Thank you for coming, everyone, and welcome.

Friends, we are in strange times. Separated from one another in isolation during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Though the Gould Discourse has been recorded and archived for decades now, this is the first time you are watching this only on screen. I'm doing my best to relate to my computer camera tonight. I won't be able to see you give a little nod, or chuckle or quizzical look. And many of you in your own homes won't be able to have the usual experience of a being an audience member with mutual laughter or being able to turn to your neighbor. AND I hope you find this time valuable; that the technology keeps working, and if we have glitches, we'll all just take a breath and try to get back on track.

Let's start by taking a few deep breaths, landing in this space. Maybe you've been already on zoom a lot this week. Maybe you've rushed from some other task or dinner to get here.

In her blog *Spiral Spiritual Practice in the Time of Corona*, Rev Karen G. Johnston reminds us that to be able to move and shift out of stuck places, both emotionally and intellectually, we must do the hard work of facing complex, difficult emotions: we must honor our pain by naming it, even feeling it. I know that some of you are experiencing anxiety and sorrow. Let us take another few breaths to honor our struggles.

And let's offer gratitude. I'm grateful you're here. I'm grateful I have the things I need in order to be here tonight. Perhaps we all can be grateful for computer access, and some ease and comfort.

My original topic tonight was *Growing Souls in Congregations*, a pretty good topic I thought for a religious educator presenting to other UU religious professionals and congregational leaders. To prepare for it, I took Rev Renee Ruchotzke's recommendation to read the book, *Nature and the Human Soul, Cultivating Wholeness in a Fragmented World* by the author, psychologist, and wilderness guide, Bill Plotkin. Mr. Plotkin is described as an agent of cultural evolution. He offers a different model of human development than most of us have learned about; it's way of looking at human development as development of the soul. And he sees that development happening, or happening best, though one's exposure to nature throughout life and with the guidance of trusted and experienced mentors. Ahh... what would it be like to grow and develop one's soul – one's true essence – with nature as your source and under the guidance of wise and trusted mentors? I think there's a lot of possibility there for us as UU's..., *maybe especially* in the time of the pandemic.

So many of us have been trying to or longing to get out into nature to get grounded in these pandemic times. A friend of mine who lives alone has said that working from home is less stressful in many ways; she gets more work done because she's not interrupted, but all that time on Zoom for work and for connecting with friends and family has left her feeling overworked and lonely. Maybe some of you can relate or you've heard similar stories from other people. But my friend says that even if she doesn't

change out of her sweats or brush her teeth, that she feels more grounded, more fully human, if she can get outside for a walk in her neighborhood.

Maybe you can relate? Have you been longing to get outside? I'd like to pause here to give you a chance to think about and discuss it. I'd like you think how you have found ways to be grounded and fully human in the past few months. Have you gone out in nature? Where have you been? Have you been drawn to water? Or mountains? Or gardens? Or where would you have wished you could have gone? Or are there other ways you have sought to get grounded, maybe through artwork, writing or music. I have a piece of music for us to listen to for a moment while we reflect. And then you'll be invited to a break out room to share with others about this. The break out room will be for 10 minutes and you'll be with about 4 or 5 other people. In a moment, you'll see a button to click to join a break out room. If you want to pass and not join a breakout room that's fine too. Don't click the button and you can stay here quietly instead. So, first the music for a moment to think about how you've been connecting with nature or how you've been wanting to connect with nature, or something else you used to get grounded during the pandemic, then we'll have breakout rooms.

I hope you enjoyed the conversations in your break out rooms. Maybe you had common experiences, maybe totally different ones. If you like, you can put a word or phrase to describe your practice in the chat. We'll keep the chat going can keep the chat going but I'll read a couple aloud now. Working to get out in nature is a big one for me. Maybe like me, recently you've been reminded of times you were out in nature as a child. I've been longing not just to get outside and walk on the sidewalks in my neighborhood, but to get into the woods. I want trees over my head. What I've been longing for, I realize, are experiences I had in my childhood during my formative years between when I was 7 and 12 years old, when we lived in a wonderful neighborhood for kids. A few blocks in one direction was the school, the library, a drug store with a soda fountain, a movie theater, the bank, a mom and pop grocery. A few blocks in the other direction was the park with an ice-skating rink, playgrounds, a ball field, and a creek. At that time children didn't have a lot of structured activities. The time I spent time at the park was mostly with 2 brothers and my friends, exploring the banks of the creek. I remember how we used to flip over flat rocks in the shallow water, looking for a hole in the mud. Then we would plunge a hand into the hole hoping to pull out a little crayfish from its home. My friends and I also made up and enacted stories by the creek and in the woods.

In his book *Nature and The Human Soul*, Plotkin talks about his childhood experiences growing up near woods, fields and farms in a town in New England that sounded even more magical than my experiences by the creek. In Plotkin's model of soul development these experiences of unfettered play in nature as children are crucial for developing our souls. He talks about other ways to offer nature to children besides being free range in a park or in fields – it could be a back yard, or stand of trees in a public park. How many of us have seen a child absorbed in watching busy ants working to move earth in the crack of a sidewalk. What is important is the **kind** of experience. Plotkin links the development of the soul to being in relationship to the natural world. This is how we learn how to function in and contribute to our cultural world and how we learn to treasure nature.

Plotkin describes 8 stages of development arranged, not in a line, but on a wheel. Each stage has tasks to complete and each has a gift. And these gifts are not lost in the different stages of development; they are transformed.

The wheel starts in the east, in the spring with new light, beginnings and birth. This is the time of the Innocents - babies and toddlers. Their place is described as the Nest, where it is the parents or caretakers' responsibility and joy to preserve the very young child's innocence; their unique human nature, which will eventually blossom as their gift to the world. Innocence is what provides all of us our natural openness to the world

The second stage is that of the Explorer – their place is the Garden, where innocence doesn't disappear, but fosters wonder. Wonder is active, it's exploration – like what I remember from my experiences by the creek. Wonder is the gift to us from the Explorer. Where would we be without it? How could we fully explore our values and beliefs without wonder?

Then the wheel turns to the South for the third stage – it is a time of flowering, growth, delight and summer. Our “tweens” those years between childhood and being an older adolescent are the Thespians- actors who can play many parts. They inhabit the Oasis. Thespians use wonder to create passion and fire, which ignites a teenager's world. Passion and fire are the gifts of the Thespians to everyone. This fire and passion challenges us adults to enact our values. I'm reminded of Francis Manley's Gould Lecture last year in which she talked about how youth like Greta Thunberg and the students of Parkland High School have challenged us adults to do the work that will save lives of children and youth.

The fourth stage is the Wanderer in the Cocoon –this is when the adolescent's fire fundamentally transforms them, like a pupa metamorphoses into a butterfly. And that butterfly falls in love with the world. The Wanderer's gift to everyone is the ability to explore Mystery – how we encounter that which is greater than ourselves.

This is where many theories of development end, with the young adult, ready to be launched into the world. There are theories of moral, spiritual and ethical development that continue into adulthood, but we don't often to really delve into them. I think it's easy for us to look at children and youth and say, “Ah, I see this child must be at this stage or the other,” but we don't want to look so closely at how our adults are developing. I think adults resist being labeled. But that's not what this model is about.

Our third Principles lays that out for all of us that we ACCEPT one another and ENCOURAGE one another to spiritual growth. So, let's consider the stages of this model about adulthood. In the fifth stage, we are in the west side of the wheel – the time of fall, of endings, but also of mystery and shadow, of introspection and self-discovery. This is when the Apprentice inhabits the Wellspring and where one's love for the world gives birth to one's sacred purpose in life, not just one's advocacy, though one's job can be one's sacred purpose. The gifts of the Apprentice are inspiration and visionary action.

The Artisan in the Wild Orchard is the sixth stage. I love this image of a wild apple orchard. Every apple seed, Plotkin learned, has not only the prospect of becoming an individual apple, but also of a one-of-a kind-apple. We only get uniform apples because apple growers use grafting techniques for mass production of apples. But if each seed were allowed to have its way, no two apple trees would bear identical apples. Their color, shape, texture and taste would be as unique as snowflakes or fingerprints. Ripe adulthood, Plotkin writes, is like a wild apple tree. If we grow as nature and soul would have it, each of us blossoms unmatched into adulthood. Our fruit, what we give to the world, is without equal, never before seen. The gifts of these Artisans are the seeds of a cultural renaissance. Changing the world is possible.

The last two stages are in the north – a time of stillness, winter and hardship, but also of skill and fortitude; of nurturing, teaching and service.

The 7th stage is the Master in the Grove of Elders. This is often when we retire from our jobs – that is the jobs that support us. Plotkin reminds us that the work of and for the soul is never done. This is when we have time and skill to devote to projects which produce and sustain a wholeness or what we UU's might call the web of life. The gift of the Masters is Wholeness.

And in the 8th stage, The Sage in the Mountain Cave, we turn to face the east. And that wholeness - the web of life which we have worked to sustain - supports us with grace. Here we can think of grace as Mystery, and an incredible, creative unfolding of the universe. The gift of the Sages is Grace.

In this model we begin in innocence and we end in grace.

Here we have a really beautiful model of how nature can be the source to grow souls and how we can grow and develop to sustain nature – the web of life – and also how we can sustain our culture – our congregations, sustain Unitarian Universalism. Since this model is on a wheel, not a ladder, it is not hierarchical. One stage is not lower than any other. In his explanation of each stage, Plotkin ends the chapter by saying how that particular stage could be considered the best. I think of how so often we say “Our children are our future”. And they are. But the focus of childhood is not to become something else. Childhood is a wonderful stage to be in. And, like all stages, it has its gift to the community.

Our congregations can be sustained by the gifts of people of all stages and our congregations can be places where we recognize all of the life stages and support them. Think what would happen if we treasured the individuals in each stage and the gifts they bring? What if children were not considered “pre-people”, but full on PEOPLE, and we valued their interactions with adults, so that they could inspire wonder and passion within us? What would it look like if we stopped thinking of our elders as “retirees” and instead we held them in veneration; we need our Masters to work on sustaining our planet; and our Elders to show us what it's like to embrace wholeness and grace? If we did that, how would their roles in the congregation change?

To cultivate the gifts of each stage as we develop, however, assumes that all goes well.

We know that not everything goes well. Even the most devoted parents and caretakers have failures; we don't have all the skills and mindset to create soul-centered or faith-centered homes, because most of us were not raised in those kinds of homes. Our communities have failures, because we don't have good models for putting the development of souls at the center of all we do. And certainly, we as individuals, families and communities, are not supported by the larger society to allow nature and our souls to be our guides

Bill Plotkin describes our current society as not being soul-centric, but ego-centric or self-centered. Its qualities are hyper individualism, aggressive competition and mindless consumerism. This is what we and our children, youth, families and other adults are facing. As Plotkin describes it, babies are born with innocence, but very young children are taught to be obedient and to conform. Children lose the ability to wonder as they internalize inappropriate criticism, perfectionism and learn to suppress their emotions to fit in with peers and the larger society. So often the passion of our teens is smothered by competition and self-doubt. Some of us never develop or fully develop the gifts from the stages of

adulthood; mystery and finding one's sacred purpose; fortitude; nurturing our gift to the world; finding wholeness and grace.

I find that adolescents in particular are so susceptible to the pressures of an ego-centric society. We see them so caught up in competition – not only specifically with school grades and sports, and music and art competitions - but also the competition to have all the boxes ticked by the time they leave high school. I remember talking to the dad of a youth in my congregation who was struggling with being in youth group. This is not unusual with high schoolers. But this particular youth saw no the point of being there. I talked the dad about where else this youth might have a place to find meaning in her life. I knew she was on the high school soccer team and that might have meaning for her. But the dad sighed and said no, his daughter didn't enjoy being on the team, but she knew she had to keep on with it. It took me a minute to realize what this dad was saying. This youth had to do a sport she didn't enjoy, in order to look good, in order to get into a good college. And this youth had told me the same thing, "I don't need youth group," she said. "I don't need religion. I already know what I need to do – get into a good college so I can get a good job and take my place in society."

Ideally, as they develop, adolescents have time to use wonder to explore mysteries of life. They often like spend time alone, not because they are depressed, but because they need time to think. They might be interested in poetry, or in understanding the difference between sex and romance. They may be wondering what else there is for them besides getting education and training and then earning money to buy lots of stuff. It's difficult to legitimize that time wondering to include it in the list of achievements that can be ticked off the portfolio high schoolers feel they need to be successful.

And if adolescents don't have the gifts from growing up in a soul-centered way, instead of achieving authenticity, they become adults who strive for mere economic and social survival. Plotkin describes our whole culture as one made up of unhealthy adolescents. He writes, "The egocentric standard for a full-functioning "adult" in Western society is a socially popular [conformist] who earns a lot and buys a lot, is religious, (but not spiritual), is uncritically loyal to her country, (but who exploits the natural world on which her country depends), who cares about the human children in her neighborhood (but is heedless to the plight of children of all species elsewhere in the world) and is vigilantly fearful for the security of her own people (but oblivious to the devastation perpetuated by her own society upon other peoples and other species."

And we also know that there are people who are struggling to survive in this ego-centric society. People are not able to make ends meet; people are not able to sustain meaningful relationships. This pandemic is exacerbating everything and showing us stark examples of how our systems in society and government are stacked against people who were already at the margins because of their identities: black people, indigenous people and people of color; gay, lesbian, bi-sexual people, trans people; people who are non-gender conforming, people with disabilities, poor people

Rev Meg Riley, senior minister of the Church of the Larger Fellowship writes about a recent fall she had in her kitchen after fainting. Her first reaction to her adult child was to say "I'm fine". But she writes That voice that says "I'm fine" and really means "leave me alone" is occurring to me as a voice of stupidity that I should challenge at every turn. I'm not fine. We're not fine. None of us are fine right now, and pretty much we never were. Privilege makes some of us definitely way more fine than others, but none of us are fine in a world where marginalized people's lives are deemed less important than a robust economy for the privileged, with a government coldly calculating whose deaths are acceptable and

whose lives matter enough to protect. None of us were fine before the coronavirus and certainly none of us are fine now. None of us are fine in a world of cruelty, violence, indifference, greed.

Here we are in strange my friends and yet familiar times

In her blog, Rev Karen Johnston quotes environmental activist and author Joanna Macy - If we were to be given a pill to be convinced, "Don't worry. It's going to be okay," would that elicit from us our greatest creativity and courage? No. It's that knife edge of uncertainty where we come alive to our truest power. If there was ever a time of uncertainty, surely it must be now. Maybe we are not ok, but we have done hard stuff in the past and we continue to do hard stuff, with compassion for one another. As UU's we know that we don't have to go it alone. As I have said in other places, we UU's are persistent, individually and collectively. Our work to keep staying connected during the uncertainties of the Corona pandemic is evidence of that!

In the last two months, UU congregations have turned on a dime to move to online services and provide other online offerings to meet the needs of our congregants.

In our break out rooms earlier we shared different ways of connecting with nature and other practices we're using to sustain ourselves. Now I'd like you to think about what your congregations or the groups you're associated with have done to sustain your people in the time of the pandemic. And I'd like you to go a little further to consider that the way your responded as a congregation, can tell you something about what your congregation values. Did you create lots of opportunities to bring people up to speed on Zoom? That might tell you that you value your elders. Did you figure out a way to do music in your service? That might tell you that you value beauty as a source of meaning. Did you figure out easy ways for people to contribute financially on line? That could tell you that you value your institutions and your good works. Now I'd like to give you a moment to think, what comes to mind about how your congregation, or the group that you're associated with, responded to the needs of your people since the pandemic began. And also think about what that tells you about the values of your congregation or group. In the chat afterwards you'll be invited to type in your values in a word or a phrase. Again, feel free to pass, and you can wait quietly here in the main room. You'll go to your same break out groups and you'll have another 10 minutes. But first a moment with some music for you to think.

I hope you thought of some values of your congregations or your groups, and I'm hoping that you'll share them with us. Here's your opportunity to use the chat box again; please enter a word or phrase that describes the values of your congregation or group.

We'll keep the chat going. After the lecture, Amy Kent will use these to create a word cloud which she will post on the website. I'll read some here.

It has been said recently that in these strange times, we are like soil that has been tilled. We are loose and open and ready for the seeds of new ideas and practices.

And I would add that we are fertile soil. Our congregations develop values and aspirations and we lift them up in our vision statements. Here we find a list the rich qualities we cultivate: those are compassion, love, respect, diversity, humility, and TRANSFORMATION.

Transformation. That is the real and unique work of our congregations. The model of soul development I have been describing gives us two touchstones for faith development that can help us be transformational. One is understanding the importance of nature for us to develop fully and creatively.

The other is the need for experienced mentors and guides.

Wise and trustworthy mentors and guides help individuals as they move through their stage. Most often when we think of mentors in congregations, our Coming of Age mentors come to mind. In our congregation, we have called this program Rite of Passage. The job of these mentors is to serve as positive role models of active and engaged members of the congregation and to help the youth clarify their beliefs and values. These mentors must be spiritually mature themselves so they can be open-minded and able to accept a wide variety of religious beliefs; they must be able and willing to share personal experiences in appropriate ways and they must be able to ask tough questions of youth to guide them in forming their beliefs.

The mentor/youth mentorship also requires that the parents and caretakers have trust in the mentors and, that the youth feel safe and connected to their mentors. It's hard work, soul centered work, for everyone involved. The goal is not the celebration at the end of the year. The celebration is valuable to mark the youth's spiritual work and their new role in the congregation. The goal of Coming of Age is to help the youth create something that's meaningful to them not only going forward, but as they are going through the program and for the mentoring process itself of to be meaningful. We want our young people to develop into engaged and authentic Unitarian Universalists, who will one day become active in the stewardship of our faith movement and as serve as experienced, authentic mentors themselves one day.

Our current society thinks of the life stages as birth, childhood, adolescence, adulthood and death. The wheel of soul development shows us that there are several stages between childhood and adult hood. What if children had mentors to help them develop within and between the stages of being a child, a young adolescent, as well as for our older adolescents? We do have a model of that in the Our Whole Lives program, or OWL - our lifespan sexuality education program. In some ways, the trained facilitators our elementary OWL programs act as mentors. They help our Kindergarteners and first Graders to explore their wonder of the world and personal relationships. They help our 4th-6th graders to understand the changes in their bodies, personalities and relationships as they go through puberty. In the Our Whole Lives program, trust is carefully built between the parents and caretakers, and the facilitators, as well as between the children and the facilitators. Building those trusting relationships and creating those safer spaces are sacred tasks of Our Whole Lives.

When I talk to parents of teens and other adults about our "Coming of Age" program, they sometimes say, I wish I had a mentor. What if our congregations had capable mentors to help adults move through their developmental stages of Apprentices, Artisans, Sages and Elders with purpose and meaning? We do have some models for that too. There are Our Whole Lives programs for young adults, adults and for older adults. Some of you may be familiar with Wellspring, a program for adults for spiritual deepening. In Wellspring each person selects a trained spiritual director to work with them in the program.

I think that's our biggest challenge is to creating mentorships is fostering trust. That's a challenge in the best of times. Here we are isolated physically from one another – for who knows how long at this point. For my congregation, and I'm guessing others as well, our first priority after the shutdown was getting our Sunday morning services on line and accessible. No mean feat, I must say. Then we looked at ways

to connect congregants during the week. But recently the weekday online events week have become less popular - from adult coursework to Friday Dance Parties. And I've heard much the same from my colleagues.

I think up until now, we have been focused on just holding it together. I think most of our children, youth, families, and other adults staying at home have learned by now how to negotiate the basics. We're creating new norms. But none of us is fine and some of us are less fine than others. Being at home is stressful for many households, especially where there is financial insecurity, where there is addiction, the potential for abuse, where children with special needs are not receiving the services they need, and where people have experienced loss of a loved one.

We are in strange times, friends, still and again. We're in uncertain and perhaps liminal, in-between times. It feels like we are moving from one phase of the pandemic and physical isolation to another. I'm not talking about trying to get together physically. Yesterday we heard from our UU Association President, Susan Frederick Gray that the UUA now recommends that congregations begin planning for virtual operations for the next year (through May 2021). This is quite sobering. How will we hang on that long? Susan let us know that maybe that with time, and depending on the specific conditions and recommendations of local public health officials, small in-person groups of people and may become possible. We just don't know.

But this pandemic is teaching us that our actions directly impact the health and well-being of everyone. As Susan said in her message to congregations, as COVID-19 disproportionately impacts people with disabilities, Black people, Indigenous communities, Latinx people, the elderly, and essential workers, a majority of whom are women and women of color, religious communities have a moral responsibility to do all we can to reduce risks for those already at such high risk.

We need to stay isolated, AND yet, we need to strengthen our connections.

We might think that "trauma" is too strong a word for what we all are experiencing. This pandemic does not have a momentous, catastrophic event like a mass shooting or a hurricane. Instead, we are experiencing continuous mini-traumas. As our colleague, Craig Schwalenberg pointed out to me, this is more like the AIDS epidemic – except that we all are at risk, and all of our society is impacted. I also talked to Susan Suchocki Brown from the UU Trauma Response Ministry. She assured me that any trauma is trauma, even if people can't recognize it. She pointed to resources from our UU Trauma Response Ministry to help us find ways to acknowledge what we're going through as trauma, ways to identify others who are in trauma – like children and youth - and ideas for self-care. I shared with her what I think congregations are going to face. That people are entering a new normal that is not healthy, that as we enter the summer there will be more pressure on families since school will be out and vacation plans have gone out the window. And that though we've been good about getting our worship on line, we're looking for ways that congregations can build and maintain relationships. And Susan said those were good things for her and her colleagues to think about. So, who knows?

Obviously, there is no one source for solutions as we move through phases of the pandemic. For example, Susan Frederick Gray let us know that there is recognition for the increasing need for pastoral care and trained pastoral care leaders, so, there is a new course from the UUA Leadership Institute: Spiritual Care Training for Congregational Leaders. I am grateful for my religious professional colleagues. We have been talking to each other to share our experiences and ideas; I'm grateful our UUA staff who are helping everyone in leadership to stay connected and for providing us resources.

My hope is that we have successes in addressing people's needs in the next phase of the pandemic and we continue sharing ideas.

And my hope is that those successes teach us how to sustain our communities, create meaningful events, large and small, and then teach us how to foster caring and supportive mentorships.

I'm know there will be many discussions on what innovations and new ideas are available to us as we broaden our vision of what could be and how to go about it. Some congregations are looking at what Paula Cole-Jones and Sheila Schuh are bringing us on creating Communities of Communities- this model of structuring a congregation gives a voice to all the groups within it and, in turn, supports the whole community and makes room for diversity. Shannon Harper and her colleagues are experimenting and trying on new things in their work. The principles of emergent strategy are helping to guide them. Among these principles are that change is constant and we can look to the patterns of change in nature and power of wonder to guide us in creating the world we want. I'm excited for our UUA general assembly; its theme: Rooted, Inspired and Ready.

Who knows where we'll all be one year from now for the next Gould Lecture?

I'll close my remarks tonight with a piece from the poet, Rainer Maria Rilke

God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
Then walks with us silently out of the night.

There are the words we dimly hear:

You, sent out beyond your recall,
Go to the limits of your longing
Embody me.

Flare up like flame
And make big shadows I can move in,

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going No feeling is final.
Don't let yourself lose me.

Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know its seriousness.

Give me your hand.

Resources:

Nature and the Human Soul, Cultivating Wholeness in a Fragmented World by Bill Plotkin
<https://animas.org/books/nature-and-the-human-soul/>

2019 Sophia Fahs Lecture Creating Communities of Communities presented by Paula Cole Jones
<https://www.uua.org/ga/past/2019/workshops/sophia-fahs-lecture>

Emergent Strategy- Shaping change, Changing Worlds by adrienne maree brown
<https://www.uuabookstore.org/Search.aspx?k=Emergent+strategy>

UUA Trauma Response Ministry Facebook Page <https://www.facebook.com/uutrm>

Spiritual Care Training for Congregations
<https://www.uuinstitute.org/courses/spiritualcarediscernment/>

Music from Coffee Slug: *Sanguine* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XwhnoE-XEf4> and *Bamboo*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gYep7IlfdIA>

Slide show of photos illustrating the Eight Stages of Eco-Centered Human Development
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1HbTr9JKO2bPOmOlplWDSdFxBSgGFGJsX/view?usp=sharing>