

All this month we have been talking about letting go and surrender. Today I'd like to share my experience of letting go. My experience is one of letting go to permit living my Unitarian Universalist faith more fully. The letting-go is letting go of the narrative of separateness and self-sufficiency. The transformation is getting to a point of living our UU Covenant more fully in order to transform ourselves, our communities, and our world.

I have some feelings of vulnerability and guilt associated with sharing my experience but (with motivation from the previous services this month) I have decided to do so. I choose to do so because I know that I'm not the only one with such an experience. I always hesitate to share my experience because I ask myself will people be able to relate or will they go into the two S's. The two S's are stereotype and stigma. I decided that my experience needs to be shared because it is relatable and relevant.

People choose to pursue ministry for many different reasons. Not unlike many others who have embarked on a spiritual path, I am on such a path because I went through a dark night of my soul and lived to tell the tale. As a result of this experience, I believe that I have a responsibility to share what I have found. I hesitate to use the term "calling" because I got no distinct call. I didn't even get a text message (*pause*). However, I am somehow drawn to the common warrior myth that when the warrior survives the dark night of her soul she has the responsibility to share what she has found during the journey (Maybe that is a calling?)

I grew up in a family where self-sufficiency and independence were worshipped. My grandfather (the minister) was firmly set against accepting any type of assistance and he pointed out constantly how he believed that some of our neighbors who dared to ask for help were just plain lazy.

He said he would work himself to death before he asked for a hand-out and he followed through on that. He had worked on the very morning of the day of his death. I had internalized the teachings of my grandfather a lot more than I realized.

I began to struggle with the purpose and meaning of my life as I neared midlife. However, I was determined to tough it out on my own. I was determined to keep working diligently in an industry where I questioned the ethics of my work. When the down times and the anxious times came I was not going to show any vulnerability or reach out to others for help. I was not going to let go of my deeply held beliefs about self-sufficiency and I was not going to show weakness.

I found that I felt better with a few drinks and even better with a few more. Before long this developed in to habitual drinking. The lie I told myself, in true naturalist fashion, was that since I drank organic corn liquor mixed with a high antioxidant organic fruit juice that certainly this was not so bad for me.

Of course, as with any ineffective coping method, there were side effects and consequences. It became impossible to function at my true capacity. I know I'm not the only one here today who has been down this path.

My drinking became a major problem. As this dark night became darker and darker I made the decision to leave my individual residence and move into a self-supporting, self-governing intentional community of individuals in recovery from substance use disorders. This community is called Oxford House. Oxford House Incorporated now consists of over 2400 houses internationally. There are 17 Oxford Houses here in Albuquerque. Oxford House was started in 1975 by three individuals who discovered that they could help themselves by helping each other. These three obtained a single house and created an intentional community.

While I lived in the house I got a better lesson in the Seventh Principle than any seminary could teach. The Seventh Principle is one of seven principles which are integral to our Unitarian Universalist faith. The seventh Principle states that *We affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part.*

I got an intense full time educational program in interdependence. The interdependence came at all levels. I learned that I needed to be in community with people willing to share a mutual vulnerability. I was reminded that I was needed. Although, at first I was needed primarily because the house had some electrical limitations and I was the only one in the house who knew what a breaker box was or where to find it.

I moved back to my own place after about 14 months but I took with me a lesson that had changed my life. That lesson was that without connection to the interdependent web referenced in our 7th Principle, we will connect to harmful things that, at least initially, give us that same positive feeling we get from spiritual connection. I had to let go of deeply held beliefs about separateness, independence, and vulnerability in order to let go of a harmful connection and form spiritual connections to something larger than myself. After this experience, I felt the responsibility to work with people struggling to let go of unhealthy connections. I began working with a community of people struggling with recovery from addiction to alcohol and other drugs. I soon realized that the lesson I had learned had a much broader application than I first realized. I felt the need to share what I had found.

So, this next part I did not foresee: here I am going into ministry, on the backside of 50, way outside my comfort zone, standing in front of a large room of people admitting my own vulnerability and interdependence.

Through my own personal experiences I have found new depth of meaning in our 7th Principle and the individual necessity of respect for the interdependent web of which we are part.

Independence vs. interdependence.

Focus on Independence often results in isolation and feelings of aloneness, and fear of those seen as other than ourselves. Interdependence focuses on community and working together for common goals and ideals.

This is not about alcohol or any other drugs. This is about unhealthy connection and the need for healthy connection. Drugs and alcohol are just one form of unhealthy connection among many.

-This is about unhealthy connection as a symptom of our lack of understanding of and respect for our interdependence.

-This is about letting go of the deeply held belief that we are separate and independent.

-This is about learning a type of effective coping that is primarily spiritual.

There are three significant pieces to this: The first is that: In the absence of healthy interdependent connections, humans will form unhealthy connections. Second is that the root of our inability to let go of unhealthy connections is our worship of imaginary independence and our illusion of separateness. Third is that we can move beyond unhealthy connections and learn the effective coping skill of forming healthy connections to the interdependent web of existence.

First: 1. In the absence of healthy interdependent connections, we humans will form unhealthy connections.

Although we have more ways than ever to connect with one another, most of these ways involve a screen. We are much less physically present with each other than ever before. Many of us have at least hundreds of Facebook friends yet, how many of those people do we feel we could call during a crisis. How many of those “friends” know anything about us beyond what we post to create our public persona.

Many addiction specialists agree that addictive behavior occurs due to a lack of bonding. By addictive behavior, I mean any unhealthy bonding and connection that we develop and then have difficulty changing, despite its harmful effects . Humans have an innate desire to connect and bond with something.

If strong connections are absent in our lives, addictive behavior can quickly fill the gap. This often involves chemicals found in alcohol and other drugs, but non-chemical activities such as gambling, sex, video gaming, and shopping can also fill the void.

We human beings have a natural and innate need to bond. And when we’re happy and healthy we’ll bond and connect with each other. But if we can’t do that — because we are traumatized or isolated or stuck in deeply held beliefs about independence and self-sufficiency — we will bond with something that will give us some relief. That might be gambling, that might be pornography, that might be working obsessively but, we will bond and connect with something because that’s our nature, that’s what we want as humans.

In the absence of healthy interdependent connections, humans will form unhealthy connections.

Second: At the root of our inability to let go of unhealthy connections and create interdependent relationships is our illusion of separateness.

There are so many cases of holding on to ineffective beliefs but I’m talking specifically about holding on to the illusion of separateness and holding on to the myth of Blessed self sufficiency and independence. This myth has us refusing to ask for help and relying on anything but each other for comfort. The list of unhealthy things we connect to goes on and on and on. The

transition to effective coping requires letting go of this myth of independence and separateness and permitting a spiritual transformation to interdependence.

Dealing with the struggles inherent in human life requires addressing both physical and emotional pain. But in order to do that, we need to be supported by, and connected to, others. We have to be with that pain, but we need the support of community to do this.

To build a supportive community we need to let go of the illusion of separateness and the associated unhealthy, destructive connections that mimic the feeling of that true spiritual connection.

One has only to review the current news to be reminded that we are in a society that is struggling extensively with addictive behavior and that there is a relationship between addictive behavior and other struggles in our society. Addictive behavior intersects with homelessness, poverty, crime rates, high incarceration rates, unemployment, and violence, just to name a few. Could it be that the greater problem isn't addictive behavior itself. Could it be that the greater problem is the loneliness and isolation of our society? Could it be our worship of independence and self-sufficiency that make us prone to Addictive behavior?

Third: We can move beyond unhealthy connections to healthy connections to the interdependent web of existence.

There are many facets to the 7th principle but this, I believe to be, is one of the more subtle facets. The 7th Principle states *We affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part.*

Note: This principle does not state: We affirm and promote respect for blessed independence and self-sufficiency. That's not what it says

Last week's reading from '**Interbeing**' by **Thich Nhat Hanh** stated "the word inter-be should be in the dictionary. "To be" is to inter-be. You cannot just be by yourself alone. You have to inter-be with every other thing."

What I heard in that was:

We are Interdependent and we need each other to survive.

When I first heard the 7th principle, I thought it was about ecology but now I see that it is not just about our relationship with our ecological environment. It is also about our relationship with each other.

We are Interdependent and we need each other to survive.

When we fail to connect with each other, our mental and physical health are negatively impacted, and we will connect with anything that provides relief and distraction. We will even connect to things that prove to be ultimately harmful to ourselves and others. Science has proven that oxytocin, a hormone released through physical bonding and connection, is important for stress resilience and well-being.

We are Interdependent and we need each other to survive.

When we are disconnected from the interdependent web of existence, we make unhealthy, destructive connections that mimic the feeling of that healthy connection. Many behavioral scientists are coming to a common belief that the cause of addictive behavior — be it drug addiction, gambling addiction or even addiction to our mobile devices — is a lack of human connection.

We are Interdependent and we need each other to survive.

Based on these observations, what I hope for us is to start with some painfully honest self examination by asking ourselves a few questions:

-What am I attached to that is not respectful of the interdependent web of which we are a part?

-Is my attachment to independence and self-sufficiency keeping me from letting go of unhealthy attachment?

- What would it look like to share this struggle and be supported by, and connected to others in releasing unhealthy connections?

- We affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part. What would it look like if we lived this principle with respect to our fellow humans?

It is also my hope that this church and other UU churches around the world are places where we make interdependent connections and form “social bonds”. It is my hope that through these social bonds we come to find comfort in the realization that:

We are interdependent and we need each other to survive.