

Acceptance and Encouragement to Growth©

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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“I understand why some depressed people kill themselves: they need the rest.” The first time I read that sentence in the book *Let Your Life Speak* I found myself recalling numerous people I have known through the years who struggled with depression. Our reading this morning makes clear that Parker Palmer knows all too well how depression can drain all sense of meaning and purpose from a person’s life. As I was planning for today’s service I found myself drawn to Palmer’s writings for two reasons. First, he is an eloquent writer, and second, his life’s work honors both of the concepts I will be addressing today, acceptance and encouragement to growth. I wanted to find just the right passage, a passage that would lift up, in equal measure, both acceptance and encouragement to growth.

These two concepts are the key elements of our Third Principle, which is the basis for today’s sermon. In a single statement this Principle invites us to affirm and promote both acceptance and encouragement to growth. Depending on how one interprets or understands each of these it could seem that this Principle holds a contradiction. If we really accept each other doesn’t that mean we shouldn’t encourage another to change by growing? How are we to do both of these, accept each other and encourage growth, at the same time? I would suggest that the reading offers an example we might consider as we ponder such questions.

When I think about the situation Palmer describes, I reflect on my prior career as a social worker. Over my almost thirty-five years in that field I sat with and provided counseling to a significant number of people caught in the grip of depression. Depression was a significant focus of our reading this morning. Psychotherapy on the other hand was not. There wasn’t a single word, not just in this reading but throughout the entire book about medication or any other type of “treatment” by a medical or mental health professional. Instead, Palmer wrote about “the ministry” his good friend Bill offered him as he “spent ...months in the snake pit of the soul.” I can tell you that in the hundreds of hours I have spent assisting and supporting people who were depressed I never once massaged a person’s bare feet. I never attended a single training seminar where foot massage was suggested as an approved treatment approach to relieve depression. And I am certain that no insurance company would provide payment for services rendered to a therapist or doctor who proclaimed foot massage to be their therapeutic intervention for depression. Yet Palmer speaks of how his friend’s actions and caring helped him reconnect with the human race. My impression is that while Bill wasn’t treating depression he was connecting with Parker on a very deep level and assisting Parker in reconnecting with himself and life itself. Bill was doing this by lifting the spirit of his good friend. He was doing what to me seems to be spiritual work—the work of acceptance and compassionate encouragement. On a one-to-one basis he was putting into practice what our Third Principle advises that we do in our congregations.

Here it seems both appropriate and important to acknowledge and speak to a particular word that is in our Third Principle that isn’t in the title of my sermon. That word is “spiritual.” The full wording of this Principle is “acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.” Folks who would feel drawn to

our UUFB Mystics group quite likely feel at ease with this word. Others who are more linear and concrete in their thinking patterns may be less comfortable with the word spiritual or the concept of spiritual growth. It is quite possible that some of you find the word or the concept to be problematic. That makes sense to me if you think about the commonly understood meaning of the word spiritual; of or consisting of spirit; not corporeal; or of the spirit or soul as distinguished from the body or material matters. For those who need things to be of this world to consider them real, the word spiritual is at the least suspect and possibly even off-putting. But there is another side to this word, a side that is not often recognized. It is a side that can appear, like the concepts of acceptance and encouragement to growth, to be contradictory. It could be beneficial for us to consider these alternative meanings. Spiritual can mean; of, from, or concerned with the intellect; intellectual. When compared to other faith traditions in this country, Unitarian Universalists are very near the top when it comes to years of education attended and degrees attained. Generally speaking then, we are quite an intelligent and intellectual group. When we consider this way of understanding the word, it would seem we are a highly developed spiritual group. And there is another somewhat different interpretation of the word. Spiritual refers to that which is characterized by the ascendancy of the spirit; showing much refinement of thought and feeling. I imagine that most if not all of us would want others to think of us as someone who exhibits refinement of thought and feeling in the course of our life.

I believe that every person here likely feels comfortable with at least one of these four meanings of the word spiritual. At the same time, it is just as likely that one of these meanings holds a bit more challenge for each of us. The challenge may relate to whether we can believe in what a particular meaning is referring to, such as a spirit or soul. Or the challenge may relate to what a particular meaning requires of us, such as showing much refinement of thought and feeling. If you notice yourself feeling uncertain or even uncomfortable with any of these various meanings, you might want to ask yourself, is this a potential area for my own spiritual growth. If the answer is yes, I encourage you to seek out others in the congregation who can support and assist you in your growth.

As I mentioned earlier, I believe it is important that acceptance and encouragement to growth be considered in equal measure. So I want us to turn our attention now to the issue of acceptance. It seems to me that it would be beneficial to approach this portion of our Third Principle from two directions.

The first involves the acceptance we receive or need. From our earlier reading we find this in what Parker Palmer identified as his need. He tells us that he needed to “feel somewhat reconnected with the human race.” He also needed to know that he “could still be seen by *someone*.” These may not be what you need but the reality is that all of us desire and need acceptance from others. If you are not getting the acceptance you need the question that comes immediately to my mind is what is being done about this. And that is followed by a second question. What else can be done? Notice that here I am already slipping back into the encouragement to growth part of our Principle.

The second type of acceptance is that which we offer to others. Those of you who were here on December 17th heard me speak to the question of just how accepting we need to be. In my sermon that day I made it clear that we don’t have to, and actually should not, accept any and all behavior. Instead, this Principle advises acceptance of

the person and the inherent worth and dignity that each and every person possesses. I will confess, I am not always able to demonstrate acceptance of another at the level I know is possible. I know this is an area where I have room to grow. My hope is that throughout the remainder of my life I will know and be in relationship with people like Bill. Now not necessarily someone who will stop by my home every afternoon and massage my feet for half an hour. Once a week would be sufficient. But more generally, I hope there are people who will gently and compassionately assist me in connecting with someone who deserves and is not receiving my acceptance. Having someone who can do such a thing is an important function that we, as members and friends of UUFB, can serve for one another.

So as I contemplate the wording of our Third Principle, it seems to me that it reflects and highlights important and fundamental aspects of our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition. Both are broad and inclusive enough to offer space for many ways of perceiving, along with a great diversity of belief. Both call us to accept one another for who we are, for where we are, for how we perceive, and for what we believe. At the very same time, both challenge each of us to consider where we might initially sense things to be either one way or another. This Principle and our faith tradition both invite and encourage us to find ways to adopt what I have heard referred to as an “and/also” way of perceiving and thinking. They do this by asking us to be open to and to foster encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations. I know I have not yet achieved an ascendancy of the spirit when it comes either to acceptance of others or to the ultimate refinement of thought and feeling. Therefore, I will appreciate and acknowledge your acceptance of my current state of development and your encouragement to spiritual growth with all of its meanings. My hope is that you will journey with me in this endeavor. And that you too will feel moved along the journey to affirm and promote acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregation.

May it be so.