

BE STILL

OLD GNARLY ONE

December 6, 2020

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g9CvcKD8V8I&authuser=2>

Let's begin this morning with recalling one of those experiences we have all shared. Frederick Buechner reminds us of it.

"You catch sight of your face in the mirror when you are brushing your teeth in the morning or combing your hair, and often you say, in effect, 'Well, there it is again, the same old washed and slept-on thing I saw yesterday and will see again tomorrow—no better and no worse.' But sometimes, I believe, there is another response which is deeply jarring, and which involves you're asking in effect, 'Is that really me? Am I my face?' And although the answer, of course, is, 'Yes,' the answer, of course is also, 'No.' I am my face, and I am not. A strange and confusing business."

Beneath the face there are many layers of self, and the deepest layers are for the most part hidden from us. That rings true, especially as we enter this season of December, in our preparations for celebrating and honoring those days that signal something is moving across the landscape of our desires, our wants, to touch and be touched at the deeper layers of our lives, that face we are and are not facing in the mirror each morning. These celebrations that we hope will have us staying a bit longer staring into that mirror come in many forms, and interestingly to me, they all occur in the month of December.

- For the Christian it comes in the form of a birth, a baby named Jesus, celebrated on December 25th.
- For Judaism, Hanukkah, the miraculous lighting of the Menorah for eight days from one day's worth of pure, untouched oil, symbolizing that the Hellenist/Greek culture could not stamp out the spirit of Yahweh and the faith at work in the lives of its people.
- For the Mahayana Buddhist of East Asia, December 8 is Bodhi Day, commemorating the Buddha's enlightenment.
- For the Pagan, it is the Yule, the winter solstice, celebrating that the sun is making its way back and the days begin getting longer. For those of us who suffer from SAD, Seasonal Affective Disorder, December 21st is a very welcomed day.
- For those of African descent the seven days celebrating the 7 principles of Kwanzaa, beginning on December 26th, modeled after the first harvest celebrations in

Africa, and the meaning of the name *Kwanzaa* comes from the Swahili phrase "matunda ya kwanza" which means the "first fruits" of the harvest.

- Ah, and for those of Unitarian Universalist persuasion, Chalice has already be begun on December 3rd, lasting seven days. Initiated back in 2005, Chalice is an invitation to spend a day, lighting the chalice, with each of the UU Principles, reflecting on their meaning and doing a good deed focused on each one. Making the principle real by one's action, one's behavior.

Yes, December is the mirror in which we see that we are our face, and we are not our face. It can be a confusing business, a perplexing season in each of the holidays I have named for we approach them with hidden memories of childhood days, wanting to be recaptured or avoided. At work are deep longings that may be denied but bubble to the surface at times in unexpected ways with extravagant purchases we cannot afford, zealous attempts to make the season jolly with constant playing of Christmas carols, or the concealed griefs hidden in hugs that last longer than mere warm expressions of greeting.

We human beings are walking, breathing, living paradoxes, especially in December. It is of no wonder to me that the celebrations I've named happen in this month. For in them we come closest to the deeper layers of our faces just as assuredly as the days come closest to night. At times we hate ourselves and the things we do while defending our right to do them. We seek a depth of meaning to our days while at the same time working feverishly to keep our days at an even keel. We strive to bring about change in the world while laboring to maintain our status quo. We want to be and feel loved and yet, we keep ourselves at a distance to ourselves, as well as to others. We are a puzzle to ourselves to be sure. Am I my face? I am, and I am not.

I remember a conversation I had one time with a psychiatrist friend of mine who said that most people who come to him for therapy, for help, do not really wish to explore their inner depths. They come to him, he said, in expectation that he will help them to simply make their lives comfortable again. He went on to say that he understands his task as a psychiatrist to be that of helping people do that which everything in their nature resists doing; namely, to go where few humans go – beneath the surface of their lives and into the depth of what motivates them.

Ah, what an amazing month this is and calls forth from us. I think of this time, the season, as invitation to look in the mirror to learn about that face we see. Plato said that to be about that kind of learning consists not in telling people new things but extracting from their memories what they already know.

What is it that we already know? We are in a sense not unlike that great prophet, Elijah, for whom knowing comes not from the mighty wind, earthquake, and fire as he flees from Jezebel's wrath, finding himself in the cave on Mount Horeb, but in the still, small voice, which in grammatically strict translation. *Qol dmamah daqah co da mah ma da caw*: the "voice of fragile silence." [12] still, fragile silence.

As the story goes, as Rabbi Mike Comins reminds us, at one point in the story of Elijah's prophetic efforts God confronts Jezebel's prophets of Ba'al and challenges them to the famous contest on Mt. Carmel (ch. 18). King Ahab and the people gather to see whose sacrifice will be accepted, that of Elijah or the prophets of Ba'al. This is Elijah at his best - angry, daring, dramatic. The fire of God descends from the heavens, consuming Elijah's offering. "Adonai, He is God!" shout the people.

The story goes on for when Jezebel learns that her prophets of Ba'al have been wiped out she's none too happy and vows to get at Elijah for it and so he then goes on the run, eventually making his way, after wilting in the desert for 40 days but nourished and revived by one miracle after another, until finally he arrives at the cave in Mount Horeb. That's where I find the story most enlightening. For it is in that cave's entrance, the still, fragile silence gives him not an answer, but asks a question in a different way than how it had been asked prior in the story, "*ma lekha po? Cole vi yo mir ma fo, Eliyo?*" "Why are you here, Elijah?"

But, as Rabbi Comins would have us ponder, if we take those words in the context of having fled through the desert the question moves from, "Why are you here, Elijah?" to "Who are you, here, Elijah?" Who are you in this fragile silence beyond your righteous, daring, angry, dramatic self?"

And so I ponder, am I only the face in the mirror that I see, the one that can so boldly puts on the righteous armor of standing up to the values and actions of those whom I identify as desecrating what I trust and believe are the true worthwhile principles by which I stand, attempt to live by, and have guided my life? Yes, I am that face, and I know how to preach that sermon, but I am also the face I see in the mirror asking me not why I am here but who am I, here?

Finding myself at UUC that sometimes comes up in the morning when I'm looking in the mirror, putting on my deodorant, or facial cream. I tend to brush my teeth in the

shower. I am not asking you today, "Why are you here?" The season we have entered, whether it be through Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, Bodhi Day, Yule's Winter Solstice, or Chalica, asks in the stillness of this fragile silence, "Who are you, here?"

Yes, we are the ones, who when looking at ourselves in the mirror, recognize the face. And we are also that face that asks back to us, "Who are you, here today in this place, at UUC, in this moment of time, of this season having traveled through deserts, wind, earthquake, and fire?"

I sometimes find such questions deserve a response not from my mind, my words, my learnings, but from what I see not in the mirror as much as by what I see before me. Quite truthfully, I see old gnarly ones before me. Now before you start in chat, asking each other, "What? What did I hear him just say? What the heck! Did he just call me old and gnarly?"

Let me continue and perchance you will come to welcome yourselves described in such a way when facing the mirror in the morning, that same old washed and slept-on thing you saw yesterday and will see again tomorrow—no better and no worse.

The old, gnarly one that I'm referring to and speaks in the still, fragile silence is the last remaining coastal redwood in the Oakland hills of California, where I used to live. Not but a mile or two from my home stands today, as it has stood for the last 500 years, is a single old growth redwood from a grove that once populated the eastern hills of San Francisco Bay. The entire ancient coastal redwood grove was cut down in the middle of the 19th century, during the gold rush era, to build the docks, homes, and stores of San Francisco. This one tree, only 90 feet tall, not as tall as some Sequoia Trees, wasn't discovered until the early 1970s. Silent, alone, towering over new growth trees, it has stood these past 500 years. It is referred to today as "Old Survivor."

How is that? Why had it not been cut down when the rest of the grove had met such a fate? One reason we are told is because its roots are anchored on a steep slope in rocky terrain. But the truly more plausible reason is because its wood is all twisted, distorted, and gnarly.

[\(show pic of the tree's gnarled trunk\).](#)

It was considered not worth the effort to cut it down since its wood could offer no useable lumber. And so it was considered useless.

Jenny Odell: “How To Do Nothing” talks about the formulation of uselessness. Using Old Survivor as metaphor she writes,

“...we could say that Old Survivor was too weird or too difficult to proceed easily toward the sawmill. In that way, the tree provides me with an image of “resistance-in-place.” To resist in place is to make oneself into a shape that cannot so easily be appropriated by a capitalist value system. To do this means refusing the frame of reference: in this case, a frame of reference in which value is determined by productivity, the strength of one’s career, and individual entrepreneurship.” [What I would call that face we see in the mirror, the one we recognize, and gets us through the day. And then there is the other face we see, and sometimes do not recognize as it speaks to us in that still fragile silence like Old Survivor, what Odell continues with her metaphor,](#) means recognizing and celebrating a form of the self that changes over time, exceeds algorithmic description, and whose identity doesn’t always stop at the boundary of the individual. In an environment completely geared toward capitalist appropriation of even our smallest thoughts, doing this isn’t any less uncomfortable than wearing the wrong outfit to a place with a dress code. To remain in this state takes commitment, discipline, and will. Doing nothing is hard.”

I would add, it is what we are called in this season to be about. Let us be in December, which ever holiday we celebrate, an Old Survivor, made gnarly and beautiful over time, standing silent in place with purpose. For when that grove of ancient coastal redwoods once populated the Oakland hills of California, it also stood as a community of navigational points of reference that mariners viewed from their ships as they sailed into San Francisco so that ships would not run aground in the bay.

And may it be so with this grove of UUs, standing formidable in our still, fragile silence, prophetic as Elijah, a community by which others may navigate the world they find themselves and come to hopefully recognize in this season the face they wake up to and see in the mirror.



