

INSIDE OUT – August 12, 2018,
Cedars UU Church
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In each of us shines a light. It matters if we can let our inner light shine out.

For instance, I recently re-watched an episode of the TV show, *The Big Bang Theory*. In it, the very smart and super arrogant, Sheldon Cooper, wants to win a contest called The Physics Bowl. He thinks he can win single-handedly, but he must have a team to enter, so he recruits the Third Floor Janitor, the Lady from the Lunchroom, and a younger man who is either the lady's Son or her Butcher. Sheldon does not speak Spanish.

Near the end of the contest, he is shocked to find he cannot answer the final question. But, the Janitor comes up with the answer. When Sheldon asks, "How can you possibly know the answer," the gruff old guy says, "Here, I am lowly janitor. In former Soviet Union, I am Physicist."

There are many reasons we hide what is good within. Part of that is that we fear others will not understand. A common question to ask someone you have just met is "What do you do?" In response to this is a series of images on the internet about what we do and what people think we do. In the basic set up there are six photos. Above each photo is a phrase like "What my friends think I do," "What my boss thinks I do," "What my mom thinks I do," "What society thinks I do," "What I think I do" and finally, "What I really do."

In the one about teachers, what "students think teachers do" shows the scary Professor Snape from Hogwarts shoving Harry Potter and Hermione's heads down into their books. What teachers "think they do" shows a happy person, arms raised, surrounded by cheering children. Finally, what "teachers really do" is depicted as someone sitting at a desk swamped by mounds of paperwork. The point is that all are different and none are right.

We all want to be appreciated. We want to be known for how we add to the goodness and beauty of the world. This sermon is about finding goodness inside ourselves and our church and then letting it shine out.

UUism builds on an assumption of individual inner strength and goodness. Unlike the *Prelude* this morning we aren't merely waiting for chariots to "carry us home." We are working for our lives to be happy here and now by finding our light and letting it shine. We have different ideas about from where this inner light comes. For some, it is the inner image of God, for others Dharma, and others insist it is a product of evolution and our basic human nature. No matter the source, it is a shared assumption in all UU practice and principle that each of us can, and should, bring our inner light and goodness out into the world. This idea is at the foundation of our faith in human progress, and our hope for building peace and justice. We assume that it is possible for persons to learn and change and grow in the light. Everyone has some goodness and light and can let that shine. So, we think all should experience equitable (though not perfectly equal) inclusion in society.

I once served a UU congregation with one member who was a retired barber. He was not a good-looking guy. He had a blunt, even gruff, manner. He spoke with an uneducated accent. Instead of saying Iraqi Arabs he'd say "Ay-rabs from I-rack." You wouldn't know it at first glance, but he was smart and knew more about European and Christian history than some scholars. In the UU church, he began to give occasional summer sermons. We did not let his socio-economic status or external appearance limit his participation in the life of the community. He was able to be heard by university professors and doctors. But more than that, he was proud that his words and understanding shined out through a community of people trying to bring goodness into the world.

Many cultures describe inner goodness as light. This light is what in us is loving, true, righteous, dignified, good and lovely. It is, in part, the light of our chalice, inspiring us to treat all people kindly, to nurture a learning spirit, to take good care of the earth and to live lives full of love and goodness. When one understands that the qualities of the true and beautiful and good in all things, then we can understand the various and unique ways it can dwell in us, and be embodied and fulfilled through us.

Part of the reason we form a church is to help each of us show out that light. This is not only because we know it is there, but also because without light, As it says in today's story, Swimmy, "the deep wet world" is lonely, scary and very sad. There is a lot of causes of harm in this world; life includes death, all government is imperfect and human nature is often selfish or hateful. Furthermore, no matter how hard we try to be good, we make mistakes and begin to doubt our goodness and light. We each have been criticized at some point just for being what we are. Some have been ostracized and told that we have no light worth sharing. Trauma and isolation can cause us to lose track of our inner goodness all together.

Swimmy is black. We have been talking a lot in this church about what it means to be black in the white dominated society of America. We talk about trauma and oppression that arises from the supremacy of some over others. Swimmy is different, a minority. He is faster than the other fish. But none the less, he shines. The terror of the world drives him to hide in the darkness, but he shines again. He recovers his light by finding light in the world. In spiritual experiences, he encounters the wonder and beauty of the world. The author, Leo Leoni, describes Swimmy's spirituality like this: "As he swam, from marvel to marvel, Swimmy was happy again."

His inner light grows brighter, then shines out when he finds others to share the goodness of life. Others inspire him to bring out what has hidden inside: courage, hope, intelligence, leadership and a desire to help others be happy. Even his external blackness is a source of power, part of their collective strength.

The great Rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel, mystic, and ethicist, wrote,

"The beginning of faith is not a feeling for the mystery of living or a sense of awe, wonder, or fear. The root of religion is the question what to do with the feeling for the mystery of living, what to do with awe, wonder or fear. Religion begins with a consciousness that something is asked of us..."

This is the bridge from "spirituality" to "religion." Do you know the difference between shoaling and schooling fish? A *shoal* is a group of fish who swim together in a shimmering mass.

A *school* is when all of the fish swim in the same direction, like a moving flock or herd. That is the difference between religion and powerful religion. So, I say, along these lines, that UUs are not interested in the shining of individuals alone. Instead, we see the power of bringing those lights together into a congregation, like a school of fish. Together, our lights grow stronger, and our collective light is powerful. Our collective light can help us focus on the goals of our mission. It can shine out to confront the tragic sources of fear and hate and violence in this world. Our collective light can call others.

So, what is asked and expected of us? What do Unitarian Universalists do together to let our light shine out? That internet meme applied to what Unitarian Universalists do reveals the problem with poorly shining light. “What Conservatives think we do” shows a goat-headed devil surrounded by swooning, half-clad witches. “What our friends think we do” shows someone sleeping in a church pew, and “What atheists think we do” shows Hippies dancing around a May-pole. What we think we do is work to help the poor and suffering, while our minister thinks what we do is glorious worship services in a cathedral-like atmosphere. But the image of “What we really do,” shows middle-class white people talking during a coffee hour. All views are different, and none are right.

For what do you want to be known as Cedars? Most congregations don’t want to be known at all. They may say that they have gathered to promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations, but what they do is practice compassion and kindness for about a hundred and fifty people, while only talking about justice and compassion in the world.

There is an old saying; “a church exists by its mission as a fire exists by burning.” Our Mission is not what we say in our mission statement and song, but what we do, to worship, nurture, serve, and love. Swimmy’s mission statement is: “Let’s go and swim and play and SEE things.” By “see,” he means marvel, appreciate and wonder at beauty. Then he does what is needed to make that happen.

I bring up our mission and reputation in part because some people in this congregation have been talking about growth. Most people raise “growth” in an institutional context. We say something like this, “If we had more pledgers we could support a minister better.” Or we say, “if we had more children it would make our RE program more exciting for everyone.” However, this is the worst approach to growth possible. People do not join religious communities to pledge nor to increase attendance numbers. We join because we find a group of people we like and who include us. We join because we hear a message that inspires, or comforts us, or gives us hope for ourselves and humanity. We join because we see a community doing something we think needs to be done. We join a congregation because we were walking in the darkness, alone and perhaps frightened, and then we saw a light glimmering. Perhaps someone told us about Cedars or invited us to come, and we arrived and liked what we found and stayed long enough to say, “I want to be a part of this.”

People join this church for a caring community, but also for what we do, what we help people do, in this world. A progressive movement grounded in a theology of wholeness and love—a positive vision of a world of goodness—has great moral and political power. Do we want to be that? Do we want just to swim together, or school together? Do we want to be a light or a

lighthouse of hope and change? Will people say of us, as it says in *Swimmy*," And so they swam in the cool morning water and the midday sun, and they chased all the big fish away." Let this community help us find what is good and true and beautiful inside and let it shine out into the world.

There is a song that was a children's song for much of the last century and then became an anthem for social change and the promotion of civil rights. There are exclusively Christian lyrics, but we sing UU verses that include everyone:

This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine / Everywhere I go / I'm going to let it shine / Building up a world / Out there in the dark / I'm going to let it shine / This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine, let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.