

“Becoming at Any Age”

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First Church in Boston

May 10, 2026

“Who am I?”

Do you ever ask yourself that?

The search for self-understanding is an ancient one. I suspect many of us are familiar with the maxim, “Know Thyself.” Inscribed on the ancient Greek Temple of Apollo in Delphi, the charge has reverberated throughout Western culture.

It’s a question that philosophers have answered with long treatises about the nature of the self—including French philosopher René Descartes famously concluding, “*I think, therefore I am*”. And it’s a question that poets have explored in countless stanzas. How many times have you heard Mary Oliver’s question: “*Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?*” Or perhaps you’ve languished in Walt Whitman’s lyrical poem, “Song of Myself” which splashes open with the line: “*I celebrate myself, and sing myself.*”

And you, do you celebrate yourself?

As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of each person, seeing a spark of the divine in everyone. And yet, how often do we affirm this with *other* people in mind . . . forgetting that, yes, that means *me* also!

You are a sacred wonder. A miracle of a breathing, feeling, thinking human being who woke this morning to yet another day. Each of you carry within you a story, *your* story, of navigating life in your unique way. Still, none of us have lived without screwing up, making mistakes, and causing harm to ourselves or others. And I hope none of us have lived without also knowing laughter, curiosity, joy, and love. With all that life can bring, charting our particular course through life is rarely, if ever, simple and straightforward.

Which is why I suspect that the hardest part about coming-of-age is realizing that *you* are the one charting the course of your life. On the one hand, becoming an adult can be the joyous embrace of new freedoms and opportunities. As a child so much of life can be proscribed by parents and other adults who tell us “how it is.” Becoming a young adult can mean an opening up of possibility to new ideas and different paths that feels liberating.

But, on the other hand, the realization that *I* am responsible to figure out what to do next can be utterly terrifying. What if I choose “wrong”, if I screw up, if I *fail*? Or, just as scary, what if I can’t stop the bad thing from happening? This too is coming-of-age: an awakening to loss and limits. You don’t make the team. Your parents divorce. Your friend dies. You lose your faith in God. Now what?

In my own adolescence and young adult years, I experienced both the joy and the screw-ups. Through school and personal reading, I devoured all kinds of new ideas as my mental landscape of the world rapidly grew wider, deeper, taller. And from the moment I received my driver’s license on my 16th birthday, I began exploring new places on my own, completing my first solo cross-country drive at age 22. I also had my heart broken when my beloved college boyfriend left me for another woman. When I married another man at age 24, I found myself withering until finally finding my way out 3 years later. Along the way, I lost my faith in the religion of my youth and slowly started rebuilding a more liberal and life-giving understanding of God and the sacred gift of living. So, in short, my coming-of-age was not a simple or easy path. Is it ever? Was yours?

Growing up is not easy. It’s not simple to sort out your path, your people, your place in a complex world of adult relationships and responsibilities. And I don’t think it’s a process that just stops at some magical age of “maturity” when we have it all figured out.

Rather, we change—our thinking, beliefs, and/or bodies change. So also, our relationships with others change—deepening, drifting, ending, or renewing. At the same time, our contexts of families, friends, cities, and nation change as economies grow or recede, wars stop or start, social movements push for change or trigger backlash. Again and again, life presents new opportunities and challenges that transform our understanding of our self and the world. And yet, we may still be enticed by the idea of finally reaching a sense of personal “fulfillment”. Can’t we just someday “arrive” and be our fully realized self?

In a recent [Hidden Brain podcast](#), author Dave Evans criticizes this idea that we will ever simply arrive at a destination that “fulfills” us. When Evans asked people what they meant by feeling “fulfilled,” he discovered the idea traces back to Abraham Maslow, saying:

“[We] have the Hierarchy of Needs, going back to his originating paper in 1943 . . . where the apex of the human experience is self-actualization. And self-actualization occurs when one becomes all that one can be. And if I can pull that off, what will I get, according to Maslow, is fulfillment.”

And yet, there is a fundamental problem with this idea, warns Evans, because all of us contain within ourselves more possible directions than we can ever pursue in a lifetime. When we realize that “my human capacity even exceeds my lifetime,” then we have different questions to ask. He explains:

“I no longer have the goal of trying to be all I can be because you can't even get there from here. You can't be all you can be. Don't worry about that. Now, can I be fully who I'm trying to be right now? That's the invitation.”

Rather than a life defined by a single achievement of self-fulfillment, instead our lifetimes may be many chapters of fully living life in *each* moment. Who do you want to be *now*, in **this** moment of your living?

This pull to more fully live is why a 32-year-old Henry David Thoreau withdrew to Walden Pond in 1845. Famously, he explained his choice:

“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”

He went to live intentionally, and he left the woods because he had more living to do, writing: “it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one.” Like Evans, Thoreau recognized how living fully could manifest in different ways across a lifetime.

Often, I think Thoreau is held up as the quintessential “drop-out” from society who went in search of himself. And when people learn that he regularly returned to Concord, including to have his laundry done, they deride him as some kind of phony. However, Thoreau does *not* say that he went to be alone, to be a hermit. Rather, he went to be able to live in a particular way. A simpler life. A life closer to nature. A life freer from the pressures of a transactional economy consuming his time. He went to the woods not to isolate, but to intentionally live in a way in which he might learn more about himself, nature, and the world of people of which he remained a part.

In *Walden*, Thoreau wrote: “I had three chairs in my house; one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society.” Being oneself, he knew, was never intended to be only solitary. Friendship and society are part of living. Indeed, it is through our relationships with others that we often learn more about ourselves.

In the poem, [Fifteen Years Later, I See How It Went](#), Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer depicts how caring for her child changed *her*.

*... Love grew as
my ideas of myself diminished. Love grew
as he came into himself. Love grew
as I learned to let go of what I'd been told
and to trust the emerging form.
Until I couldn't imagine being without him.
Until I was the one being born.*

Becoming oneself is not a journey in isolation—not for fragile infants in need of care, nor for adults of any age transformed by love.

While ancient Greek culture called for us to “Know thyself,” it also bequest the myth of Narcissus whose obsession with his own beautiful reflection shut out other people. In the end, Narcissus becomes a flower, thereby quite literally ceasing to be human. To cut ourselves off from other people and to focus only on “me” loses something essential about being human. And so, alongside the charge to “know thyself” is also this warning to stay in relationship with others. Yes, our one unique life is sacred and wonderful, worthy of Whitman’s exclamation, “*I celebrate myself, and sing myself.*” And even Whitman’s long poem goes on to depict all manner of relationships with others. Both matter—knowing ourselves and being in relationship.

And so, to know who we are is to also consider where we fit in the motley stew of humanity. Of course, we are not all alike. We have different skills and stories, capacities and challenges. And while those differences can sometimes mean we struggle to understand or to relate to one another, they also mean that when we come together we are often wiser and stronger in shared work. Last night’s auction is a great example of this—the varied donations by different people, the range of skills needed by volunteers, and every single person showing up to create the party and donate as they were able made the night a success. By coming together in our differences, we made something more than we could do alone. Finding such strength in diversity is true in our small circles of family and friends as well as in larger communities of church, city, and nation.

Our affirmation of *both* the inherent worth and dignity of each individual *and* our essential interdependence is why Unitarian Universalists promote the use of the democratic process. We each have a perspective that merits a voice and a vote. And we all exist in larger social contexts of relationships that impact one another. Both are true. Emphasizing only our own interests or on people like us, risks cutting off a wider expanse of humanity, like Narcissus

gazing narrowly at his image and missing the beauty of others. While ignoring individual experiences and focusing only on what is best for “society” or the “nation” as a whole risks silencing voices of dissent and difference.

In this moment in which fascism continues to advance and the Civil Rights Act has been gutted, our religious values call us to resist. Fascist thinking threatens to drown out all who would not submit to a narrow way of being human, who have their own unique ways of living. In contrast to efforts of fascist control, we dwell within a long tradition that calls us to be ourselves, to value the sacred spark of divine within each of us and to honor that same spark in every other person. This means we fight for a diverse, equitable society, a democratic society, a society that makes space for each of us. We fight not just for our individual selves, but for others to also live their lives more fully and freely.

There is much, too much, happening in our world right now. As immense currents of politics and storms of social division pull for our attention and time, I ask again: who do you want to be *now*, in **this** moment of your living?

Your answer need not be finally reaching lifelong fulfillment or signaling some great capstone action of your life. You can simply answer for *now*. What might it mean for you to live more fully at this point in your life? In this way, we are all still coming-of-age. Each of us are still answering the question “who am I?”—answering by how we choose to live this day and then the next day and the next. (Should we be so lucky!) Each day we are each invited to answer as our story continues—even when we may be writing our last chapter. Our lives are never just one achievement, one defining moment, one elusive experience of “fulfillment.” Our lives are the journey of intentionally living many moments with a diversity of people in all kinds of places.

So may we each live—with intention and with love . . . for ourselves and for those with whom we are co-writing the stories of our lives.

Amen. Ashé. Blessed Be.