

WHOLENESS HUNGER

Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper
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The controversy over the Elkton Pride event illustrates a sad fact: We are living in a time of deep division, mistrust, and fear—magnified by economic inequality, perpetuated by a polarized political system, amplified by Internet communication, and broadcast by conflict-hungry media. Adding to the cultural climate of fragmentation that surrounds us is the fragmentation of our personal lives. The different pieces—work, relationships, leisure pursuits—often don't seem to fit together. In spite of our attempts to be generous toward others, we sometimes feel overwhelmed by the greatness of the world's needs and the smallness of our individual impact. Our individual efforts may feel like the proverbial “drop in the bucket.” Meanwhile, the gap between the very wealthy and the rest of us continues to widen, as one in every seven Americans lives below the poverty rate. (**Optional:** “America was once the great middle-class society. Now we are divided between rich and poor, with the greatest degree of inequality among high-income democracies. The top 1% of households take almost a quarter of all household income—a share not seen since 1929.” [*Time*, 10/10/2011, p. 30])

In contrast to our expressions of kindness, we are constantly reminded of the disturbing human capacity for cruelty and violence. (**Optional:** This past week in Mexico City, “masked gunmen dump[ed] the bodies of slaying victims during rush hour as terrified motorists watch and tweet friends to avoid the highway. A woman's decapitated body [was] left at a city's monument to Columbus, the head atop a computer keyboard with a sign saying she was killed for blogging about drug traffickers.” [*Daily News Record* 10/8/2011]) I am reminded of these lines from a poem titled “The Second Coming,” by William Butler Yeats:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world . . .

The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.

In the midst of this atmosphere of conflict and chaos, many of us struggle to find a **center**—a place where we can discover and embody a way of life that expresses our deepest values, even in the face of all the powerful forces of fragmentation and conflict. We can become “**dis-spirited.**” We yearn for a sense of meaning and purpose that will not only enable us to bring coherence to our personal lives, but also to promote healing for a broken and tattered world. Sociologists of religion have coined a phrase for describing this deep and widespread yearning: **wholeness hunger.** “Wholeness-hunger is an apt description of what underlies much of today’s spiritual malaise. It is something felt by many people, something that underlies comments about ‘centering your life’ and ‘finding connections’ that are so frequently voiced by the populace at large.” [Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*, p. 62]

In my monthly series of reflections during the next seven months, I will be discussing our search for wholeness and the ways it can expand, beginning from the center of the individual self and moving outward to embrace the progressively wider circles of family, congregation, local community, nation, and global community. In this journey, we can draw from the deep wells of our Unitarian and Universalist heritage. Our faith tradition teaches us that ultimate reality is undivided. **It is one.** Our UU heritage opposes the worldview that separates the saved from the unsaved. It reminds us that we are one undivided human family. **We are one.** Our UU heritage challenges us to be **inclusive**, not in spite of our differences but **because** of our differences. We believe in the underlying unity of all things and all people, and it is our responsibility to translate this shared belief into our actions. This is what inspires our journey toward wholeness.

Now let me say a few things about what the journey toward wholeness is **not about.** Wholeness is not about **uniformity.** Our shared belief in the underlying unity of all things makes it possible for us to accept differences among us. We do not need to think alike in order to love alike. This presents an ongoing challenge in our movement and here in our Fellowship, where there are so many different viewpoints represented. Over the past 15 years, I have come to admire the climate of mutual respect that prevails during our dialogues with one another, not only in the post-sermon discussion period but also throughout our group meetings. I think this is what distinguishes us from other churches: the free exchange of ideas and opinions in a spirit of

shared respect and mutual support. Our Fellowship exemplifies the principles of our Association:

Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

Wholeness is not about happiness. At a personal level, it means acknowledging the qualities of ourselves that we prefer to avoid—what Jungian psychology calls the Shadow side of our personality. “Shadow work,” as the Jungians call it, involves penetrating the walls that separate us from our Shadow: denial, avoidance, repression, and above all **projection**, which involves attributing the qualities we deny in ourselves to other people. To me, understanding how projection works is the gateway to understanding how the Shadow operates in our personal lives and in our collective behavior. These insights can help us avoid demonizing our adversaries, but they can also force us to confront some of the unpleasant aspects of our personality and history. Searching for wholeness may lead us to acknowledge the sources of unhappiness in our personal lives.

Wholeness is not about perfection. One of the best books about spirituality I have read is titled *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, which is based on the authors’ experiences work with alcoholics. “The core paradox that underlies spirituality,” they say, “is the haunting sense of incompleteness, of being somehow *unfinished*, that comes from the reality of living on this earth as part and yet also not-part of it. For to be human is to be incomplete, yet yearn for completion; it is to be uncertain, yet long for certainty; to be imperfect, yet long for perfection; to be broken, yet crave wholeness. All these yearnings remain necessarily unsatisfied, for perfection, completion, certainty, and wholeness are impossible precisely because we *are* imperfectly human—or better, because we are perfectly human, which is to say **humanly imperfect**.” [Ernest Kurtz & Katherine Ketcham, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, p, 19]

If those are some of the obstacles on our journey toward wholeness, what are some of the landmarks that can guide us? Many of the traditional models of spiritual development are based on the vertical image of a **ladder** that extends **upward** from lower to higher. The most familiar

metaphor is that of many paths leading to the peak of a mountain. This image draws heavily on the masculine concern with hierarchy: higher levels are superior to lower levels. Let me suggest an alternative metaphor: a **circle** that expands outward. This image is drawn mainly from feminist spirituality and from the wisdom traditions of Asia. Instead of focusing on lower-to-higher, this model of spiritual development is circular, expanding **outward** from the self to include and embrace the ever-wider circles of family, congregation, local community, nation, and world community.

This is the model that will guide my discussion of wholeness during the next seven months: **inside out**, starting with the search for wholeness in oneself. The journey toward wholeness begins with the self, but it certainly does not end there. The wisdom supporting this approach to wholeness is both wide and deep. In her book *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, historian of religion Karen Armstrong notes that within the ancient Chinese wisdom tradition, “Confucius saw each person at the center of a constantly expanding series of concentric circles. The lessons a [person] had learned from taking care of his parents, his wife, and his siblings would educate and enlarge his heart so that he felt empathy with more and more people: first with his city or village, then with his state, and finally with the entire world. It was difficult because it required the abandonment of the vanity, resentment, and desire to dominate to which we are addicted.” [pp. 43-44]

The search for wholeness should not be a solitary venture. We can share our journey with others who are pursuing the same elusive goal. In his book *A Hidden Wholeness*, Parker Palmer talks about the “circles of trust” he participated in within a Quaker community: “a rare form of community—one that supports rather than supplants the individual quest for integrity—that is rooted in two basic beliefs. First, we all have an inner teacher whose guidance is more reliable than anything we can get from a doctrine, ideology, collective belief system, institution, or leader. Second, we all need other people to invite, amplify, and help us discern the inner teacher’s voice for at least three reasons:

- * The journey toward inner truth is too taxing to be made solo: lacking support, the solitary traveler soon becomes weary or fearful and is likely to quit the road.

* The path is too deeply hidden to be traveled without company: finding our way involves clues that are subtle and sometimes misleading, requiring the kind of discernment that can happen only in dialogue.

* The destination is too daunting to be achieved alone: we need community to find the courage to venture into the alien lands to which the inner teacher calls us.

Our Fellowship offers multiple opportunities for pursuing the journey toward wholeness: the Heart to Heart groups, the adult RE group, “Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life,” the women’s spirituality group Sophia’s Daughters, book discussion groups, a hopefully soon-to-be-revived men’s group, and all the other ways we connect with one another. Toward the end of his classic study titled *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James wrote, “Not God but life, more life, a larger, richer, more satisfying life, is in the last analysis the end of religion. The love of life, at any and every level of development, is the religious impulse.” [quoted by Fuller, *Spiritual But Not Religious*, p. 157] Let me close with an excerpt from one of my favorite poets, Marge Piercy. This one is titled “The Seven of Pentacles.”

Live as if you liked yourself, and it may happen: reach out, keep reaching out, keep bringing in.

This is how we are going to live for a long time: not always, for every gardener knows that after the digging, after the planting, after the long season of tending and growth, the harvest comes. [in *Cries of the Spirit*, ed. by Marilyn Seward, p. 172]