

“Trust Thyself”
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The title of this sermon, “Trust Thyself,” is a bit of advice from one of our Unitarian forebears, Ralph Waldo Emerson.

I’d like to tell you a story. One day, a woman was preparing a pot roast for a family dinner. Just before she put the roast in the pot, she cut off the bottom. Her daughter watched her do it, and said, “You know, Mom, I’ve always wondered, why do you do that?” The woman thought about it for a minute, and then said, “I don’t know. That’s the way my mother always did it. Why don’t you ask Grandma?”

So the daughter went to Grandma and asked, “Grandma, why do you always cut off the bottom of the pot roast before you put it in the pot?” And Grandma thought about it for a minute and then said, “I don’t know. That’s the way my mother always did it. You should ask Great-grandma.”

The daughter then went to Great-grandma and asked her the same question. Great-grandma said, “Well now, let me think for a minute. Oh, yes, now I remember. When your Great-grandpa and I were first married, the pot I had was too small to fit the whole roast, so I cut the bottom off to make it fit!”

Ralph Waldo Emerson advises, “Insist on yourself; never imitate.” I’m pretty sure that pot roast was not on Waldo’s mind when he wrote these words. The fact is, though, sometimes we find ourselves doing things in a certain way, and it has never occurred to us to question why. Sometimes we may find ourselves on a certain path in life. We’ve been going through the motions and not checking in with ourselves: “Is this what I’m choosing to do with my life?” “Does this choice reflect who I really am?” Am I “insisting” on myself?

I remember a boy named Mark. He was a gifted young piano player. After a year or so of lessons, his piano teacher told his father that she had taught him everything she knew. She recommended a professional concert pianist by the name of Mr. Gates who worked with talented students. His father, not surprisingly, was very proud. He was also a strict and authoritarian father, the kind of man whose anger you did not want to provoke. He told

his son that he wanted him to become a concert pianist. Mark, being an obedient child, threw himself into pursuing that goal. I was friends with his older sister, and every time I'd go over to their house, there Mark would be, practicing, hour after hour.

Now, Mark enjoyed playing the piano, at least in the beginning. But those countless hours of practicing came at a cost. He sacrificed over 10 years of his childhood working toward the goal of becoming a concert pianist, trying to fulfill his father's wishes, hoping to gain his father's approval.

Parker Palmer, author and educator, observes, "In families, schools, workplaces, and religious communities, we are trained away from true self toward images of acceptability; under social pressures... our original shape is deformed beyond recognition; and we ourselves, driven by fear, too often betray true self to gain the approval of others."

Mark went away to college, ostensibly to pursue the goal of becoming a concert pianist. He called his parents one day, and told them that he was giving up the piano. Of course, they were shocked. I have no idea what Mark ended up doing with his life, but I am so glad for him that he had the courage to say, "No. I'm not going to fulfill your dream for me, Dad. I'm going to live my own life."

We can live unconsciously and go about our days according to what we are taught by our families, by society, by our religious institutions. But to do so is to remain lost to ourselves.

Palmer says, "We are disabused of [our] original giftedness in the first half of our lives. Then –if we are awake, aware and able to admit our loss –we spend the second half of life trying to recover and reclaim the gift we once possessed."

You begin life completely and utterly open to the world, with a natural curiosity and an eagerness to drink in everything around you. You are born loving and lovable. There has never been another one of "you" and there never will be again. You are completely content with who you are. You are in love with yourself. You are ready to offer your unique self to the world. This is your precious gift; the gift of your self.

As we grow up, though, most of us get the message that we should not value who we are inside. We're taught that we must think, speak and act in certain socially-acceptable ways. We believe what we are told, that what is inside us, our true self, is not worthy of love and acceptance. But we have a deep need to be loved and accepted. The solution? Gradually, we learn to project a persona that is acceptable to the outside world. And so, we do our best to lose our true selves.

Once we submerge our true selves, there is a void left. So we begin a search outside ourselves for something to fill that hole and to make us feel better. Debbie Ford, author of The Secret of the Shadow, The Power of Owning Your Whole Story, recalls this happening in her own life: "By the time I was five years old, I was all too familiar with the voice in my head telling me that I wasn't good enough...Desperate to feel loved and accepted, I set out on the exhausting task of getting other people to validate my worth."

And the more energy we put into seeking happiness outside ourselves, the less we pay attention to our original selves, except to criticize it. We take those messages we have been given, the ones that tell us we are not acceptable as we are, and invite them to live inside our heads as the "internal critic."

Ford recounts that it didn't seem to matter how much she accomplished in the outer world; she couldn't escape the internal voice that criticized her every move. She says, "That voice continually reprimanded me, telling me I didn't deserve love and that I would always be alone."

If we remain unconscious and unquestioning, our inner tyrant will continue to rule our lives. I had one of those. I still do, at times. I don't know how it happened, but at some point in my life, I started waking up. I began listening to that voice and to what it was telling me. I started thinking, "Maybe that voice is not always right." And I started challenging it. So great, I thought, now I've got two voices in my head!

What I found, though, was that if I battled the inner critic by criticizing IT, that critical voice would only become louder and more insistent. So not only do I have two voices in my head, but they're fighting! You know, the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. So I decided to try a different approach. I tried being loving and kind to my critical voice. And something amazing

happened. That critical voice got quieter. And there was a shift inside me. I was ready to change, to begin to love and accept myself for who I am.

As Parker Palmer puts it, “we spend the second half of life trying to recover and reclaim the gifts we once possessed.” How do we go about that task?

Tikkun Olam is a Jewish concept that means, repair of the world. And the way this world repair was once described to me included an image I still carry with me. The world was once like a round piece of glass, but it has been shattered into millions of tiny pieces. For Jews, Tikkun Olam is commonly interpreted as a call to social action, to put pieces of the shattered world back together.

I picture the process of finding our authentic selves in a similar way, as taking hold of little pieces of our selves and fitting them together. And what exactly are these little pieces that we’re supposed to be looking for? Philip C. McGraw, better known as “Dr. Phil,” describes the authentic self as “the ‘you’ that flourished, unselfconsciously, in those times of your life when you felt happiest and most fulfilled...It is the composite of all our unique gifts, skills, abilities, interest, talents, insights, and wisdom. It is all of your strengths and values that are uniquely yours.”

It’s who you are without the trappings of life. Imagine yourself, if you can, without the usual ways in which you identify yourself. We are not what we do, nor are we what we have, nor are we the images others have of us. Take all of those things away and then ask yourself, “Who am I, really?” This can be a scary question to contemplate, because we often measure our worth by what we do, by how successful we are, even by what our credit score is.

Also, inside many of us lives a frightened little girl or boy. For some of us, deep down, we may feel so unworthy that the idea of moving aside all the layers to get to our core selves can be terrifying. We need to be gentle with ourselves.

We need faith. Faith in ourselves. It’s OK to trust in ourselves, in the still small voice within. Bit by bit, we can trust enough to shed the persona, the false self that we show to the world. Little by little, we can become confident enough to let our authentic selves shine out.

“Trust thyself,” Emerson says. “Every heart vibrates to that iron string.”

In being who we really are, we do risk disappointing others, maybe even losing relationships with people in our lives that we care about. Emerson was unyielding in this regard. He says that we must never compromise who we are and who we strive to be for the sake of another's love.

“I must be myself,” he proclaims. “If you can love me for what I am, we shall be the happier. If you cannot, I will still seek to deserve that you should...I will so trust that what is deep is holy.”

Reclaiming our true selves is holy work. It is hard work. It takes a lot of courage and a lot of faith. But we are worth it. Every one of us is worth it.

Society teaches us to seek happiness outside ourselves. But, the reality is, happiness is an “inside job.”

In the words of Emerson, “Nothing can give you peace but yourself.”

May we trust ourselves enough to find that peace within.