

LIFE-LONG JOURNEY  
SERMON BY MICHELLE LAGRAVE

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FIRST PARISH IN FRAMINGHAM UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

I became a believer. Ever since, affect theology has been formational in the way that I think theologically, in the way that I grow spiritually, and in the ways that I teach and minister. And so I would like to share with you now a little bit of what I know of affect theology. I intend for this to be a personal and somewhat intimate sharing of how I experience my faith within the context of this faith community. I invite you to join with me for a bit, to walk together for a time, to share in this life-long journey of searching for truth and meaning, of seeking shalom, of learning how to live.

We begin in the base of our brains. This is where our brains receive both external and internal sensory input. We see, hear, taste, smell, and touch. Here, we begin to be aware that our hearts are racing, that our bodies are feeling pain, that our skin is sweating. Our bodily experiences are *foundational* in the way we understand and live out our faith lives. Affect theology is an *embodied* theology.

I *see*. Each Sunday morning, I walk out into the chancel and I see this beautiful, historic, sacred architecture of pew and choir loft, of clear windows and magnificent organ pipes. Sometimes, I see a youth hanging from the bell rope, struggling to pull it down low enough so that it will ring. I witness the lighting of the chalice. I see this wondrous sea of faces, some smiling and laughing, some tired and yawning, some tear-filled. During the final hymn, I watch as the ushers open up first the inner double doors to the sanctuary, then the outer doors leading to the common. Later, outside, I notice the beauty of the flowers planted all over our grounds; I follow the intricate pattern of the labyrinth; and I gaze upon the solitary tree which I face upon reaching its sacred center. I see the youth showing up to march in Boston Pride, sitting in the balcony during worship, writing letters to soldiers, and dressing up as zombies and other-worldly creatures for the children's haunted house.

I *hear*. I hear the words of the Sh'ma ring out. *Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai elohenu Adoni echad.* **דְּהָא הוּוּי וְנִיהֵלָא הוּוּי לְאַרְשֵׁי עַמֶּשׁ** I hear the hand bells and chimes and the church bell. I hear the joyful and triumphant notes of the organ. I hear the children's laughter, the babies' crying, the stories of joy and sorrow told. I listen deeply as you share the ways you've found meaning in your life. I hear the crunch of stones as I walk upon the labyrinth.

I smell the scent of the flowers in the chancel, of the lotion on another's skin, of candles burning, of food cooking, and of coffee brewing.

I taste delicious dishes served at the congregational potlucks, the cookies and cupcakes sold by the youth groups, the challah and grape juice of communion ritually consumed with a small group of women.

I touch your hands and shoulders as I greet you each Sunday. I feel the hardness of the labyrinth stones as I walk upon them. I cringed at the sharpness of those same stones when once I tried to walk on the labyrinth in just my socks. (It was a bad idea, please don't try this yourself!) When the choir stands in the chancel to sing, or the congregation stands to sing a hymn, I feel the vibrations of your voices resonating deep within me.

Next, we move a bit farther up our brain stems to where our emotional responses occur. First, we experienced sensory input within our bodies. Now, we experience emotions which we feel about these same sensory experiences. In this community: I feel awe when I look at our beautiful sanctuary. I feel pride when I see the youth acting with care and compassion toward others. When I hear the Sh'ma, I feel a deep yearning within my heart. I feel joy when I hear the praise-filled music of the organ. When I see tears on your faces, I feel compassion. When I reach the center of the labyrinth and I gaze upon the solitary tree, I experience wonder. In feasting at our community potlucks, I always feel blessed, and I sometimes feel sad and regretful. When I look into each of your faces and shake your hands, as I greet you on Sunday morning, I feel grateful.

Next, we move even farther up our brains and into the neocortex, the most recently evolved portion of our brains, the center of thinking, reasoning, and logic. Here it is that we think about our bodily, sensory experiences and the emotions we have felt about those experiences.

I hear the Sh'ma, I feel a yearning, I think about the meaning of the words I've heard, and I understand my yearning as a yearning for God, for the one-ness of all life, for my place within the interdependent web.

I feel the crunch of the labyrinth stones beneath my feet, I see the winding pattern of the pathway, I gaze upon the tree; I feel wonder; and I think about the meaning of the labyrinth as a symbolic path toward God, and I think about the unknown people who chose the placement of the labyrinth, who laid down its stones, who planted its flowers, who chose the tree as a focal point; and I understand my sense of mystery and wonder as a connection to humanity, to a transcendent God, to that which is greater than my own, solitary self.

When I taste the food at our community potlucks, or the challah and juice of a small communion; I feel blessed as I think about the community of which I am a part, and I feel sad as I think about how much the practice of communion has changed throughout the history of the church. I realize a loss of meaning and I grieve for it.

Each Sunday as we begin to sing the final hymn, I watch the ushers open the double doors leading to the outdoors. I feel joy and anticipation and hope. I think

about our going forth out into the world for another week. I think about our return together again next Sunday. And I wonder if this thing we do together, for an hour each Sunday morning, I wonder if it is enough, enough to sustain and renew us all for yet another week.

Finally, we move to the last component of affect theology, which is our actions. That is to say, we have sensory experiences, emotions we feel about those experiences, thoughts we think about how we experience and feel, and actions which we undertake as we interact with the world, as we live our lives. Sensory input. Emotions. Thoughts. Actions. I hear the Sh'ma. I feel a yearning. I understand the interdependence of all life. I act to reduce my carbon footprint. I experience the labyrinth. I feel wonder. I understand my place in the universe. I continue to seek out and walk labyrinths as a spiritual practice.

According to Thandeka, it is only when these four components: sensory input, emotions, thoughts, and actions, are in alignment, it is only then when we can feel whole, when we can feel fulfillment. When these four components of our lives are out of alignment, when our thoughts don't match our actions and our feelings don't match our thoughts, we feel broken, disaffected, fragmented, disembodied.

Affect theology is and can be a path to leading a life of healing and wholeness, of fulfillment, of shalom. In some ways, it is simple to understand but it is never easy to do and will never be finally or fully accomplished by any one. For each piece we put into place there are more to be sorted as we continually put together the puzzle we call life and journey forward. And so it is, that I believe in being fully present to those who I am with, yet I sometimes find myself feeling impatient or becoming lost in thought. And so I believe in making careful, considered, and ethical choices when shopping, yet I sometimes find myself choosing the easiest or least expensive option rather than the most ethical one.

As individuals, incorporating affect theology into our understanding of ourselves as whole, or even holy, beings is certainly adequate for living a moral and ethical life. We can easily use this system of thought to see a way toward becoming more ethically consistent in the totality of our being. We can use this system of thought in a spiritual practice of self-examination and self-culture. Yet, as important as the work that we as individuals do is, I believe that on a certain fundamental level of reality, any concept of ourselves as "individuals" becomes unhelpful, perhaps even inaccurate. We can only understand ourselves in relation to others. We are intimately connected on the interdependent web of life. A change in any one is felt by all. We are all one.

In the "Cakes for the Queen of Heaven" class, we have been learning about the power of religious symbols. Symbols can be harmful. Symbols can hurt. When we find ourselves in need of healing from a symbol which has harmed us or hurt us or perhaps has simply been unhelpful, we need to replace that symbol with new

meaning. We can't just throw out the old religious symbols, language, and rituals. If we wish to heal spiritually, we need to reclaim the old symbols. If we wish to heal spiritually, we need to infuse old symbols with new meaning.

Thandeka in writing about a need for a language of reverence defines the symbol of salvation within the context of affect theology in this way:

“Human salvation is thus a corporate affair. We were not conceived, born, or individuated alone. If others did not exist (including the wider world of nature and the universe) we would not be here. We could not be here. A basic eco-biological law of nature is that organisms cannot flourish without an environment that nurtures, sustains, and enhances their developmental continuity through life-affirming relationships. Our human affections are thus deeply private and utterly social. We feel the world upon us and within us. The world stirs our affections. We are a pulse of its life.”<sup>1</sup>

And so we have covenanted together, as a community, and in relation to other communities of Unitarian Universalists, to accept one another and to encourage one another in our spiritual growth, as we each engage in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. And so when our search for truth and meaning becomes difficult, when we find ourselves living too much in our heads, our too much in our hearts, we can remind each other of our need for balance. Body, heart, mind, will, spirit, all are essential on our path to healing and wholeness.

After all, we are all disaffected, disembodied, or broken, in some way. This is the nature of life and the result of our all-too-human experiences. If we were not, we would be inhumanly perfect, and no one is. Thandeka reminds us: “We were not broken alone and we cannot heal alone. It takes a religious community to heal a broken soul.” We need each other. Today, we literally hummed to each other much like the adults and children hummed to the snails. We do this whenever we join together in community. We hum to each other. We call each other out of our shells. We join together in sacred space. We walk together on holy ground.

As Unitarian Universalists, we have long struggled in finding a foundation for our liberal theology. Lewis B. Fisher said back in 1921: “Universalists are often asked to tell where they stand. The only true answer to give to this question is that we do not stand at all, we move.” This captures something quintessentially true about liberal theology, that our theology lives and grows and changes. Our theology is constantly in the process of becoming. Thandeka demonstrates that with affect theology, our search for a foundation may be over. The foundation of affect theology actually rests outside of theology, and within the field of science. Human experience is understood through the lens of neurobiology. As people of liberal faith, we are not likely to ever plant our feet in a cement-like faith, but here we can find a place to

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<sup>1</sup> The Rev. Dr. Thandeka, “New Words for Life”

rest, a place to find the ground beneath our feet, a place to stop our seemingly endless wandering. Here, within the warm embrace of affect theology, we can move forward together, with purpose, as we join each other on a life-long journey of becoming. May it be so.