



To Be Fully Human

Reverend Sharon Dittmar
First Unitarian Church
536 Linton Street
Cincinnati, OH 45219
(513) 281-1564
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Last week I was in a store with a teenager and, feeling exhausted by her impulsive talking (and knowing of her need for more “minutes”), I promised her a quarter if she would be silent for a minute. When I first proposed the deal to her she kept talking, so I repeated the deal and she asked “For real?” Yes, for real. At the thirty second mark she asked if the minute was up, but other than that she made it the whole minute without talking, and earned a quarter. In the aftermath there was a stunned silence between us. She earned money by being silent. I paid a person so she would be silent.

I’m not sure this is recommended in parenting manuals. In fact I have my doubts. Am I falling apart or figuring things out? I don’t know. I think I am being human and muddling my way through.

Thomas Moore writes:

Spiritual people often speak glowingly of wholeness and pursue it as an ideal. But the soul is present in disintegration as well when we have entered life generously and have been affected, having lost our original innocence and ideals. To be spiritual is to be taken over by a mysterious, divine compulsion to manifest some aspect of life’s deepest force. We become most who we are when we allow the spirit to dismember us, unsettling our plans and understandings, remaking us from the very foundations of our existence. Nothing is more

challenging, nothing less sentimental, than the invitation of spirit to become who we are and not who we think we ought to be.¹

This passage appears in *The Soul's Religion: Cultivating a Profoundly Spiritual Way of Life*. It comes from a chapter entitled "The Way of Disintegration." I think I have been disintegrating all year. Maybe some of you have been as well. As someone here said to me just this week "Everyone has lost something this year. Everyone." Whether it is your pension, home, job, salary, certainty, reputation, health, comfort, savings account, or faith in leaders, everyone has lost something this year. Everyone has lost something. It's been that kind of year.

For me, the bottom came with the murder of Esme Kenney a month ago. I did not have rage at her accused murderer. I did not have rage at the facility that housed him or the police or the state. What I had was incredulity that a 13 year-old went out for a jog in the middle of the afternoon and never came home. I am still in disbelief. Strangely, this horror brought me finally face to face, in an undeniable, disintegrating way, with how little control we all have in our lives; whether it is our safety, health, finances, or relationships. And the consequences of this, well, obviously, they can be absolutely devastating and permanent. I was immobilized in this space, with this realization.

One day I even found myself acting out. Other than saying I did nothing illegal, I am not going to tell you what I did, but I thought to myself afterwards "I am not well." Maybe you have thought this about yourself this year too. Maybe in the midst of your disintegration this year you have scared yourself at some moment and wondered "How am I?" "Who am I?"

Two weeks ago I met with a Search Committee looking for a new District Executive in our Heartland District. I was the chairperson of this committee, and in between our meetings I found the opportunity to talk to one of my colleagues, Bill Breeden, minister at the Bloomington church in Indiana. Bill is not your usual Unitarian Universalist minister. In his life he has been poor (he is a twin and likes to say "I was born so poor I had to share my own womb"), a Nazarene revivalist leader as a teenager, a tax protester, truck driver, death row chaplain, and now UU minister. Bill's life experiences are varied and he is the perfect person to speak to when considering a disintegrating life. Bill has been in solitary confinement for protesting. Bill lived in a tepee without electricity with his family for many

¹Thomas Moore, *The Soul's Religion: Cultivating a Profoundly Spiritual Way of Life* (2002), 89.

years. Bill has let himself disintegrate and has lived to tell the tale, and he is still happily married and has a good relationship with his children.

I took Bill aside and told him about my year and Esme's recent murder. I finished by asking "Bill, what do I do?" What do I do? He listened and said "Well, the only thing you can do is go deeper." This was not the answer I was expecting. Another UU colleague would have set up a self-care plan for me. I had him repeat it. "Go deeper" he said. He explained to me that in going deeper I would learn more about what it is to be human and that this would help me, if I can face it, help me personally and in my ministry.

As frightening as I found his words, they were also comforting. I did not need to run. I could stand and look and try to accept all this brokenness and pain as part of a natural, normal life. Devastating at times, yes. Unfair, yes. Random, yes. Real, yes. I am not returning as the same person I was a year ago. Perhaps you are not either.

I remember Betty Cavanaugh speaking from this pulpit several years ago about the unexpected death of her first husband, Mac, before she had even reached middle age. I remember her saying (and I paraphrase) "It took away my innocence. Since then I have had neither the highs nor lows that I did before. I have been happy again, but it is not the same." I remember sitting silently in my chair and thinking "I hope that never happens to me." Oh, how very naïve, bordering just a bit on arrogant. But it was my need for denial at the time. Now that I am disintegrating, denial is not as optional, and many more things seem possible, both hard and pleasant.

Moore writes:

Although we tend to think of emotional turmoil as an aberration and a sickness, every life is composed of an emotional ebb and flow. Things go right, things go wrong. A therapist soon discovers that the painful situations people get into cause them to reflect. People are often moved to consider their lives seriously in the midst of confusion, and this enforced reflection may be the beginning of spiritual insight. The spirit is not always discovered in a positive and blissful quest for meaning. Sometimes it is found only after we have been broken and torn apart by failure and sadness . . . Sometimes the fall from grace is not only a fact but also a symbol. One summer my daughter, then six years old, was doing flips while diving into a swimming pool when she came tumbling down too close to the side of the pool and hurt her head badly. I worried about her brain while a friend said that the fall marked her exit from the deepest innocence of childhood . . .

Religious literature is full of debilitating falls and disasters, all signifying a low entry into the mysterious and infinite. The ascent usually gets the process going, but the fall is also necessary, and it may take a variety of forms. Maybe it is true that our clumsy and literal tumbblings mark a deeper descent into life.²

I spoke with a colleague this week who told me he thinks a lot of us are feeling “stupid” these days. We feel stupid for losing money in our pensions. We feel stupid for following conventional wisdom to not pay off our houses, and now some of us are worried about the mortgage payments for the first time in years. We feel stupid for trusting banks, the government, and our employers. We are ashamed. He also thinks we are angry because we put our trust in people and institutions that it turned out, for a variety of reasons, were not trustworthy.

I don’t think we are stupid. I think we are human and this is life. We are disintegrating. I don’t think our leaders (whether banks, governments, or employers) are any more flawed than they ever have been. They are human, too. And this is capitalism. The reason our pensions grew so much is because of the benefits of capitalism. The reason they are shrinking now is because of the problems with capitalism. We are disintegrating now. And when I say “disintegrating,” I don’t mean it in a pessimistic, nihilistic, permanent way. I mean it more as that journey of life that leads to open emptiness.

As Moore explains:

When we disintegrate, going down into life and into our potential for vitality, we may have to give up the fantasy of ourselves as sentimentally whole. We may have to risk experience instead of keeping it at bay; for it is the impact of life and soul that makes us into persons of depth and character. I suspect that the common glorification of wholeness and unity is a defense against the alchemical dismembering of our emotions and thoughts into a mature, tempered soul. We are always becoming whole, and that means we are never whole but always disintegrating as we go. We find our wholeness as we are peeled away, like an onion, with the process finished when there is nothing left to peel. Perhaps only then will we be moved to give up the idea of wholeness altogether, having

² Ibid, 83-84.

disintegrated sufficiently to be touched by life, and are therefore empty.³

Empty, not as in desolate or alone. But empty, as in having space for something else. Moore tells a wonderful story about seeing the Pantheon in Rome for the first time on a rainy day, and once inside the Pantheon, discovering that the center is a hole open to the sky so the rain falls in on him. He considers it an empty space through which the mysterious and infinite can enter.

If we are always whole and disintegrating as we go, then there could be something mysterious and infinite in the disintegration some of us have experienced this year. It is not familiar yet. I am still adjusting to the face to face reality that a 13 year- old can go jogging in the daytime and never come home. Yes, I have read about these cases for years. But for the first time, it came this close to me. Perhaps other things have come close to you this year, uncomfortable, new, real things. Can you come close enough to be touched by life and find some space within yourself? The space will hurt, but it will also be full of greater compassion and understanding, perhaps unexpected new things as well.

I will never again assume myself to be as invulnerable. With this realization, I have found in this year a greater ability to listen to people in pain – something that opened in my emptiness. To neither hurry nor offer answers (when there aren't any), but to just listen. Yes, this is real. I can be present. I am not in control. I don't have an answer, but I will sit with you and see you in this moment.

When I see others in their moments, I can also see myself more clearly in my own moment. So when I could not listen to compulsive talking for one more moment, I paid someone to be quiet. Is that whole or broken? I don't know. I'm not sure it matters. It is. Here is this moment. What do you want in this moment? Who are you in this moment? What falls in on you through the hole/whole in this moment? For those of us who are disintegrating, there is also lots of potential for something new.

So, for the first time in my life, I am considering returning to a neighborhood straight out of my childhood, a type of neighborhood I would have typically avoided at all costs, tiny ranch homes stretched out one after the other. And I am considering acquiring two teenagers, an acquisition that most people would suggest I avoid at all costs. I am considering moving in

³Ibid, 89.

with my boyfriend Earl, who I love, who lives in Eastgate with his two teenage children.

I have always said “I can’t live in Eastgate.” I would say “People are missing teeth there.” Earl says, “People missing teeth are people too.” (bad UU minister – what about that first principle?). We are at Home Depot and someone completely strung out asks us for money while mentioning he is from Clermont County. I look at Earl and say “Clermont County. Your county.” Earl says “Yes, but he is looking for drugs here in Hamilton County. Your county.” It was his daughter I paid to be quiet for one minute. You see, the way of disintegration.

But I think it might just be the house, straight out of my childhood, that has seemed so impossible, until I started to disintegrate and things fell in on me, like how funny it was when his son painted his chest with a smiley face while we were painting. How easy it is to live someplace where no one cares if you wear make-up or dress-up. How revolutionary it is to find one billiard hall left with nothing but pool tables. How fun it is to be absolutely wretched at pool and play anyway. How simple it is to go to the pay lake and sleep out overnight in a pick-up truck while others fish through the night. Nothing I would have ever expected.

I loved Youngstown, Ohio as a small girl. It is my hometown. But when I got older I just wanted to be farther and farther away from the hard working class life and small houses. Then I developed a hole/whole in the roof of my head and other things seemed possible. Are they good or bad? I really, honestly, have no idea. I only know that I have disintegrated sufficiently to be touched by life, and am therefore empty in a way of potential.

I know that many of us are challenged by worry and loss this year. Disintegration hurts and it can last, long and hard. You have companions on this journey. We are here. You are human and your experience is normal. This might be the largest shock of all, disintegration is normal. Please ask for help if you need it. Know this too, “We become most who we are when we allow the spirit to dismember us, unsettling our plans and understandings, remaking us from the very foundations of our existence. Nothing is more challenging, nothing less sentimental, than the invitation of spirit to become who we are and not who we think we ought to be.”⁴ We’ll get there. Peeled away. But we will get there.

⁴ Ibid, 89.

