

Seasons of Life
Unitarian Universalist Church in Cherry Hill
Sunday, June 9, 2024
Melanie Jones, DLFE and Rev. Margret A. O’Neill

Melanie Jones

Today we celebrate and recognize lifespan faith engagement here at UUCCH. Lifespan Faith Engagement can seem like a mouthful but it’s simple in the breakdown- How are we engaging our faith throughout our lifespan, from birth to death. We’ve heard from Jenn and Kourtney, we have heard from our younger friends in SpiritPlay.

I had Jimmy ask some of our middle school and high school students their reflections from the year. Our group really loves animals, especially cats, and they enjoyed learning about the significance and symbolism of animals in different religions. They learned that different mediums can be used to share a story of faith, like your favorite anime TV series. They come here to learn and have fun while connecting with each other, and learning what it means to have their own faith.

I am currently working towards a master's degree in social work. One of the foundations of social work is evaluating a person's whole being to assess what they need, including their faith and spiritual life. Lifespan Faith Engagement immediately takes me to Fowler’s Stages of Faith Development. There are stages of development around faith and beliefs that we go through as we grow and age, much like other stages of development. As infants we rely on our caregivers, as young children we are more literal and also fanciful. In adolescence our social influences widen, and our ideals start to take shape. In adulthood we critically evaluate and personalize our faith, which can lead us to acceptance of paradoxes and compassionate orientation towards all beings.

Each of us here has a story; we may have shared parts with one another, or perhaps not at all. In planning for today, Margret shared the idea of doing the sermon for today in conversation style, to share with you some of our journey and stages of our faith. We all start out as babies, relying upon our caregivers for all of our care. What faith were you born into?

Rev Margret

I was raised in a very observant Catholic family – there are a lot of details about that I did not know or understand at the time. But as far back as I can remember, no matter what else was going on, we all got cleaned up on Saturday afternoon and went off to Confession. There we would recite all our wrongdoings from the week before, cleanse our souls and be ready to receive Communion on Sunday. And then on Sunday my father preferred the early Mass, at 6:30 am, because it tended to be shorter (even the priest was only half awake!) and it freed up the rest of the day for other activities. That was my early experience with religion. I did not even know other religions existed. I remember a conversation with my mother when I was about 12 years old, getting ready for my Confirmation, as my mother was studying to convert to Catholicism. So I asked her, what was her religion before – and she responded, “Oh, we were nothing, we were Methodists!” So I thought Catholicism was the only real religion. What was your early religious experience like, Melanie?

Melanie Jones

My parents were not particularly religious people. My mother was raised in the Quaker tradition, and both my grandparents were devout in their practice. My father was raised attending a Presbyterian church, but his family wouldn’t say they were religious, but went to church as good folks do. Growing up my mom would take us to one Methodist Church in our town and then the other, but she eventually stopped because she had a hard time connecting with people in the congregation, which means that my sister and I stopped attending. My mother spoke about God and spiritual things around my sister and me. We talked

about angels, said our prayers at night, and were reminded that rain was just God's tears which helped everything grow. It wasn't until my seventh-grade year that I would enter the doorway of the second Methodist church in my town. Margret, what was your understanding of the God/the universe/soul stuff as a child?

Rev Margret

My idea of God when I was very young - and probably quite a bit longer than that - was as a big, important, powerful adult man who created people and had opinions about how people behaved, and reacted in love or anger, depending on our actions. So if I was good, God would be happy with me, and if I was bad, God would be disappointed or even angry with me.

I was taught that God made things happen in the world based on whether he – always he – was pleased with us. I remember one children's book about Christianity said that in long-ago times God became so unhappy with people that he closed Heaven, and then sent Jesus to re-open heaven by dying to save us.... And if the book told it that way, who was I to question the story? What was the story as you understood it in your early years, Melanie?

Melanie Jones

When I think back to my childhood, any time I pictured God it looked like many of the pictures I saw in church that depicted Jesus, you know the ones where he looks white and kind of blonde, with this ethereal glow around him? It was the only image that had ever been presented to me. This specific image stayed with me well into my young adult years. As a teenager, I became very involved in an evangelical church and camp community, and I had a very similar theology as you did, Margret: If I did good things, and did my best to know what God wanted from me, then God was happy with me. If I didn't do the things that made me a "good Christian," then God would be angry with me. As I look back, I realize how fixated I would be in analyzing my thoughts, my ideas, even the things I liked, and not just my own, but of those around me as well.

Many of us are brought up in a religion or spiritual practice, but we all reach a stage where we begin to ask questions and start to explore for ourselves. Some may call this the "rebellious" stage in life. Did you experience this?

Rev Margret

I was not really a rebellious teenager, and I kept getting up and going to church on Sundays even after I was in college, but I got to know people in other religions. I went home with a roommate and went to her Methodist church with her, which I had been told was a sin, but lightning did not strike me, so that was a shift. I took a class on religion that started me thinking. I stopped going to church except when I was home with my family, and I remember the time I told my mother that I would not go to Confession. Religion just became irrelevant to me, what I had been taught about God did not match how I saw the world, and though I still went along with my family when I was home, I did not identify as Catholic, or as anything, any more. How about you, Melanie?

Melanie Jones

I was a very devout "believer" in my teens and through college. I went to a Christian Liberal Arts school, I majored in youth ministry, I was a student chaplain, I led a team of students in youth retreat programming. But even from my early years in youth group, I never felt like I fully fit in the mold of what a good Christian girl should be like. It was a source of anxiety and self-loathing for me, longing just to get myself together and become the right kind of person. My faith and beliefs began to shift as I graduated college and entered my twenties. I remember one day in particular; I was talking to a friend and asking her and myself whether what I had been taught was really what I believed or if I believed it because I was told I should. This began a fundamental shift in my beliefs and how I would carry myself.

We set out on the journey of discovery- self, spiritually, morally- and we may make stops along the way. Some places we just pass by, others are places that we might stay a while. What did your faith and spiritual life look like as you journeyed into adulthood?

Rev Margret

When I was just finishing college I married a man who had been raised in a Methodist family just as devout as my Catholic one, and who had also drifted away. We did not think religion had any place in our lives until one day our son, who was just turning five, came home and told us what he had learned about God from watching Christian TV at a friend's house – an old man on a throne who sent people to heaven or hell – and his dad and I looked at each other and said, “we need to get a church!” It was important to us that our child's thinking would be shaped by a system that matched our own beliefs and values. We knew about the Unitarian Church in town, so one Sunday we headed there, and as they say, the rest is history! We had found a faith that matched our own worldview and convictions, and a community that could help shape our son's values in the world. What was your own shift like, Melanie?

Melanie Jones

My twenties and thirties have been a slow burn of changes. After college and my first job as an adult, I found myself letting go of the “rules” that I was taught and reframing my spiritual narrative. I identified as a progressive Christian, but by my early thirties, I spiritually felt like a teenager who wanted to throw off everything that was handed to her and go my own way. I did not want to be identified as any specific faith. I knew that my beliefs did not fit into the mainstream of the religious world I was still a part of. I was working in different Methodist Churches over the years, and I was still a part of the camp community I joined in my teens. But I felt like I didn't belong in those spaces anymore, and I didn't know what new spaces I could fit into. I went through a period of being angry and resenting all that had shaped me for nearly twenty years. There were growing pains to go through. Where are you now? What does faith mean to you today?

Rev Margret

Much of my theology is shaped by my study of the healing arts, reading physics and cosmology, and by my experience in the world. I now understand God to be the energetic force that holds and unites the cosmos, which I name as Love. That is one of the reasons I so appreciate the new articulation of our Unitarian Universalist faith as the values of Justice, Equity, Transformation, Pluralism, Interdependence and Generosity with Love at the center – and I am so grateful to whoever came up with the acronym JETPIG so I can remember those values and speak them without hesitation. And yes, Love at the center, holding everything together. And you?

Melanie Jones

As I reflect on the past fourteen years of my life, I can see the path laid out that led me to where I am today. It took me a very long time to learn that I can let go of what no longer serves me while still making room for new perspectives and possibilities. I am learning that I am allowed to take up space as I am, and that it is okay to not have an answer to everything. I have worked through many of my old narratives about God and myself and I continue to make peace and be grateful for the foundation I was given in my teenage years. I now have more freedom to explore ideas and theology, while cultivating the faith that has always been at the core of who I am.

Rev Margret

You know, I always bristle a bit when people call Unitarian Universalists “non-believers.” I think everyone believes something, and that belief is important. You, or you, or you might or might not believe the specific stories about God and Jesus that were written down in the collection of books we call the Bible, but you can probably say pretty clearly what you do believe about the nature of the universe and

how things work in the world. Many UUs are humanists or scientific rationalists, others are spiritual seekers, or follow the path of Buddhism, or Judaism or the Hindu tradition, while others are guided by the stories about God and Jesus in the Christian Bible – or you may hold as true some mixture of all of these belief systems. And faith? Faith is not blind obedience; the term derives from the same root source as “fidelity,” meaning commitment, the values and principles to which I dedicate my life. Unitarian Universalism is indeed a faith tradition, and we are clear about the values and commitments that guide us (though we may argue about the specific words) – ours is a faith centered in Love, in our human connections and the interdependent web of all existence.

Melanie Jones

The theme of today’s service is the seasons of life; the different stages that we go through as we grow up. As I mentioned earlier, in James Fowler’s “Stages of Faith,” Fowler refers to comparative religionist Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Smith explains the differences between religion, faith and beliefs. Religion is the cumulative tradition, with many parts (narratives, symbols, etc). Belief is “the holding of certain ideas”; beliefs seek to translate experiences of transcendence into “concepts or propositions”. “Faith is deeper, richer, more personal... Faith then, is the quality of human living... A quiet confidence and joy which enable one to feel at home in the universe, and to find meaning in the world and in one’s own life, a meaning that is profound and ultimate, and is stable no matter what may happen to oneself at the level of immediate event.”

Our program is called “Lifespan Faith Engagement,” because faith engagement is not just for any one period of time in our lives. Faith engagement is a lifelong journey of finding solid ground to stand on, and that foundation stays with us in calm breezes as well as the raging storms. I am not done growing and exploring. You are not done growing. I am thankful for the journey that was and the journey to come. We all will reach new stages of faith at every phase of life if we approach life with an open heart, And remember that no matter what faith we practice, the law of the universe is love, and love is at the center.

Sources:

James W. Fowler (1995) *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, HarperOne.