

Waking Up and Growing Up: How We Develop Spiritually

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Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento



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Hymns: #346, Come Sing a Song with Me; #123, Spirit of Life/ Fuente de Amor; #1008, When Our Heart Is in a Holy Place

Reflection by Frances Myers (printed at end)

Reading #529 by Rabindranath Tagore

The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world/ and dances in rhythmic measures. / It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers. / It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth and death, in ebb and in flow. / I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life. And my pride is from the life-throb of ages / dancing in my blood this moment.

Sermon

The late American Unitarian minister A. Powell Davies wrote: “Life is just a chance to grow a soul.” But how do we grow spiritually? Not how, as in how to, but what does growth look like? What form does it take?

Ken Wilber is prolific writer about the evolution of human consciousness. He brings together eastern and western perspectives on

spirituality and promotes Buddhist meditation as a mindfulness practice. He also writes about how we develop as human personalities; how we grow our souls.

Wilber says human beings experience two kinds of spiritual development. These are separate yet parallel tracks. Each one has several stages of development, all of which Wilber explains with big words and countless details. He calls these two tracks *Waking Up* and *Growing Up*.¹ By *Waking Up*, he means the practice of being present in the moment. *Waking Up* means gaining the capacity to experience unity—to feel oneness with all that is—with life, with divine love, with the cosmos. For thousands of years, religious traditions around the globe have been refining their particular practices to pursue an experience of unity.

Such experiences have generated beautiful art, like the poem I read from Tagore: “The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world/ and dances in rhythmic measures.... I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life.” Tagore conveys an experience of a person who is awake to oneness. In various traditions, deeper and longer practices of prayer or meditation have brought many people to more transcendent states of being, to higher stages of *Waking Up*. The parallel development of *Waking Up* is *Growing Up*. This has to do with how we experience relationships as we develop, how we feel and react, and the choices we make in response to that experience.

You could say that *Waking Up* is the mystical part. *Growing Up* is the inter-personal part. *Growing Up* spiritually is about how we see ourselves and the world around us, and the ethical decisions we make and the actions we choose to take.

Wilber draws on experts in developmental psychology in charting how we grow. He says there are maps that underlie our behaviors--patterns in our DNA or structures in our souls. Each developmental stage has its own map or structure underlying it. Growth involves moving from the map of one stage to that of a later stage. As we go through life, Wilber says, most of us are not aware of the maps that underlie our behaviors. *Growing*

Up fully requires awareness of our own maps, assumptions, reactions and feelings.

Every human being starts as a newborn, who makes no distinction between itself and its surroundings. An infant knows only what it feels and experiences. The baby IS its experiences. A baby doesn't identify as being hungry; it IS hunger. Later, as it grows, the baby discerns the world around it. The baby perceives the presence of others and responds to them, yet it remains focused on its own desires and wants. Its efforts are aimed at getting what it needs.

From here we develop through several more stages in life. We go from these early self-centered stages, to stages that are group-centered, and later to stages that are world-centered, or global in awareness. And later, if we keep developing, we may achieve a the cosmic-centered stage, with an awareness of belonging to something much larger than ourselves.

According to Wilber, even as we go through more of these phases of experience, we carry in the structure of our souls all the maps from our earlier phases. We transcend the earlier maps, yet they remain a part of us. Sometimes we may revert to an earlier stage. For example, if an adult is acting abruptly out of pure impulse or craving, that's a fallback to an earlier map. My late mother had a cousin her age demanded that others meet that person's needs, demanding essentially that we take responsibility for their emotional happiness. This relative came across as self-centered and always insisting to be attended to, all their life long. According to Wilber, that person was operating from an early map, one that charted seeing your own desires and needs alone, without seeing, asking or caring about the needs of others—or their experience of your behavior.

Growing Up spiritually—growing beyond such early stages, calls for giving attention to our experience, practicing mindful awareness. Wilber says to observe your experience, feelings and reactions as if you are watching with a video camera. Just let the experience be what it is. By mindful awareness, gradually we can get a glimpse of the map that shapes our feelings and reactions.

As we go through childhood into youth, we move through stages where our needs are the center of our awareness and we want to get those around us to meet those needs. Then we move into stages

where a sense of belonging is more powerful than our need for individual gratification. Our center of awareness becomes our circle—such as our family, peer group, clan, racial identity—any or all of them. In this group-identified stage of development, what's most important is the sense of belonging and affirmation, which means keeping the group's acceptance and affirmation of you. This involves conforming to the expectations of your group—starting with your family but moving beyond it into social circles, to religious affiliation, racial or cultural identity, and national identity. Wilber says the maps that impel our need for belonging can lead to mistrust and hostility toward those outside our circle, such as those outside our racial identity, religion, or nationality.

Going against these maps can cause distress and fear. Going against the maps means to question the comforting assumptions we have accepted, perhaps without even being aware of what they were. Violating conformity upsets the expectations of our group and risks our place in it.

When our heart is calling us to do something that doesn't conform to others' expectations, we fear the loss of belonging and comfort—those unseen but felt benefits of group identity. I believe this explains the persistence of racism in American society. That is, subtle versions of racism are passed down invisibly from generation to generation. The pull of conformity keeps them acceptable as well as unacknowledged.

Waking Up White is the title of a book by Debby Irving which some of our members have been reading. Her journey begins with her struggling silently to understand race and racism in the United States and in her life. The journey continues as she reflects on how racism operates. As a white person, Irving says, for most of her life she feared saying or doing something offensive to people of color around her. Likewise, she didn't like it when white people near her would say things that were blatantly biased, unfair, or mean-spirited about people of color, but she didn't know how to speak up or have the courage to do so. She remained in her discomfort and silence. Most confusing, she writes, were "my unwanted racist thoughts that made me feel like a jerk. I felt too embarrassed to admit any of this, which kept me from going in search of answers."

“It turns out,” she says, “that stumbling block number one was that I didn’t think I had a race, so I didn’t look inside myself for the answers.”² Now she is *Waking Up*. For most of her life, Irving explains, she was having a white experience in a white culture but not realizing it. She had inherited a culture and a system of racial dominance. She had been brought up to take it for granted. Indeed, she had been brought up not to notice the culture or speak about it. Consequently, when she had thought of *race*, and the meaning of race, she had thought of non-white races only. All other racial identities were measured against the identity of whiteness, the norm, the standard. She had learned to conform to this identity without even seeing it. Her fascinating book features her own discoveries of the attitudes which had kept her ignorant of racial injustice. *Waking Up White* shows her liberation. She came to see and understand the maps that weren’t serving her. After *Waking Up*, she set about *Growing Up*—learning more, speaking up, risking mistakes, and resisting the status quo of systemic injustice.

I don’t know if Debby Irving is a fan of Wilber’s or if she makes a practice of mindful attention to her experience, but she did unearth and examine the maps that she had grown up with. For her it was probably more like dogged research, introspection and giving uncomfortable challenges to people she loves. By paying attention to her own discomfort and by struggling to make sense of racial dynamics, she came to see the maps by which generations of white Americans had been operating.

She woke up and she set about *Growing Up*. *Growing Up* includes curiosity, not only about the world but also curiosity about how we arrived at our views, reactions and behaviors in the world. Our values and principles teach us: *Waking Up* is good but only the start. *Growing Up* depends on what choices we make regarding our actions and words. It means expanding the reach of compassion beyond ourselves and our circle.

Compassion is the bridge between the parallel tracks of *Waking Up* and *Growing Up*. The practice of compassion links our spiritual awareness to the active and inter-personal parts of life.

The practice of compassion means being present to *what is* and receiving *what is* with honesty and kindness. It includes identifying our spiritual connections to others, to their suffering and

their dignity. It comes from sensing the oneness of life and sensing our unity with all people. Compassion is an incentive toward solidarity and humility, an incentive to avoid causing harm. However, in order for the practice of compassion to be honest, authentic and sustainable, it should include self-compassion.

Wherever we might be in the process of *Growing Up*, self-compassion asks for honest acceptance of our imperfections. Compassion sees our complicated personalities. It says that we are loved in spite of them. We are loved. There are parts of us that won’t get solved once and for all. Parts of us don’t get fixed. There is no final fix for most of the contradictions or paradoxes of our personalities. There is only more growing to do.

Part of *Growing Up* is to see ourselves more fully, to see our complexity. Sometimes *Growing Up* means understanding what we’ve learned or accepted that is no longer useful or helpful. Sometimes we see that what we learned or accepted isn’t even true.

By mindful attention, we notice our beliefs, behaviors and reactions. We discover and unearth our maps of relating to ourselves and others. Wilber says we don’t need to repress or avoid our own reactions, we need only watch them. Put a video camera on them, he says. We can observe our feelings and our experience as objects, as events, as processes, and not as our identity. We can see that we have choices about how to respond.

What would it be like if we were more aware of our drives, desires, and longings? What would it mean for *Growing Up* if we could show compassion to our fears and judgments? Some years ago, while on retreat at an insight meditation center, I heard a memorable dharma talk or sermon by one of the teachers. She talked about our unwanted habits and unhelpful attitudes. These are like parts of the maps that Wilber talks about. For her however, they were not hidden habits, but quite visible and annoying ones. For example, she said, there’s perfectionism. There’s judgmentalism toward others. There’s the hostile voice of self-criticism. To be sure, many of those bad habits may have come about as protective or coping mechanisms. Yet in her process of *Growing Up*, my teacher saw that self-criticism had become less of a coping skill and more of a burden and a road block.

When self-criticism arises, she doesn't see it as an enemy to suppress. She greets it as a regular companion. She gives it some gentle attention, but not all her attention. For example, she says: "Hello, self-critical voice, my old friend. There you are. I see you. I hear you. You've always been here for me, and I appreciate your loyalty. You have the urge to protect me, I know. By speaking harshly to me, you want to help me avoid mistakes. But you don't need to do anything now. I'll ask you to step in if I need you. You can rest for now.

This is the practice of compassion. Mindful attention can shine a light on our drives, feelings, fears, impulses and longings. Just noticing them, being aware and present. When we accept their company in an open way, perhaps we can loosen their grip on us. If we can show awareness, presence and patience to our own impulses, perhaps we'll be a little more free to extend awareness, presence and patience to others. In greater freedom, we can extend our presence and compassion to all people and all beings.

Waking Up means to open ourselves to sensing the present moment. It means to be open to sensing unity, to feeling oneness with all that is—with life, with divine love, with the cosmos. Growing Up means to respond to this unity, to take responsibility for our connections, to choose our actions. We can use our awareness to make choices.

The poem of Tagore concludes: "I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life. And my pride is from the life-throb of ages / dancing in my blood this moment."

This mystic poet's pride, once awakened, cannot be kept separate from the needs of the world and the life to which he expresses a deep connection.

To feel this pride and connection, this is Waking Up. To engage with life, the world, and other people, this is Growing Up.

May we have awareness, compassion and patience for the journey. May we feel ourselves alive and know that we are loved and we are part of love.

We are part of extending love and compassion into the world. May we extend compassion into the world beyond us, to all people and all beings. Amen.

Reflection by Frances Myers

Growing Up my parents taught us right from wrong and what characteristics they felt were most valuable....being kind...working hard...loving your family. They also valued independent thought and fixing your own problems. Their message was pretty clear, they believed people who needed organized religion or therapy were weak.

And this "do it yourself" attitude worked for me.....until it didn't.

I was 30...happily married...had 2 small children...and was on the career track I had studied for -- the American Dream -- right?

Except it wasn't....I slid into a deep depression. One day my daughter Maeda....who was 4, said to me.."Mommy is it a sad day for you?" and I felt as if I had been punched in the gut. I grew up with a mom who had lots of sad days, some when she didn't get out of bed....I knew I couldn't/wouldn't do that to my daughters.

So I found the courage go to a therapist. During one of our sessions she asked me if I had a spiritual practice...a church home or faith community. She said that for most people trying to... "go it alone" was really hard...and that I might want to consider finding something. At about this same time, my husband Dan who had been raised in the Catholic Church....but was no longer practicing, wanted to find a church we could attend as a family. I was still hesitant about organized religion....but willing to be open to the possibility.

We were living in Lancaster Pennsylvania and the Unitarian Universalist Church of Lancaster and their minister Kit Howell had come to our attention about 6 months prior. Kit frequently wrote letters to the editor defending liberal ideas such as sex education in schools and equal rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons. When the Lancaster Planned Parenthood Office was bombed, Kit invited them to move into the basement of the church.

Pretty gutsy....this could be an interesting church.

So we went....And because I was ready for it...Kit's sermons spoke to my inner soul. I felt connected to something bigger than myself. He spoke about life being full of grace and also being perverse. Life was complicated....confusing...amazing and wonderful. Although no one can walk our path for us, he said we get strength and hope from those we choose to be in community with. Asking for help was not a weakness.

His words and the Unitarian Universalist Principles challenged my views and ideas in a way that was both comforting and difficult.

Kit Howell died of lung cancer in 1996 at the age of 45. Although I only knew him for 3 years, I am so grateful that our spiritual paths crossed.

Every day is a new leg on my spiritual journey. I am very fortunate that there have been therapists,

¹ Ken Wilbur, *Integral Meditation: Mindfulness A as a Path to Grow Up, Wake Up, and Show Up in Your Life* (Boulder, 2016: Shambhala).

ministers, congregations, teachers, friends and family who have supported/....are supporting me along the way.

I try to live my life still amazed by moments of grace, and stay compassionate and hopeful in moments of fear and sadness.

I want to keep in my heart the words Kit always used to end his sermons - "In a world without end"

² Peggy Irving, *Waking Up White and Finding Myself in the Story of Race* (Cambridge, MA, 2014, Elephant Room Press).