

## Gradual Epiphanies

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Roger Jones  
Preached on Sunday, January 5, 2025  
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Music: *Hymns:* #346, Come Sing a Song with Me; #86, Blessed Spirit of My Life; Life Calls Us On (K. Gibbons/J. Shelton). *Piano solos:* Robert Schumann, Arabesque; Alexis Ffrench, Forever Song; J. S. Bach, Air on a G String, Orchestral Suite No. 3 in D major, BWV 1068.

Personal Reflection and Poem by Courtney, Worship Associate [printed below sermon]

### Sermon

Tomorrow, January 6, is the 12<sup>th</sup> Day of Christmas. In the calendar of the traditional church, it's called Epiphany. It recalls the story of when three Magi or wise men from the east, three astrologers from what we now know as Iran or Persia, followed a star to Jerusalem. The Greek root of the word *epiphany* mean a revelation. In this case, the revelation was a divine child born to a poor family. In general use, when we hear of someone's epiphany, we think of a flash of insight, a single moment of discovery, the "wow" of beholding some big truth. We remember dramatic stories of a sudden, dazzling awareness. However, behind the dramatic moment is everybody's unique spiritual journey, which is much more involved and complex than it looks on the surface. It takes time to reach that special moment.

The story of the Magi features the beholding of a brilliant star and then the lovely child. The story in the Bible is so compact, it can look as if the Magi hopped on their camels and headed over right on Christmas night. But it's good to remember that it was a very long journey. Traveling by camel for a journey of more than a thousand miles would have taken weeks or months. And for such a long trip they would have needed weeks of preparation before setting out. Likewise, in our journeys of personal growth and spirituality it's good to take time to prepare. Much of what leads to transformation starts out with being patient, listening, and asking others to support us in sorting out which direction to take. Revelation requires discernment.

Once a month I meet for a one-hour session with a spiritual director. Many people have not heard of this helping profession, but it's becoming better known, and more people are turning to it. In contrast to the professions of counseling or psychotherapy, the purpose of spiritual direction is not so much to solve problems as it is to bring our deep gifts and longings to the surface of our awareness. Spiritual directors ask you questions and listen to your answers for the movement of the spirit in you.

In preparation for this sermon, I asked my spiritual director about how to cultivate discernment. In her opinion, authentic discernment involves a 3-way partnership. *First* is our conscious connection with the voice inside us—the deepest, truest voice inside (not the loudest voice, she said). *Second* is a prayerful attitude of listening with an open mind, open heart and even open hands—we listen for a larger perspective to emerge, a perspective beyond that of our small, individual self, beyond our ego. You might call it listening for the perspective of the holy. *Third* is getting confirmation of our thoughts and clarifying our direction in a supportive community, one that is dedicated to listening beyond our egos. (She noted that spiritual direction is just one form or source of a listening community).

To summarize all this: with patience, we prepare ourselves to be... open to the true voice inside us, open to the calling of the universe, and open to feedback and questions in a community of trust. She said that discernment is not about coming up with quick answers. It has to do with waiting and listening.

In my life, two major changes came about as gradual transformations, or slow epiphanies. One was the realization of something I needed to do. The other was the realization of something I needed to stop doing. I'll talk about both. First, thirty-nine years ago, with a new master's degree, I was a young adult starting a career in state government finance. As a newcomer in a small socially conservative midwestern city, I joined a local UU congregation, mainly for community, or so I thought. I got involved. In the local community I also volunteered for a domestic violence shelter, created and led programs for a gay and bisexual men's fellowship, and helped out in upstart political campaigns, all of which were defeated. I had a good job, and it was interesting at first, but I grew to feel bored with it—not really called to it as a career. I thought about several other career fields. "I wonder what job would combine what I'm good at with what I love? Maybe the ministry?" I asked myself. It was interesting, but I wasn't sure I could do that. After two years, I mentioned this to Mary, our minister. She asked me good questions, talked about her own experience, and told me about other ministers she knew. She encouraged me to think about it.

The next year I got a job transfer to the city of Chicago. I enjoyed exploring so much of what that big city had to offer, including theater, music, museums, volunteer organizations, and bars that closed at two in the morning. I put ideas of ministry on the back burner. But after I got involved in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Unitarian Church of Chicago, my interest in the ministry started to come back. When I told lay leaders about this, they were encouraging. Our minister, Charlie, gave me more things to do. Perhaps he knew that more experience in the church would help to clarify my sense of calling or at least satisfy my curiosity. I spoke about my interest with other ministers, with friends in and out of the congregation, and with my therapist at the time.

Then a special moment happened. At church one evening I attended the ceremony of ordination of a man in our church who was entering the ministry after a career in higher education. Actually, by then I was the president of the board of the church, so I led the congregation in speaking the words of ordination. However, that's not what made me cry with recognition of my call to the ministry.

Instead, the tears came when his mentor, an eloquent woman who had been the supervising minister at his internship congregation, spoke to him what is called the Charge to the Minister—it's sort of like a prayer, and a blessing... and a charge. As she spoke to him, heart to heart, I felt a lump in my throat. I knew I could not put this off any longer. That experience took place a full five years after my first inklings about the ministry. On reflection, this has helped me to realize that when we have those moments of strong emotion, those times when something catches in our throat, it's worth paying attention to them. It's worth taking some time in silence to think about the feeling, maybe write about it. And of course, it's worth talking to people who know how to listen, people you trust.

Everybody's process of discernment is not the same. It's easy to project our own experience, assumptions, or judgments onto someone else's timeline. From the outside it may seem like another person is having a sudden epiphany out of nowhere. For example, I know some UU ministers who felt and heard their call to ministry after one or two visits to a UU

church. However, I don't know what their discernment experience was like. Their apparently quick epiphany might have been in the works for a very long time.

My own realization took as long as it needed to take. I'm grateful to the people who listened to me, asked me questions, and gave me thoughtful suggestions. I'm glad I took the time to clarify what I needed to do.

Five years ago, however, I realized that I needed to *stop* doing something. I'm talking about my abuse of alcohol and my dependency on it.

As a child I was no stranger to alcoholism, especially with my father, an uncle, and a neighbor. In college and graduate school, I drank every weekend. In spite of the damage and pain my family had experienced and watched around us, my relatives thought that getting drunk and sick was a merely an amusing rite of passage for a young man. So did I.

In my 20s and 30s I hung out in bars a few nights a week, not to mention weekend parties. A couple of times a year I got sick with a hangover that lasted a whole day. In my 40s and 50s, I didn't stay up late anymore, so I would try to manage my intake at home. This didn't always work out well. And sometimes at parties or dinners, a friend might say: Are you okay to drive home? The answer to this question was likely to be: "Oh, sure I am." That's because overdrinking affects judgment, self-awareness, and honesty.

I found so many excuses to drink. When I was bored, when I was lonely, when I was with other people. When I was tired at the end of a long day of work, I deserved a drink—well two or three.

Ten years ago, I began giving up alcohol for Lent, which is a month and a half long. Often people choose to give up something or add a new discipline in the Lenten season. A few years later, I also gave up drinking during Advent. (That's the four weeks before Christmas.) One December, at a session with my spiritual director, I proudly announced that I had again started this practice of abstaining. "Are you concerned about your drinking?" she asked me. *No, not really*, I said. *Well, sometimes I overdo it*.

A year later I said again that I was abstaining in December. She asked me the same question: "Are you concerned about your drinking?" Then she said to me that friends of hers who are now in recovery have told her that they used to take breaks from their drinking in order to show themselves that they didn't have a problem with it. *Huh*, I said. *Hmm*.

Around that time, somebody gave me a book to put in my pastoral care library, in case it might help someone who is questioning their use of alcohol. Entitled *This Naked Mind*, it's written by Annie Grace. The author looks at the psychological, neurological, and physical factors of alcohol use. She explores the cultural position that alcohol holds and its social appeal.

Two of her points struck me the most. One is that as a chemical, alcohol is a toxin. It's toxic at any level, she says, and at higher levels, it's damaging. Alcohol consumption is linked to some types of cancer, diabetes, heart issues, depression and anxiety. Her other memorable point is that alcohol is inherently addictive to humans. Whether you think that some people have an alcoholic personality and some don't—or not—it is an inherently addictive chemical.

I read that book on a quiet night in December of 2019, after I had begun my month of not drinking. As I read, I realized that I didn't need to start drinking again. This obviously didn't come out of nowhere. After years of self-deception, I was now considering my behaviors

honestly. I was reflecting on the questions of a trusted professional who had only my well-being in mind.

And at her suggestion, I started going to meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous. In those meetings I learned that my epiphany was indeed a quiet one, compared to the stories I've heard from people whose only alternatives had become either to stop drinking or to die drinking. Hitting bottom is what it's called. This can include losing one's job, car, driver's license, house, or marriage.

When I heard such tragic stories, it was easy to tell myself that I didn't belong there. I had little in common with a group of people gathered to support one another in their sobriety, I thought. However, my spiritual director suggested that, instead of getting *hung up* on the differences I perceived between myself and others, maybe I could listen for the commonalities I shared with others. So I kept going. It took a year for me to begin to notice those commonalities.

Whether it's alcohol abuse or any other kind of addiction, it is often called a disease of isolation. By abusing alcohol, I avoided being authentic—and that *is* isolation. One of my gradual epiphanies was that the ways I was using alcohol had to do with discomfort with myself and discomfort around other people. It affected how I navigated relationships with other people.

Eventually I was invited to tell my story of sobriety at a meeting. I told the group that I don't think I had ever hit bottom, but I had been hovering over the bottom for a very long time. The longer I did so, the less peaceful I felt. The less I was able to imagine a happy future. Now, however, I feel good about my life and hopeful about my future. I feel free. Afterwards, people thanked me for my story. Some told me they could relate. I found myself participating in what my spiritual director calls a listening community.

This information may be a surprise to many of you who have known me for a long time. Don't feel bad. I've been to hundreds of AA meetings by now, and most people there don't even know that I'm a minister. It can be surprising to me too. It is a surprise that it took me till age 58 to have the realization that I needed to make a big change in order to be my true self.

However, with the support of listening friends and listening professionals, and by taking time for self-reflection, writing, meditation, and prayer, I was able to act on that realization. And, one day at a time, as we say, I've been doing it for five years and 36 days. If this is news to you, I hope you won't feel self-conscious around me, because it's old news for me.

In this sermon I've given you some examples of my gradual epiphanies: one thing that I needed to do with my life, and another thing that I needed to stop doing. My journey of discernment is unique to me, of course. But the choice to engage in discernment is an invitation for all of us.

In Courtney's personal reflection earlier, she told us about her discernment which led to a realization about accepting a world that has a lot more *gray* in it than it has black and white, and the need for her to cultivate empathy toward other people. As Courtney put it, she "realized that the most important discovery, or epiphany, [she's] ever had was a gradual realization and appreciation, for other people's experiences."

No matter how dramatic or striking they are when they show up, epiphanies and realizations take time, and they need space. Amid the demands of life and the distractions of political upheavals, consumer culture, smart phones and social media, it will take intention and

support to open up to the stirrings of the spirit. It will take some time for quiet and reflection, and some time spent with trusted listeners.

We can allow the spirit of discernment to do its work in us... if we remain patient and pay attention to the true voice inside us. It can happen if we consider our lives from the perspective of the holy, the perspective of the great web of life. And it can happen—for us—if we stay open to feedback and questions in a community of trust. Discernment is not about quick answers, even if the moment when we finally understand the answer feels dazzling and moving to us.

As we begin this new calendar year, I wonder what questions are waiting in your soul. What could the blessed spirit of your life be prompting in your mind and heart? What is waiting to be revealed?

Let us all consider this new year an invitation to discernment—not a resolution, not an assignment, just an invitation. May we be so blessed—you and me and the whole wide world. May all be blessed with openness and curiosity, with clarity and understanding, with freedom and with peace. So may it be. Amen.

#### Worship Associate's Reflection by Courtney [delivered before the sermon]

One of the definitions of epiphany, according to Mirriam-Webster, is “an illuminating discovery, realization, or disclosure”. Thinking about how this might apply to my life, I realized that the most important discovery, or epiphany, I've ever had was a gradual realization and appreciation, for other people's experiences.

That may seem like a simple or obvious thing to become aware of – of course everyone has their own experience and perspective. But looking back on myself, when I was younger, I can see how dogmatic I was in my own perspective. I tended to have very rigid, black and white viewpoints about the world. As a result, I could be judgmental when I encountered experiences that were different from my own. Sometimes, I lacked empathy for what someone else may have been going through.

As I grew older, I grew in experience. I had to navigate situations as simple as being on the losing side of an argument, or as complex as realizing that sometimes there's no reason why something bad happened – it just did. Or seeing that there can be multiple ways to understand a situation, with no clear answer.

I find myself now more aware than ever that my experience and perspectives are my own, and they are valuable – but that I learn and connect more with people when someone is willing to share their own experiences with me. To realize that someone trusts me enough to tell me part of their story, or give me another perspective I hadn't considered, is a gift. I realize, as I get older, that I work to be someone who is trustworthy, empathetic, and safe, so that others will not be afraid to share their experiences with me. This has been my epiphany. It was not sudden – it took years to put it into words.

A couple of years ago, I wrote something I call “The Gray,” a poem or prayer, if you will, about this experience:

## The Gray

I'm sanding my rough edges  
And trying to descend  
From the hill that I kept dying on;  
I'm trying to make amends.  
My breath, it comes out ragged  
I'm unsure of what to say  
As I start to move from black and white  
To living in the gray.

So rigid and inflexible,  
Unable to see the skew.  
Burn down the house to build up myself  
And my limited point of view.  
But after I'd reached a breaking point,  
And saw I'd lost my way,  
The color faded from my world,  
Leaving shades of gray

Now, trying to grow past myself  
And listen more than speak.  
To realize that compromise  
Is not a sign I'm weak.  
Heavy grief is no excuse  
No matter what it may weigh.  
My hurt hurt others with absolutes  
When I couldn't see shades of gray

I burned my oldest bridges  
and I'm learning how to swim.  
Leaving one shore for another,  
and scrubbing off some sins.  
I'm don't know where I'm headed,  
But I'm grateful along the way -  
Striving beyond the black and white  
And ever toward the gray.