

## **Opening Words**

We are here

*at the end of the month of May*

to worship, to praise new things

*while remaining rooted in heritage.*

We begin our time of word, silence and song

*with these words*

**As we move through this year of transition and joy, we remember with gratitude the power of our living heritage, which moves through time like a clear running creek; refreshing us with the sweet draughts of courage, hope, justice-making, peaceful living, ever deeper honesty, and more truthful loving. And so we have kindled this light in thanksgiving.**

**Story:** *Jacob and Esau and the Dream*

Once upon a time, a long, long time ago,  
there were two brothers.

One was named Jacob and one was name Esau.

They were twins, babies born at the same time.

But they were not the kind of twins who looked like each other.

They were very different from each other.

They were VERY, VERY different from each other.

They liked to do very different things.

They spoke with different words.

They liked different people.

Esau liked to spend time with his father.

Jacob liked to spend time with his mother.

The loved each other, but they sometimes fought.

Sometimes they fought a lot.

Sometimes they played tricks on each other, and made each other really mad.

As they grew older, Esau stopped playing so many tricks on Jacob. But Jacob never stopped, and kept it up.

One day, when they were teenagers, Jacob really did something terrible to Esau. He told a terrible lie to him, and tricked him, and stole something that was very, very important to him.

Esau was really angry. REALLY, REALLY angry. He shouted. He waved his hands.

“Jacob, you have to grow up. You cannot keep on tricking me and lying to me. But you don’t ever seem to want to grow up. Right now, I am so mad I don’t like you at all. I am going away, and I don’t want to spend time with you anymore. Goodbye.”

So Esau told his parents that since he was old enough, he was going to go out camping for a while.

They didn’t know what happened, but they could see Esau was upset. They thought maybe if he spent some time by himself he would feel better.

Well, Esau had been SO angry, that Jacob became frightened, and he left too. He told his parents that he wanted to go camping too. So left his home and wandered around all day until he had gone far into the desert. He tried to tell himself that Esau was just being mean, but as he walked and walked he kept feeling something funny in the pit of his stomach.

He wondered. Was Esau right? Did he need to grow up?

Finally, he was so tired he needed to sleep. So he took a blanket out of his backpack, and used a sort of long round rock covered with his

jacket as a pillow to support his neck on the rough ground. And he fell asleep.

While he slept, he dreamed. And he dreamed of a steep staircase, almost as steep as a ladder, going all the way up to the beautiful, beautiful stars. There must have been a thousand steps he thought. And on the steps he could see people climbing up and down the stairs, very carefully, one step at a time.

Then he woke up. The stars were there, but there was no staircase. But then he wondered if the staircase was inside him instead of outside of him. He wondered if he should be climbing the stairs carefully one at a time. He wondered if he could climb so high he could see things clearer and better.

When he got back home, Esau was still upset. And things were not OK with them for a long time. Jacob grew up and Esau grew up and both of them happened to get married. And during all this time, Jacob kept on climbing the inner stair case. One step...he stopped tricking people. Another step. He looked at his own anger. Another step. He wondered why he wanted to make his brother mad. Another step. He realized his brother had been right. Finally, after many years, Jacob went to find his brother. He came to a river, and there was his brother on the other side. He called to him. Esau answered back. And he smiled. He too had been climbing the staircase inside of him, and asking questions. He too wondered about his anger and his tricks. They both waded into the river and met in the middle of it, and they hugged each other. "I'm sorry," said Jacob. "I was mean to you." "I am over it," said Esau. "I love you, my brother. Its time to make up for all the time we lost."

And they did, brothers who were friends until the end of their days. They were still different. They still liked different people, did different things. But they both grew up, following the rule of love, the rule of honesty, the rule of kindness, instead of the rule of anger, lying and fighting.

## Sequence

I think of the young men and women  
who live in harm's way, who hear gunshots  
and wonder if their next heartbeat is their last.  
I think of the teachers who ache for vacation,  
the students who have stopped learning now.  
I think of the folks distorted by their addictions,  
fighting uphill battles, wandering the streets, or the mazes of their  
lives.

I think of those I know and those I do not know  
who are facing health problems...dizziness,  
or ringing, or aches in joints they didn't know  
they had. I think of their bewilderment and fear.

I think of those who are out of work, or who  
hate their jobs, or who wish they hadn't retired.

I think of those who love their work, or work too much, or who have  
too many irons in the fire.

I think of those who paint, or sing, or dance, or write poetry, and I  
think of those who are blocked in their art and just can't move  
forward.

I think of those who are highly structured, and I think of those who are  
spontaneous, and feel constrained by structure.  
I think of those who take time to think, and those who respond with  
feelings first and want to burst.

I think of those who know betrayal and disappointment, and I think of  
those who know love and surprise and unexpected joy.

I think of the music to come...but I think about welcoming the silence  
first.

## *silence*

I think of all those who have shepherded me to this very moment of grace and joy: those who loved me even when I was hard to love, those I have loved even when they were hard to love, even those strangers who have been there for me in far away places, and those who now live in my heart. I think of them, I think of their names and say them aloud or within.

## *naming*

I think of the training, the practice, the skill and the passion behind the music. I think of the composer, the influences, the rhythm of the heart behind it all. I think of how lucky I am to live!

## **Readings**

*The First Reading is a poem by the great Pacific Northwest poet, David Whyte, who wrote this poem back in the 1990's. Poet Whyte works with business and corporations, helping leaders there find the poetry in their own work. The title is Seven Steps for Coming Home. And there is a subtitle too...a phrase from the German poet Rilke: Oh, pure contradiction!*

One step to take notice  
the next one to look and to praise  
the third to be praised  
the fourth is, strangely, for love  
the fifth is to be,  
caught between water and sky.

The sixth is return  
the seventh unspeakable  
except in one small stolen poem  
flawed by the heart, spoken to one other  
in secret never to be said again.

After this look down at the paper  
And see who is writing.  
Your hands only your hands

A pure contradiction,  
a pure blessing.  
Everything you learned  
has come to nothing.

**The Second Reading** *is a list of New Rules I received from the nationally well know interventionist, Julie Kelly. David Whyte had seven steps for returning to a healthier self. Julie offers us nine new rules to help us along the way.*

1. Mistakes are essential to learning.
2. You get to practice.
3. You can be accountable.
4. Nobody can do it right all the time.
5. You are not defective.
6. You can develop skills, not defences.
7. People will be there for you.
8. You are not accountable to unspoken rules.
9. Personhood is the most important thing you have.

## Sermon

Several times now in my preaching history here  
I have mentioned the intervention I was privileged to join at my  
former congregation.

It was the new sort of intervention, not for the alcoholic alone, but for  
the whole family and community surrounding him or her.

As minister of the couple whose son was in deep trouble, I spent four  
days with the whole family  
from grandma to wife to step-brother to parents and step-parent. I  
learned, in the high language of the Dao Dejing, “ten thousand

things,” things I had never even imagined before about the human heart, the human mind, the tricks and graces of the soul, the urgings and resistances of the body. Especially in regard to addictive substances or addictive behaviors.

Most people have at least heard of the *12 steps* approach to addictions, you know, the Alcoholics Anonymous approach, and Narcotics Anonymous approach. The *12 steps* are both praised and critiqued, (like everything else in the world that I can think of,) but there are certainly many millions, including folks within this congregation, who are glad to say how much these steps helped them in their healing, their step by step climb toward health. And this, even if they do keep a few theological critiques in their pocket.

The idea that healing, recovery, spiritual maturity, or the path of wholeness, is not some sudden miracle but a gradual process is hardly new, nor did it originate with AA back in the early twentieth century. The word “gradual” itself is only an English form of the Latin “gradus” which means *step*. And I think you’ll agree, the idea of wholeness being a step-by-step program is the basis of all language and mathematical education. You cannot read Goethe until you practice at the language lab for years. You cannot solve for “x” until you know what 2x2 is. Physical therapy takes it one step at a time, too. You start slowly at first, and build up to the harder stretches. Olympic gymnasts don’t go from relaxing in a chair to the “iron cross” without many practice steps along the way. And no one plays the piano or tuba or piccolo without learning the technique one step at a time.

In the world of spirituality, both religious and secular, you will find check-lists or steps to help you on your way. Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, created a set of Spiritual Exercises that is used to this very day. The Jewish medieval *Kabbalah* speaks of steps of learning, just as the Buddhists speak of the eight-fold path, or some Hindu’s speak of meditating on the various charkas, or symbolic centers rising from the base of the spine to the top of the skull.



In my high school years, as I went through the various yoga postures, I often reflected on this symbolic ladder in my back. My Fellowship Committee colleague, the wonderful P.D. Wadler, a Unitarian Universalist psychologist from Chicago, understands the very Principles and Purposes of our own religious organization to be a set of spiritual exercises....since they begin at the first principle by asking us to meditate on our inherent worth as individuals, and they end with the seventh principle, which asks us to recognize that we are interconnected with all living things, and are part of, not sovereigns of, a larger spiritual context called the universe.

And this idea of spiritual steps, of checklists, if you will, inviting our maturity, is not just related to religions or organizations. Individual poets seem to have grasped this idea too. The amazing poet, novelist and heretic Nikos Kazantzakis, (who earned a solemn excommunication from his Greek Orthodox church for daring to write the “*Last Temptation of Christ*,”) also wrote a book called the *Spiritual Exercises*, which deeply influenced me in my teens. And the lovely poem by David Whyte which you heard this morning suggests a personal vision, listing seven steps we might take to enable us to “come home” to our more mature self.

His steps are as follows:

1. to take notice, or as Thich Naht Hahn says,  
“Be mindful,” as we move through the world.
2. to look and to praise; this is a call to  
revere instead of walk by unconsciously,  
a compact form of the famous line in the  
novel “*The Color Purple*” which suggests  
that not to appreciate the color purple when  
you see it
3. to dare to accept praise yourself, you know,  
by simply saying “thank you” and without denying it by saying “aw  
shuck, its nothing.”  
It IS something.
4. strange as it seems, he maintains, its always



- possible to develop more skills in loving;
5. *to be* he says, living “between water and sky” instead of running around like the proverbial chicken *doing* things all the time.
  6. to actually return, which means going back to look over your life, remembering you cannot approach the future if you ignore the nature of the paths by which you are getting there;
  7. to accept the mystery at the heart of the journey, accepting that steps and lists and words themselves are all insufficient when compared to the mystery of relating to each other directly and emotionally, face to face.

Then he adds, interestingly, look at your hands! look at yourself as a real physical entity, not a symbol or subject of theology, but as something solid, flesh and blood, a person, not a metaphor. The poet concludes with the most marvelous and daring line:

*Everything you learned  
has come to nothing.*

In other words, you are probably going to have to *unlearn* unhealthy habits and reactions at the same time you learn better, more healthy ways to approach the world and your life. you have to both climb and descend the steps.

And this very idea is embedded in the Western Scriptures in the famous story of Jacob and the staircase to the sky. The spiritual we sang this morning talks about Jacob’s Ladder, which is the King James’ mistranslation of the Hebrew “sullah” which means a stepped ramp, or steep staircase, like the ones that you could find on a Babylonian step-pyramid called a *ziggurat*. In the Biblical story, Jacob dreams of this giant staircase going not to the top of a pyramid, butr all the way up to the sky, beyond the clouds and into the stars,

with what he called in the biblical text “God’s messengers” climbing up and down each step carefully, way up high in the clouds.

This dream to me is clearly a symbolic picture which invites spiritual growth and maturity from the young and rather obnoxious Jacob. You don’t grow up suddenly, the vision says, you grow and mature step by step. You take it one step at a time, not two. You have to go down as well as up. You cannot rush this. I mean, what’s the need? Life is hardly a contest or anything.

In the story, Jacob goes through many adventures and misadventures, ascending and descending his dream staircase all the while.

Until, many decades later, he is reconciled to his brother Esau. The actual biblical text is quite surprising, actually. Jacob has so come to revere his mature brother Esau that he calls him a “god,” the only time I can think of in the Hebrew scriptures when a mere human being is appreciated with such a divine evaluation.

And in so many ways, this is wise. For when a person refuses to spiritually grow, whether by some step process I’ve listed, or by some other way, if structured exercises and steps are not to your liking, there is a tendency to slip into treating others as symbols, not unique human beings, or as means to an end, not an end in and of themselves. The goal of spiritual growth, it seems to me, whether or not theism is your metaphysic, is to at least learn to revere the preciousness, the inherent worth, the divinity, if you will, glowing within each person.

Which is why I like the meditative steps offered by Julie Kelly so much. Julie was the interventionist in the family intervention I described at the beginning of this sermon. She is one of the wisest and most powerful persons I have ever met, and she knows her business, believe you me. I spent four days with this family, and the outcome, by the way, was terrific, the young man detoxing, and then going on to work in the same sort of work himself after a while. He has been clean and sober 10 years now.

Part of the process was to educate the family about other factors involved in addiction besides biological factors. Perfectionism, lack of self-esteem and other signs of wounding to the soul often accompany those struggling with such problems. They often also accompany the friends, family and society around them. It is because of these wounds to the soul, or heart, or mind, or psyche or self...choose your vocabulary... that I speak of *healing* at all, the move from fragmentedness and woundedness to wholeness.

Even if addiction is not a problem for you, you may recognize some of these wounds as your own. The world is hardly divided between the perfectly whole and the utterly broken. As Buddha reminded us, brokenness, pain and loss are simply the cost of being alive, not punishments for evil behavior. His eightfold path was his suggestion for steps that might be taken to address this truth. Julie Kelly, although certainly supportive of the traditional 12 steps ---and all of their non-theist, feminist and other permutations---was convinced that other issues needed to be faced step-by-step too.

And so she offered us this set of New Rules you heard earlier, rules to help define our daily practices, and to each serve as a focus for our meditations and daily thoughts. I find them most helpful, and use them often to re-center myself.

Oh, sure, I know the old adage “rules are meant to be broken.” And I realize that in a Unitarian Universalist church in particular, the very concept of “rule” makes some people wince.

They would rather try and draw their straight lines and curves without those little plastic rulers to guide them. They would rather that people spoke of disciplines or suggestions, rather than rules.

Well, I’m a Unitarian Universalist too, and frankly, I like the idea of rules. Because I have not been a minister for 30 years without noticing that almost everyone I have ever met moves to a set of *unspoken* rules whether they admit it or not. Rules like: “It’s

important to notice me; so, notice me.” Rules like: “I should be first.” Rules like: “Play fair, which means ‘do not exclude me.’” Rules like “My mother treated me that way. You had better not, even though you never met my mother.” Rules like “Things should never change.” Rules like “Don’t upset the apple cart.” Rules like “If something bad...or good... happens to me, I must have *deserved* it.”

Julie’s rules seem a lot healthier than these rules. They were written to override and supplant many of these other rules, unconscious as they are, so that life can be lived more consciously, and on healthier ground.

Like her rule #1: “Mistakes are essential to learning.” Seems obvious, but if there is anything of the perfectionist in you...and there is plenty of perfectionist attitudes in me...the *unwritten* rule that needs to be replaced is this: “Mistakes are a sign that you have failed, and are not up to doing this.”

So to offer a rule which says “Mistakes are *essential* to learning” is to say something down right revolutionary.

Or, to say “You get to practice,” rule #2. Note the phrasing: “You **GET** to practice.” In other words, the language lab is not a torture chamber, the piano scales are not the rack....but both are privileges. Honors. And look, lets leave the verbs and musical instruments aside...and imagine practicing love-making techniques, practicing sewing, practicing cooking, practicing dating...these and a thousand more are all privileges. And please remember rule number one as you practice rule number two “Mistakes are essential to learning.”

But, she says in rule or step #3, you can be held accountable. In other words, life-practice is serious. It’s not just a game, with everyone falling down laughing their heads off at the end of the game. Life is serious, and people can be hurt by our mistakes, even though making them is essential to our learning. To grow up spiritually is to face that and know that this is part of life, unpleasant as it may seem.

But in rule #4, a most important step, she reminds us that NO ONE can get it right all the time. The important word in that sentence is No One. That is, we are all, every one of us, on entirely equal footing in this regard. Not only is perfectionism a waste of our time, but we can't be perfect even if we work at it for the rest of our lives. It's just not possible. This is the rule that lets the steam out of the pressure cooker once and for all.

But, she says, even though we can't be perfect, that does not mean we are, therefore, defective, that we are losers, born into sin, miserable wretches.

Which means, next step, that we don't have to defend ourselves, since we are not worthless.

It's more important to hone our relationship skills, to study them, practice them, to learn how to be direct, kind, non-judgmental, patient, honest, balanced, and to work on not feeling threatened and wound up even in the presence of people we personally find unpleasant. Skills, the rule says, not defenses. A simple rule, but a tough one for many of us, I'd wager.

Then there is the matter of faith. Trust. Not the religious understanding of faith. But the necessary faith that people will be there for you is the seventh rule. Not because of supernatural compulsion, but because they are human, and most folks know we are all in this together. Oh, sure, you can work hard on developing your cynicism muscles if you want, and label everyone in the world as completely untrustworthy, but then I would have to ask you "whatever for?" Is this some defense? Do you think you will win some prize for isolating yourself behind a studied and committed faithlessness? I testify clearly that even when I was convinced that I had disappointed everyone, I still found folks showed up in my life. I can be as hard on myself as anyone in this room, I assure you, and can come up with plenty of reasons why folks should stay away, but they still come.

But even though there are many trustworthy people in the world, there remain many folks too who have not developed a great deal of mindfulness, or consciousness about their inner lives. They make rules, for you, for me, based on things that happened in their past days and act as if that should be perfectly obvious. This rule---#8...you are not accountable to unspoken rules--- affirms that it isn't at all perfectly obvious. So if someone seems hard bent on wounding you for not following their unspoken, utterly un-communicated and often utterly irrational rules, you are *not* accountable. There is no reason why you and I have to go through hoops we don't even know are there. Again, this is a wise step to take in our lives...to discern the real from the false, and to always relate realistically even to the false.

Lastly, Julie's 9<sup>th</sup> rule states that Personhood is the most important thing you have. Personhood. Your uniqueness. Your own story. Which is not anyone else's story. Which is not what you own nor what you lack, but who you are, and who you are becoming, as you grow deeper.

Whether we are fighting addiction or not, whether we use the word spiritual or not, whether we are part of a tradition or a questioner of all traditions, I'd still say that the maturing of our soul, our character, our self...again, choose your word... is not some luxury, but our calling, not something extra, but something basic.

Climb Jacob's ladder. Or spiral Sarah's circle.  
Or use other language you like. But let us grow together, and move toward, if not finally achieve, wholeness.

### **Memorial Prayer of the Heart**

O Heart of my heart,  
Life of my life,  
Singer of the song that is this moment!  
My heart moves through the world.  
My heart moves through the years.  
My heart bends.

It bends before those who gave their lives  
while fighting. Their lives were infinitely precious.  
It bends before those who lived and died  
amidst the fighting, civilians in an unfortunate place in an  
unfortunate time.  
Their lives were precious, infinitely so.  
It bends before those who wail, who sing  
laments, who chant the *requiem*, the *kaddish*,  
the psalm of David or fourfold *takbir*, who  
lift their fist, who scream, who suffer hurt.  
Their lives are infinitely precious.  
And my heart bends, bends to the ground  
before those who struggle to make peace  
from sunrise to sunset, who create covenants of peace and leave  
angry strife behind, though  
it costs them plenty to do so.  
How precious their every breath,  
their every heartbeat.  
Alleluia.  
Justice, come. Harmony, come. Strength,  
come. Love, come, & be signed by this our song.

**Song: Perfect Singer**