"The All of It"
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
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How often do you laugh? According to sources, young children laugh around 300-400 times a day whereas a forty-year old laughs an average of 4 times a day. Startling, isn't it?! Except, that when you dig a bit deeper, there seems to be more repeated quotes about these statistics than actual citations linked to scientific studies. *It's always important to check your sources, right?!*

Whether or not the source of the statistic is scientific, I find it striking that it seems to resonate. "Kids laugh *a lot* more than adults" seems like a 'true' statement. What does that say about our sense of what it means to be an adult?

There's a new phrase that's become popular in recent years: *adulting.* Have you heard of it? On Urban Dictionary (a crowd-sourced online dictionary), the top definition for adulting is:

> Adulting (v): to carry out one or more of the duties and responsibilities expected of fully developed individuals (paying off that credit card **debt**, settling beef **without** blasting social media, etc). Exclusively used by those who **adult** less than 50% of the time.

Another entry defines adulting as:

> Adulting (v): to do grown up things and hold responsibilities such as, a **9-5 job**, a mortgage/rent, a **car** payment, or anything else that makes one think of grown ups.
>
> *Used in a sentence: **Jane** is adulting quite well **today** as she is on time for **work** promptly at 8am and appears well groomed.*

Sure makes adulting sound like fun, huh?!?! I especially like the suggestion that those who describe their behavior as "adulting" are those that do not in fact "adult" all of the time. Certainly part of my own fascination with this word is how well is does capture the tenuous steps into adult responsibility that young adults make. It makes visible just how much responsibilities adults are expected to take on.

Hopefully kids and teens do not need to feel responsible for the 'big' stuff like food, shelter, and taxes. But as adults, our responsibilities often increase not only in number, but also in

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consequence. If we don't show up for work, maybe it's not just ourselves who go hungry, but also our spouse or kids who end up homeless.

Responsibilities can be tough. They curtail our options for how to spend our time or our money. They show up day after day or year after year asking for our attention and energy. On some days, we might look out the window at children playing nearby and wonder . . . when is the last time I laughed like that? Or felt so unburdened?

Sometimes it is not only the specific responsibilities of our own lives that feel wearisome, but also the sense of responsibility for our shared world. We read the news—local or national—and feel a sense that we should *do* something. We should do something about deportations or school shootings. Do something about climate change or racism. And, in fact, we may find ways to take action and *do* something that makes a positive difference. Yet, even as we take action, the ongoing flow of problems can feel relentless like the drip of a broken faucet. Or, maybe even like the rush of a waterfall as large as Niagara Falls.

But, is this the whole picture? Is this adulting—taking on responsibilities until you realize that its too much? That you're never going to control the flow of the world's problems . . . and maybe not even your own. That you come to see the world for what it is as a broken place full of hurting people.

Yes, this is the world. Sorrow permeates our lives. Injustices litter the landscape. These are pervasive parts of life. *And* they are <u>not</u> all of our lives or our shared world. Comingled with sorrow, real joy exists. Nestled among the injustices, there are generous and brave acts of compassion and love. We live within this tension of joys and sorrows, of love and injustice, of kindness and indifference.

Understand within the context of this tension, our weekly ritual of sharing joys and sorrows is so much more than a time for personal announcements. By inviting us to share *both* our joys *and* our sorrows, we engage in a spiritual practice that teaches us to acknowledge the all of it. All that is our lives.

Within the wider Unitarian Universalist community, there are many critics of the ritual of joys and sorrows—especially when practiced as an open mic time as we do the ritual. The critics say that worship is a time for corporate worship, a time that defines our shared identity, and not a time for individuals' stories, nor a time for the extraverts to hijack the airtime. Perhaps you share some of these concerns—and they do point to problems that can arise. It certainly is a risky move to simply open the floor to a room full of people with no idea of what might happen next.

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Still, I see the ritual differently. I do think it *is* a time that creates a shared identity. The invitation to share *both* joys *and* sorrows recognizes that life is all of it—the good and the bad, the struggles and the celebrations, the mundane and the extraordinary. Bringing these all into one ritual challenges the notion that life should only be good and we should keep our struggles hidden and private. At the same time, the ritual refuses to accept that life is *only* struggle or that all is bad, depraved, hopeless, and lost. Suffering and sorrow do not have the only word. Joy breaks in and boldly holds its own place.

Nor do I see the ritual as necessarily individualistic. By speaking our individual truth into the community, we are reminded that we are not alone in our experiences of life. While the details of each persons joy or sorrow may be unique in some ways, in many ways the spoken stories so often speak to our shared stories. We too have felt loss and grief. We too have felt delight and relief.

There *is* a careful balance of the individual and the community. We ask that those who share be brief, to share in just a sentence or two, so that space remains for others to speak as well as for the other elements of the service. *Not to mention the need to not delay the ever-important ritual of Coffee Hour!* Indeed, in some larger congregations, the ritual looks different in order to accommodate both the number of those wishing to share and the carefully choreographed programming that is also deeply meaningful to many.

Even so, I value the sharing of joys and sorrows as a widespread ritual in our Unitarian Universalist tradition and here at First Parish. It speaks to a way of being in the world—a spiritual vision that is open to the fullness of life; that neither shrinks away from hard stuff, nor succumbs to hopelessness; a vision that cultivates gratitude and paying attention to what is good and joyful in life. This is the all of it. No simple bifurcation of good and bad, joys and sorrows, but the comingled reality of moving through life in the tension between all of it.

At any given moment, I suspect every one relates a bit differently to this tension. Some of us may be feeling buoyant and happy with life; while others really struggled just to show up today. We also inevitably vary in our willingness or ability to share where we are at with others. Sometimes we're just not ready to talk about it. Sometimes all we really want is a listening ear. Part of living into our covenant to care for one another is carefully considering how to best support another—or to reach out for support ourselves.

Wherever we may be at in this moment in our lives, we came here today bringing all of it with us. And this is why I believe First Parish and communities like ours matter so much. We matter as a place to care for those who are sick, grieving, or feeling alone. We matter as

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a place to celebrate not only the birth of children or weddings, but also landing a new job, enjoying time with friends, or working together to do some good in the world. We matter because adulting and our responsibilities can wear us down. We need moments that renew our energies, remind us to laugh, and refresh our vision for who we are and what we might be able to do with our lives.

And we matter as an institution beyond our individual needs. Institution can sound like a stodgy and serious word. But all that I mean by it is that First Parish in Wayland has been here in this town since the beginning of European settlement. We have been at this corner and in this building for more than 200 years. We have had a role to play in the local community for centuries.

For example, not long after this Meetinghouse was dedicated, the minister at the time, Rev. John Burt Wight, led the congregation into the emerging liberal religion of Unitarian Christianity. We continue to be an important liberal religious voice in the community—flying our rainbow flag, leading responses to the hate mail received by the Islamic Center last year, and, most recently, hosting a bus to the upcoming March for Our Lives event to support the movement for less gun violence. As long as neighbors and communities continue to struggle with how to dwell together in a shared world, I believe that we will need community institutions like First Parish where people can come together and wrestle with what do we do…what kind of world do we want to build?

I love religious community. There are so few places where we can show up with all of who we are. Where we can be renewed. Where we can care for one another…and be cared for. Where we can work together to make a better world.

Even so, I have no illusions that we are a perfect place or perfect people. Nor do I think that everyone is always happy all of the time. But that's ok. That too is part of the all of it that brings us here. For more than 375 years, the members of this community have come together in their shared values and belief *AND* in their differences to support this congregation. This year, we are asking for your support once again—not only in your financial gifts, but also by sharing your reflections about our strengths and our future.

In his poem, "Long-Haul People," UU Minister Rudy Nemser expresses the importance of those who support a congregation year after year. These long-haul people show up with their pocketbooks and their casseroles. They teach religious education classes, work on the building, and show up on Sunday. When asked, they contribute their opinions to the ongoing projects and the work of the congregation. As Nemser writes,

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Individuals and fashions
arrive and pass.
The church—their church—will be here, steady and hale.
For a long. Long time.
It will.
For long-haul people bless a church
With a very special blessing.

Whether you are a long-haul supporter of First Parish or a first-time giver, your contributions to this community are what makes this place continue and thrive. This place matters to so many in ways that are small and in ways that transform lives. It is because of you that First Parish continues to exist, continues to make a difference in people's lives, and continues to dream about what more we can do in the future.

This isn't a rote appeal, nor an empty ritual of asking for money because it's that time of year. This is my expression of gratitude for all that you do to support First Parish. This is my affirmation of the all that we bring here to share with one another and beyond our walls. The struggles and the celebrations. The tears and the laughter. The all of it.

So may it be.
Amen

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