

## **The Art of Authenticity**

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### **Reading**

#### **Our Deepest Fear**

*by Marianne Williamson*

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.  
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.  
It is our light, not our darkness  
That most frightens us.

We ask ourselves  
Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?  
Actually, who are you *not* to be?  
You are a child of God.

Your playing small  
Does not serve the world.  
There's nothing enlightened about shrinking  
So that other people won't feel insecure around you.

We are all meant to shine,  
As children do.  
We were born to make manifest  
The glory of God that is within us.  
It's not just in some of us;

It's in everyone.  
And as we let our own light shine,  
We unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.  
As we're liberated from our own fear,  
Our presence automatically liberates others.

## Sermon

June of 2009,  
The summer before my senior year in college  
I was exploring the idea of going to graduate school  
For my Masters in Divinity.  
I was twenty years old.  
I was serious about Unitarian Universalism  
I was clear that I wanted to become a minister  
And the question was...when?

That year, I went to our denomination's annual national gathering,  
General Assembly,  
In part to research theological schools  
But my main goal was to talk to other young adults who were in ministry.  
You see, at the time when I entered seminary  
Many people were becoming ministers much later in life  
What some people call "second career" ministers  
And "first career" ministers were much rarer,  
And especially those who became ministers before the age of thirty.  
The messages that I got through subtle and overt comments  
Were that I should get some "life experience" first—  
As though all of the life I had lived until that point were somehow not real—  
And "wait a few years".  
It wasn't exactly clear how long I should wait, just that I should.

And so, I wanted to hear from people who had become ministers in their twenties  
About what advice they had  
And what they thought of this idea of waiting, and for what, exactly.

I talked to several people that week  
But the one who stands out most was Michael.

Now, Michael was another young adult, maybe three or four years older than me.  
He was considering applying to seminary as well, in the next year or two  
And he caught wind that I was considering going to seminary  
Fresh out of college  
And sat me down in the giant conference center cafeteria to say  
"look. I really don't think you should go to seminary.  
You are too young.  
You can't possibly be mature enough to be a minister.  
You really should wait a few years, until you are older, and more mature, like me."

I was so angry.  
He didn't know me at all  
I hadn't asked him for his thoughts  
And he completely cut down my dream  
As though he knew me better than I knew myself

Better than those closest to me knew me.

Six months later, I did apply to seminary.  
And when I applied,  
I didn't tell a soul.  
Except, of course, for the people I had to ask to write recommendations for me.

Now that I was actually doing it  
Pursuing a dream and an intuition that this was the right next step for me  
That I belonged in seminary.  
My heart felt tender, vulnerable, like a tiny fledgling  
Needing protection and nurture  
Not quite ready for the cold harshness of the world.

I couldn't stomach the idea that I might be so vulnerable  
As to share that I had applied to seminary  
With anyone.  
What if the seminaries didn't want me? What if I wasn't good enough?  
What if I told someone that I had actually done it—  
I had actually taken the first step to become a minister—  
and they laughed at me?

For months I kept it a secret, until I no longer could  
Because I was about to graduate college  
And I needed to start making concrete plans,  
Until I was accepted and knew where I was going and had shared my news with a few close  
friends  
And then a few more  
None of whom laughed, of course.  
None of whom made me feel like I wasn't worthy  
Wouldn't be enough  
All of whom believed in me  
And in my calling to be a minister.

The fear of not being believed in  
Made me make myself small,  
Made me feel inadequate,  
Insecure.

In this week when the question of belief,  
And who to believe  
Has been so present in our nation  
I have been sitting with what it means to be believed  
And to be believed in.

And to be clear, let me say.  
I believe Dr. Ford.

I believe survivors of sexual violence.

It happens all too often that people are not believed  
Or their experience of what is real and true  
Is discounted  
Because they are young adults  
Because they are children  
Because they are women  
Because they are black  
Because they are brown  
Because they are not citizens  
Because it's her word against his  
Because they must not remember correctly  
Because it must not have been how they remember it  
Because that wasn't what was meant by it  
Because they are blowing it out of proportion.

And we have seen the effects of this kind of thinking, my friends.  
This kind of discounting of real people's experiences does real harm.

And what it does is that it makes the person  
being discounted or disbelieved  
less than human.  
It says "your lived reality is not as important as the story I want to believe."

In our Wonder Box, Jessica told the story  
Of Snuffleupagus,  
And how the characters of Sesame Street came to believe Big Bird about Snuffleupagus's  
existence.  
But here's the background.  
From 1971, when Snuffleupagus debuted, until 1985,  
Snuffy would shuffle out of the frame  
just as Big Bird had gathered others to come meet his friend.  
The producers initially left it ambiguous  
whether Snuffy was Big Bird's imaginary friend  
Or was just shy, and had bad timing,  
and the adults were preoccupied and missed him—  
which is funny, because if you've seen the show you know  
he is the most giant of the puppets.

And so the joke went for 14 years  
Playing with the concept of reality or imagination  
A fine and normal thing to do with a TV show puppet,  
Until the shows producers began to get feedback  
About a growing concern of parents and educators  
In the wake of news in the early eighties about child abuse.  
Big Bird's, who, I learned, is supposed to be a projection of a six year old,  
His implausible eyewitness testimony

Might have real life consequences  
And discourage kids from telling adults about their experiences  
For fear that the adults might ridicule or disbelieve them.

And so, the producers decided that it was essential  
to restore Big Bird's credibility  
Dr. Lawrence Rubin, a child psychologist, said in an interview,  
"The writers took a real-world concern and asked themselves,  
'Are we helping or hurting kids by keeping Snuffy in the imaginary closet,  
and do we have a moral imperative to respond to a real issue  
by changing something about the show?'"  
They decided they did.

Norman Stiles, the head writer of Sesame Street, said  
"We wanted kids to know  
that grownups will believe them"

And so, over the course of a two year story arc,  
the entire neighborhood of Sesame Street came to believe Big Bird—  
Only some grown ups at first, and then  
In the end, the adults apologized to Big Bird,  
And ends with cast member Bob McGrath telling Big Bird:  
"From now on, we'll believe you whenever you tell us something."

Being believed, and being believed in, can offer validation  
Healing, justice,  
And most of all, it can allow us to be the most authentic versions of ourselves.  
The definition of authenticity is "being worthy of acceptance or belief"  
And don't we all want to be worthy of acceptance?  
Don't we want to be worthy of belief?

It has been my experience that the more a person believes me,  
The more I am able to be vulnerable  
And the more I am able to be vulnerable  
The more authentic I am able to be  
And the more authentic I am able to be  
The more I am able to be worthy of belief.  
It feels like a positive feedback loop between vulnerability, authenticity, and belief.  
Because I know the opposite is also true  
The more I feel discounted by someone,  
The less I feel like I am able to be my true self  
And the more closed off I become, and the less vulnerable I can be.

People will sometimes ask me  
Oh, you're a Unitarian Universalist minister... Universalist, like, you all believe in everything,  
right?  
The Universalism part of our name  
Actually comes from an historic affirmation of faith

In which some preachers declared that they believed in Universal salvation—  
That all people—sinners and saints—were children of God  
And all would be reunited with God after death  
And none would be condemned to suffer for eternity.  
And this, understandably, was such a scandalous notion to the mainstream Christian  
doctrines of the time  
That the Universalists began their own Universalist churches, and a Universalist  
denomination.  
And over time, Unitarian Universalists began to focus more and more on what happens on  
earth, in this lifetime, which is all we can know  
And less and less on what happens after death.

But the legacy that I believe we have inherited from our Universalist ancestors in faith is still  
that of Universal Salvation:  
Because the meaning of the word *salvation* can also be understood as healing,  
And when I look around  
Sometimes it feels like all I can see are wounds that need healing.

In the end, we are seeking universal healing.  
Healing of our bodies and our hearts and our spirits  
Love, justice, hope, safety, comfort,  
Healing for this broken and hurting world  
And it's broken and hurting people.

Friends,  
We can offer one another healing  
When we truly hear one another into speech  
Love one another into being  
Believe one another into authenticity

When we live into the interplay of believing one another  
Allowing for our own and one another's vulnerability  
When it is safe for us  
And becoming more and more our authentic selves.

In 2015, almost six years after that conversation  
In a convention center cafeteria,  
Michael and I, now colleagues, now both having gone to and finished our theological  
educations on opposite coasts  
happened to be at the same minister's conference  
In California.  
I rolled my eyes when I saw his name on the list.  
We were in the same workshop, of course.

On the third day of the workshop,  
He came up to me at the end of the session,  
And said,  
“Heather, can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Sure,” I said, reluctantly.  
“You may not remember this”, he said,  
“But several years ago we were talking about going to seminary,  
and I really encouraged you not to go.  
I’m sorry.  
I’m really glad you didn’t listen to me.  
I was wrong,  
I’ve seen the work you do,  
And I think you’re a really remarkable minister.”

“I do remember that,” I told him, “and thank you for saying that.  
It means a lot”.

I can’t say we are friends these days,  
Or that I really care what he thinks of me and my ministry,  
Because now, as a minister,  
I am no longer a tender fledgling with a vulnerable dream,

But his acknowledgement  
And his apology  
Changed something for me that day  
To know that he had both carried that too  
For six years,  
His validation  
And his seeking to right the wrong  
To be accountable for what he had said  
It was healing, to know that we were both striving for wholeness.  
That the book was not closed,  
That the end of the story was not yet written.  
And neither is mine, or yours  
Or our hurting, aching world.  
We might all become more authentic, more whole  
If we can offer these gifts of the spirit to one another.

So dear ones  
In these times of political terror  
And systemic violence  
And exhaustion  
In these days that ask us all too often  
To deny our own humanity  
And the humanity of our siblings  
Let us hold faith in ourselves  
as much as we can, and in one another.  
Let us care for ourselves  
And for one another.  
And let us believe in ourselves  
And in one another.  
And in doing so, may we love ourselves

And one another  
Into our most authentic versions  
Of ourselves.  
May it be so, and amen.