

**Caring for Self**  
Rev. Dr. Rita Capezzi  
First Unitarian Congregation, Toronto  
Sunday, July 20, 2025

In 1982, I was a junior in college and took myself on a pilgrimage to England, to study more closely the life and work of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century mystic poet and artist William Blake. Now, I had never been out of the country. I had only ever once before flown on an airplane. I was alone for most of the trip, having to figure out on my own train schedules and cheap B&Bs, and making dollars turned into English pounds last a month. I had to figure out how to have enough pence to make a long-distance phone call home at an hour that took into account the time zones I had never before considered much.

I did all this and more. Yet one of the persistent memories of that month on my own, one of the images that still surfaces when I have forgotten so much about that trip, is this: on more than one occasion, many more than one, I am still somewhat stunned and ashamed to say, I found myself an hour or more after using the Loo, as they say in England, I found myself with my zipper down.

Oh my stars, the shame of it. How long I had been so exposed! How could I be so foolish! What an idiot! Long after that month in 1982, so often eclipsing all that I had accomplished, all that I had learned, all the fortitude and endurance and creativity and real courage I had manifested, I could still feel that red wash of shame, my zipper down in public. Why might that be? What does such a thing mean, to be haunted by such a memory in the midst of so many other memories? Why the raw and exposed, rather than the beaming with joy? Why did that shame last so very long?

Our Unitarian Universalist First Principle calls us to affirm and respect: “The inherent worth and dignity of each person.” How often do we apply our attention to this principle by seeking to notice worth and dignity in other people, but not by noticing this truth for ourselves? I have lived in this way? Have you? I have made a good work of stopping myself on the path of judgment and dismissal of people, of pausing to ask—“Wait! Why do I think this about this person? What bias am I engaging? What do I not know about this person and their situation? What does it serve me or us to think so harshly?” I don’t always do this first, mind you. I have to stop myself, I have to pause, I have to listen to that better angel of myself that knows my perspective is limited, that I don’t know everything and usually much less than I think I do. But I have learned over time, I have practiced every day—to look beyond the big long-legged man taking up a lot of space with his bobbing red shoe, to realize how he also pulls his leg in to let others pass, to perceive the book he reads and his evident love of it, to grasp his deep care as he watches a man open an umbrella inside a bakery, to notice the delight with which he views the shared reality of himself and the man with the umbrella and the all people simply being human.

I have learned and I have practiced. Perhaps you have, too. Perhaps you are thinking of ways you have lived into our beloved First Principle, finding the inherent worth and

dignity in others that you might not automatically see. But have you done that for yourself?

I have learned to say my hurts don't matter, not as important as others' hurts. That's wrong. I may have more social privileges than my neighbor, but that does not exempt me from the human conditions of pain and grief. Or, I learned to think my life is vastly more important than that of others, that the center of the universe is me and only me. That is also wrong. Yet, it is not egotistical or superior to direct care toward oneself. Our worth and dignity is, indeed, inherent. The First Principle moves against the philosophies which perceive humanity as inherently sinful or worthless. We are all the children of life, life coming to us and through us in mystery. This is our inheritance, and that doesn't mean that everything we say or do is automatically good. We all know it. We all think and even do some awful stuff. We all manifest behavior we need to adjust. Including the behavior toward ourselves. To care for oneself is not to care less for others.

More than bubble baths and massages, caring for self requires deep awareness of what pains us, what soothes us, what motivates and inspires us. Now, bubble baths and massages are good self-care, if you are so inclined, but that kind of physical attention to your body is not the only or even the best way to care for yourself. And these types of practices come to us often through the marketing of the consumer reality we swim in. If we buy these bubbles, this bath balm, this Goop, we will get achieve the serenity we so crave. A fancy coffee from a storied national chain might be a form of self-care for some of us. But the price might well be prohibitive for those whose incomes are stretched across housing and medicine and food.

Our economies are built upon the necessity of earning and then spending, and further, by enticing us to want and want and want often just beyond our means, keeping us all striving after the things we can see in front of us but can't quite grasp. The incessant "wanting" after things can keep us from understanding what is really important to us. The consumer economy has taught us that we lack, we are broken, we are empty, and if we yearn for a thing, save for a thing, buy a thing, we will feel whole and filled. But that is always a false promise. It is false, because things in themselves cannot make meaning for us.

And it is false because we are not broken and lacking. We are, rather, full of humanness. Our fears, our yearnings and confusions—these are not a problem. These are what we are. These are part of what make up our human condition. The problem is not that we are made this way. The problem is that we learn to see this truth as wrong, as something that can be remedied, specifically through things. We seek a solution outside of us, when we need to honor our own worth. We are here, now, in this time and space, to seek a new truth, a different possibility. We are here to open our hearts, to lay down our burdens, to lift up our hope, and find something new.

Ross Gay gives us an example. Yes, he is buying a fancy coffee, but that is hardly the point of his story. He is maneuvering through a beloved terrain, a place he does not live

but where he makes a place for himself. He smells the air, full of the scent of deliciousness carefully and lovingly made. He is mindful that while the bakery is good, the roti place kitty-corner from it is also good. And not just with food. Good with the thoughts of a person bestowing upon him positive regard—"I was just thinking about you on Sunday"—thought of by a person with her own burdens of grief and pain. And the coffee and croissant just an excuse to read a final book by a beloved author and to allow the poignancy of that—the last book he will ever write—to wash through him and yet not take away his pleasure in that book. And, aware of his body and the space it takes, Gay is aware as well of "The proximity, the negotiation, the closeness [which] also means mini-contacts again and again as I bob my big red shoe down, but briefly, so as not to catch a cramp in my hamstring or calf, which would be dangerous." Making space, and he deserving of taking space, too.

And then that umbrella opening in the café, what should seem annoying or stupid or inconvenient or embarrassing, a cause of humiliation. And instead, the gentle, caring thought he leaves us with, directed toward the man with the umbrella open in a bakery, but also to all of us: "I saw him giggle to himself, [ . . . ] with a smirk that today I read as a smirk of gentleness, of self-forgiveness. Do you ever think of yourself, late to a meeting or peed your pants some or sent the private email to the group or burned the soup or ordered your cortado with your fly down or snot on your face or opened your umbrella in a bakery, as the cutest little thing?"

Could we be that gentle with ourselves. Could we allow the running thoughts of perfection and wanting to go quiet? Could we allow the feelings of shame and lack of quiet? Could we pause to listen to the unheard world within ourselves—that world where we notice that someone is thinking lovingly of us, as we think lovingly of them? Where the delicious smells and tastes of life are sweetly acknowledged? Where what we care deeply about—ideas, values, community—take up much more space than the silly, embarrassing things we all do? Might we take some of the unheard world with us, use it to care for ourselves as the precious humans we all are?

Can you entertain with me a new vision, a more fulsome sense of what we each are—unique, alive, learning to live as we live? Imagine yourself not as one starfish but as the whole beach of starfish, each starfish one of your memories, each a moment with which you condemn and denounce yourself, criticize yourself unjustly, undercut your own inherent worth and dignity as a beautiful imperfect human. You have certainly been the man on the beach who can't see the point of trying to save one because he can't save all. Why bother if perfection can't be reached? Can you also imagine yourself the boy, who "made a difference for that one." The part of you who reclaims the shame and the dread we can feel about ourselves, about parts of ourselves. The boy who takes the living bit and casts it back into the sea of life, the nurturing and nourishing tide, the mystery that gave rise to each of us. Can we learn to be that gentle with ourselves and all our odd bits?

Before we leave behind this Kairos, this time set aside, and return to Chronos, to the time of ordinary living, before we depart this shared hour and Zoom space, let us spend

some time in the unheard world. Give yourself permission to return to the unheard world. Let us pause for quiet, resting in quiet, practicing once more what it might be to give a moment of time to care for ourselves. [pause one minute].

For all that is our life, for all that challenges us, for all that fills us, may we give time to ourselves, that we may honor the mystery of our existence, each self a unique expression worthy of care. May loving kindness fill us, reminding us and assuring us that as we wish love for others so we are right to wish love for ourselves. And may we pray, in whatever ways we each do, that the larger reality of love and life aid us in our quest to love ourselves into wholeness. May it ever be so.