

Our understanding of “whole” comes through the old Germanic and Norse languages: *hal*, *haila* which give the sense of entire, unhurt, uninjured, safe; healthy, sound; genuine, straightforward, undamaged, complete. Our word for health has similar roots.

To be made whole is to be healed. But here is what I learned when I was working as a therapist. Healing does not necessarily mean to be made perfect or unblemished again. Healing can mean learning to walk with a limp. Often in my work with clients I was reminded of the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel a story from the Hebrew scriptures. After a long absence from home Jacob, the son of Isaac and the grandson of Abraham, is returning home. One night he sends the rest of his traveling companions on ahead and he stays the night by a river.

Genesis 32:24-28

²⁴ So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. ²⁵ When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. ²⁶ Then the man said, “Let me go, for it is daybreak.”

But Jacob replied, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”

²⁷ The man asked him, “What is your name?”

“Jacob,” he answered.

²⁸ Then the man said, “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel,^[d] because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.”

Rabbi Bruce Kadden had this commentary on the story:

“We know that Jacob was profoundly changed by his wrestling match. He was physically damaged, “limping on account of his thigh” (Genesis 32:32). But he also was spiritually renewed, as reflected in his new name: Israel. He was no longer the “heel” who tricked and deceived others; he was now upright (~~based on those who see his name related to the Hebrew root, *yod-shin-reish*~~). A man who was never known for his physical prowess needed another reminder that it is not his physical strength, but his spiritual strength that counts. A person who was never willing to struggle with his brother, who runs away when he is threatened by him, now learns that it is through struggle that one grows and becomes the person that one is meant to be.”

<https://reformjudaism.org/wrestling-match-ages>

Jacob struggled with God and with humans and was given a new name Israel. You would think this would be a defining moment of wholeness – it was, it was - and still Israel walked with a limp

Parker Palmer says it this way

Wholeness does not mean perfection: it means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life. Knowing this gives me hope that human wholeness — mine, yours, ours — need not be a utopian dream, if we can use devastation as a seedbed for new life.

Wholeness is our goal but the path to wholeness is not a straight line, it is not a smooth process it is not always easy.

So if you are at a point in your life where there is pain, where everything is hugely wrong where everything feels like a big mess it is not that you are not whole, it is that you are on the path to wholeness.

It's a process and it involves transformation a lovely word for a messy process. Caterpillars are transformed into butterflies and in that process, they are completely destroyed and turn into a gooey mess before the butterfly can appear. They are beautiful images of Spring and their process is messy and horrible.

And how is any of this related to the Joy of Burnout?

Burnout is an interesting term I think. Think about how we connect the metaphor of fire to humans. We might say about a quarterback that runs 50 yards for a touchdown that he was on fire. When someone is doing something phenomenal and amazing we say they are on fire.

And too much fire well there is that risk

Rocket engines burnout, candles burnout, and people can burnout

“I am not sure why burnout has such resonance. The word speaks, I think, to the part of us that wants to burn on with the fire of life, love, passion, challenge and meaning and it describes our devastation when that fire seems to have burnt itself out. It vividly captures, also, the nature of the experience. People who have burnt out describe it in terms such as 'I could almost feel my brain burning' or 'It was like my nervous system was fried' or 'Instead of growing like a tree, I was a pile of ash.’” “The Joy of Burnout location 100

I've known folks who could be busy and busy and busy and did not burnout and others who burned out from the demands of their lives. I don't believe that burnout comes from having a too full of a calendar. And I also recognize that I may be just a wee bit not objective here since my calendar is usually full to overflowing.

There have been times in my life where I have gotten exhausted from the work of life and other time when the same amount of activity did not burn me out.

For me the difference is when I am feeling connected to my work, when I feel my work has value to me and others, when I have some power over what happens to me in my life, when others value me for what I do and who I am I am less likely to get to burnout.

“The classic signs of burnout are: A growing emotional, mental and/or physical exhaustion which isn't alleviated by sleeping An increasing sense of being cut off from ourselves and other people A decreasing ability to be effective at doing what we have always done, either at work or at home. Of these, exhaustion is the most defining characteristic. Each of us has our own individual pattern of burnout, and there is a range of symptoms that can alert us to the fact that we have begun to burn out.” (From “The Joy of Burnout”)

Some folks will claim that burnout is new a product of the industrial revolution and the breakdown of capitalism.

“In the sixteenth century, St John of the Cross wrote The Dark Night of the Soul about the experience of mystics who, after an experience of God's grace, went through despair, and loss of connection with God. This phase was seen as a necessary one in the soul's journey towards purification. The 'dark night of the soul' could be considered a religious forerunner of what is now called burnout, and is a phrase that people who are burning out often use about themselves.” From (“The Joy of Burnout”)

Sometimes we get into a life that is the wrong life for us. A marriage that is too confining or a job that is soul crushing. Or illness that brings you to a life you never expected. Life turns an unexpected corner and you find yourself disconnected from yourself, feeling as if you are in a desert with no water and your soul is shriveling.

Sometimes what happens is that the life you are leading is not just tiring it is sucking the soul right out of you and that is burnout. And when you reach that place there is joy that can be found. Burnout is horrible and painful and frightening but it is also an opportunity.

If we stop looking at burnout as failure and instead take a lesson from the medieval mystics and think of burnout as phase a temporary state of being that our soul needs in order to find a new way.

“Burnout is, or rather can be, a door to walk through into a life with space, love and joy – indeed, a sense of being able to be one's true self.”(Glouberman, Dina. The Joy of Burnout . Skyros Books. Kindle Edition.)

Burnout is the result of having become better able to hear our soul but not yet daring to listen. Burnout demands that we listen. Glouberman, Dina. *The Joy of Burnout*. Skyros Books. Kindle Edition.

The title of this sermon *The Joy of burnout* might be a bit of a misstatement. Burnout is not joyful, in fact it is joyless. But it can be like a big neon sign pointing the way to joy. Joy can follow burnout.

And Our UU faith can help us find our way to joy.

Because Ours is a faith of connection. We are deeply rooted in covenant. In the simplest of terms a covenant is a promise of how we are connected. We are not connected because we all believe the same thing we are connected because we promise to keep working at the connections. We promise to keep coming back to the table

Last Friday we had our second Starting Point session. Starting point is a new adult ed program whose goal is to connect folks to each other and introduce them to UUism. In our time together we talked about the three paths and practices of connection that we UUs have “listening,” “opening” and “serving.” In every one of our congregations, you will find us engaging the work of healing spiritual disconnection by:

Listening to our deeper selves
Opening to life’s gifts
Serving needs greater than our own

Listening to our deeper selves, turn off the phone, the tablet the computer the TV, put down the book. Let the laundry sit and bills wait. Find a place to sit quietly and hear your deeper self. Like the stream in our story you will find your true identity.

Parker Palmer wrote:

“The soul is shy. Just like a wild animal, it seeks safety in the dense underbrush, especially when other people are around. If we want to see a wild animal, we know that the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to come out... A circle of trust is a group of people who know how to sit quietly "in the woods" with each other and wait for the shy soul to show up.”

And from the Starting Point curriculum:

“In short, opening to life’s gifts is about leaning into gratitude. It’s about not allowing ourselves to get so caught up in the natural and cultural games of striving, proving and accumulating that we forget we’ve already “arrived” and are already surrounded by innumerable treasures.

Ultimately opening to life’s gifts is about waking up to life’s gifts. It’s about reminding ourselves over and over again that life is not a game we are here to conquer or win. It’s

not a foe waiting to pounce or take what we have. Instead it is more of a companion waiting for us to notice all that it has already offered us.”

When you have taken some time to be quiet, to listen to hear your soul you will see what there is to be grateful for. When you step away from our larger culture that tells us we are not enough and that you can buy the thing that will fix it, when you step away from that you see the bounty of all that is around us.

And when you lean into gratitude you will naturally want to give back to serve others, to share. Serving others out of gratitude is a whole different way of being. Often times we are tempted to serve others out of guilt, or fear, or a need to be affirmed. When we do that it puts the people we are serving in a role of taking care of us. We are serving them really to take care of ourselves. But when you lean into the gratitude you serve others you do justice work because the love simply overflows and you can do no other.

In this process of deep connection you will find joy. Burnout can be, if you let it, that moment when you realize the life you have is not working and that you must take the leap. And there you will find the joy.