

I. Advanced Organizer

- A. Last Monday evening, I was in Joanna's kitchen and we were talking about **origin stories**. I wasn't the only one joining Jo and Matthan there that evening - we were gathering our fall community group that we've been calling "Divine Creativity". And Jo was bringing us into our evening together inviting us into our first creative exercise. We had just been listening to stories from some different Indigenous storytellers. It was Monday, Indigenous People's Day, and we had begun our time by grounding ourselves in native voices telling their stories, listening to YouTube videos of folks sharing their origins, their creation narratives that told their people who they were and how they had come to be. And receiving that grounding, Jo invited us to gather around the table and take a bit of modeling clay, and in just a few minutes with the timer going, to sculpt something, **form something that represented to us our own origin story**, our family history, something that spoke in some way of **who we were and how we came to be**.
1. As I rolled the soft clay through my fingers, I found myself surprised at what shape my hands wanted to form. I pulled together more yellow clay, I put down the red and the blue, and I let the shape emerge - an hour glass kind of shape - two arcs joined together, and then I added there long rectangle at the end. I pulled bits of black modeling clay and rolled them finely between my hands until what had started as a ball became a thin black strip, and I layed it down the length of the rectangle. I did the same thing again and made another long strip, laying it alongside the first. And then I took one more small ball of black and squished it down to a flat pancake, laying it in the center of the arced part of my shape, a circle at the end of the long strips. When Joanna spoke time, in my hands I held something that looked vaguely like a guitar.
 2. But **it wasn't just any guitar**, which is why I found myself surprised. This instrument I had crafted as a symbol of my origin was an instrument I rarely think about. I haven't seen it or heard it in decades. And yet, when asked to represent what formed me, this is the first thing that came to mind: it was **my father's guitar**.
 3. Now my dad does not consider himself a musician. He's a lawyer he would say, not an artist. There is only one season of my life that I have any recollection of my father playing any instrument at all. And my memories of that season are fuzzy at best. You see it was only in the earliest years of my life, probably ages one to five, that my dad actually played guitar. He had learned to play in college I think, and still kept the habit up occasionally when I had come around, but not for long after that. It was the late seventies when I was born, and in those years dad strummed folk music. Peter, Paul and Mary, and John Denver were the soundtrack of my earliest memories. And if I think deeply, if I allow myself, a part of me can still hear his baritone voice singing "Puff the Magic Dragon" or "Leaving on a Jet Plane". I can hear my own young toddler voice singing along.
 4. Before last Monday night, if you'd asked me where I came from, how I came to be who I am today, **I doubt I would have mentioned my father's guitar**. It didn't feel significant enough to me to make my resume or the bio on a website, and yet in that moment in that exercise, a part of my consciousness needed to name that this was a formative part of my identity. My dad singing folks songs to me as a young child was one experience of many, one seed planted in my young life among a number of different seeds, that took. This seed germinated, it sprouted roots in my spirit, it grew and developed and matured into something different from what had come before but also true to who I am, so decades after my father put down the guitar, I still play it. Decades after he stopped singing those tunes, I still write my own. They're not "Puff the Magic Dragon", but they're not something

totally different either. **My identity as a singer, as a musician, as a creative has been evolving for decades.**

- B. I've found myself thinking about this theme of evolving a lot lately, particularly in this season of coming back to the work of Haven after this summer's sabbatical.
1. Some of you may remember that early after my return I shared that I felt like if God shared with me anything during the sabbatical for Haven, it was that this community, the community that was carrying things forward during my time of rest, is the place of revelation, the place where God was going to speak; it's not my job as pastor to go up the mountaintop and receive "the word of the Lord". Rather I sensed my job during sabbatical was to rest and recover so I can return and listen to all of you. So that's what I came back eager to do: to listen to individuals and groups within Haven, whatever spaces I found myself in, and **try to discern, what has the Divine been saying here?**
 2. A handful of weeks ago, **Jeanne followed up with me.** She kind of put me on the spot and asked me if I had a sense of any overarching message in all my listening conversations. At first, I felt hard pressed to summarize any common themes. My conversations had each had their own flavor to them - there were conversations with some of our leaders about ways they had experienced community during the sabbatical, or learned new things about their capacity to work as a team and contribute their own voices. There were conversations with newcomers who were discovering Haven for the first time and hopeful to explore the role this community might play in their journey. And there were folks who were simply acknowledging that their relationship to spiritual engagement has shifted in some way. The practices and experiences that used to feel important to their spiritual life may no longer have the same hold. So **what was the common theme?**
 3. Jeanne's prompting stirred in me and as I looked at each of the conversations I was having, and found myself praying for discernment, the word that came to mind was "**Evolving**". And as I thought about that word more, some understanding clicked into place. Every voice I had listened to shared in their various ways a **desire to evolve.** All of us, I sensed, in some way are in a journey of becoming. We recognize that we have not "arrived", that there is a process calling us forward to live into whatever is the next phase in our becoming.
 4. That might mean personal evolution in regards to how we think about our connection to God, our connection to others, how we express our spirituality, what kind of practices we find meaningful, but I also sensed there is a **corporate process of evolution we are experiencing** - that perhaps in this season Haven is moving into our next phase of life as a community. What we are becoming individually and collectively may look different than what has been before, but it is also deeply connected to where we have come from.
 5. Like my early moments with my Dad's guitar, **each of us has an origin story,** we each have things that have been planted and matured in us over time, and those things likely look different than they used to. This is also true of us as a collective. While we as a community are relatively young in the grand scheme of things, our story didn't really begin eight years ago with my family's move to Berkeley or in that first gathering in my living room. Haven's existence is a newer iteration of a longer process that is much bigger than us of things growing and changing. We're an example of how sometimes new things are born so evolution can take place. But our existence isn't just to further the evolution of church or spiritual community by having been born. We need to keep becoming, keep developing; **we need to continue to evolve.**

- C. And so today I want to kick off a series of conversations we'll be having in the months to come about what it might mean for us to embrace this process of personal and collective evolution. I'm calling this series "**Community Evolving**", and I hope in the weeks to come, it might be an opportunity to consider together, what is this evolutionary process we're in? What are we evolving into? How are we evolving as individuals and how are we evolving as a community? What might constrain the ways we evolve, and what might it mean to be liberated from potential constraints and open to new possibilities? And of course, most importantly, **how might God be working through this evolutionary process?** How might we be like that clay that became a guitar: evolving in the hands of our Creator in ways that help us become more reflective of the Divine nature and more connected to God's redemptive purposes in our world?
- II. Now I would argue that **spiritual evolution is not a new thing**, it's actually how faith has worked from the very beginning. Of course we must acknowledge there are those in the Christian tradition, as well as those from other faith traditions, who hold that the myths and origin stories we may tell about where we as a species have come from, and how the cosmos came into being, force us to believe that evolution is not the way life works. There are Christians who deny what science would tell us and ascribe today to a literal six-day creation. For them, the Bible perhaps has nothing to say about evolution at all, it's actually a tool to refute it.
- A. But **I just don't see our sacred texts or our traditions that way**, and I'm guessing you don't either. So anyone whose heard me teach the Bible for any length of time has hopefully picked up that my approach is rooted in the understanding that **the Bible itself is the result of an evolutionary process**. The Bible didn't drop out of heaven a leather bound book, it's a library of texts that evolved over centuries if not millennia. Its oldest stories have their origins in oral traditions, which is how they were cultivated for centuries before ever being written down. And over time, once they were written, they were copied, and recopied, considered and reconsidered. Texts were added and taken away. Many are surprised to know that it wasn't until the beginning of the fourth century that church leaders landed definitively on which of the many gospels, letters, and other texts that were circulating in the ancient church should be included in what we call the "canon" of the Bible. And even after that set of texts was solidified our ways of hearing, reading, understanding, and applying those texts have continued to evolve for centuries and are still evolving today.
- B. **When I look at our sacred texts, I see evolution in process**. I see a progression in ideas and understanding from the view of God that is depicted in many of our most ancient stories - often God as a tribalistic, violent diety, to the God of the prophets, the God who cares about justice and stands with the oppressed. And then we move to the God embodied in Jesus who seems to crystalize everything we need to understand about the divine through embodied self-sacrificial love, and from there to the Spirit that goes beyond any one people group and blows where it will, cultivating diverse, multi-cultural expressions of Sacred community.
- C. **One character we see evolve in our sacred texts is the person we've come to know as the Apostle Paul**. When we first meet a Pharisee named Saul, he is a black and white thinker. He fervently believes he has all the right answers. He is genuine, totally genuine in his commitment to God but he's also super confident in his own understanding and that confidence fuels a passion that is ultimately destructive. He believes it's his job to squash the heretics and so when we first meet him in Acts, he's the one overseeing the stoning of the follower of Jesus named Stephen. Saul believes this is what he needs to do in order to remain faithful to his faith.
- D. Of course, on the road to Damascus a major shift takes place. Saul encounters a vision of the risen Jesus, who calls him out for persecuting him as he persecutes his followers, and Saul

begins to see differently. He begins to understand differently. **He begins to evolve. He moves from Saul to Paul.**

- E. One of the most famous passages in all of scripture was written by the Apostle Paul. It's famous because of how often it's read at weddings; 1 Corinthians 13 is a bit of a cliché in that context. But the passage isn't really a message about marriage; Paul himself never married. The passage I think works better to demonstrate how this person who thought defending the purity of the faith was what it was all about, now seems rooted in something deeper. **He's now anchored in a different place.** His priorities have shifted. See if you can see the movement.

1. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but I do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so that I can remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away everything I own, and if I give over my body in order to boast, but do not have love, I receive no benefit.

a) Here I hear Paul extolling the things he once prioritized, once understood to be part and parcel with being an exceptional man and exceptional follower of God. And so he points to these markers we often use to evaluate our standing - do we say the right thing, could we communicate powerfully; can we have deep spiritual insight like a prophet, can we believe so fervently we can make the miraculous happen; can we live so sacrificially we prove our steadfastness - yet Paul recognizes that none of these actions are really meaningful if they're not grounded in love. He goes on to describe what that love looks like next.

2. 4 Love is patient, love is kind, it is not envious. Love does not brag, it is not puffed up. 5 It is not rude, it is not self-serving, it is not easily angered or resentful. 6 It is not glad about injustice, but rejoices in the truth. 7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

8 Love never ends.

a) As I think of Saul evolving into Paul and I read these words I can't help but wonder if in part **they are a kind of confession.** "Love is kind, not envious, *which I have been.*" "Love isn't puffed up, like I have been." "Love isn't easily angered, I know about anger."

b) **Maybe we can resonate with Paul's confessions.** How many of us, if we're honest, know what it means to be envious? How many of us, if we're honest, have a bit of an anger problem sometimes? How many of us, if we're honest, have seen our relationships pay the cost of our envy, of our anger?

c) Perhaps Paul is able to describe *agape*, the Greek word he's using for love, this way, because **for him it's not an abstract sentiment.** He's had to face through his own evolutionary process the ways in which though he thought he loved God and loved others just like the commandments taught, his way of loving fell short. Too often it was rude, self-serving, complicit with injustice, and yet until he was confronted by the living Jesus with the harm he had caused and allowed himself to be changed by that information, he couldn't do differently. But **now Paul has been humbled.** He absorbed what Jesus was saying on the road to Damascus. He understands where he's fallen short, so he can encourage his readers to do better, to love in a way that rejoices in the truth, that endures all things, that never ends. Finally he arrives here...

3. But if there are prophecies, they will be set aside; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be set aside. 9 For we know in part, and we

prophesy in part, 10 but when what is perfect comes, the partial will be set aside. 11 When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. But when I became an adult, I set aside childish ways. 12 For now we see in a mirror indirectly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know in part, but then I will know fully, just as I have been fully known. 13 And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.

- a) So this is the part of the chapter that's often cut out, not read in the wedding sermon. But to me it's perhaps the climax because here is where Paul is naming that **we are all in process**. He has learned that he has not arrived. I'm not sure Saul could have confessed that. Now Paul holds his understanding with a kind of humility that wasn't there before. He recognizes that his knowledge, as robust as it is, is hugely limited; it's far from the end destination.
- b) Paul points to how he has matured since childhood and he uses this as an example of how we are in a continual process of maturing in our understanding and our faith. Now I don't think Paul is denigrating in any way the faith of children. In fact Jesus himself held up the child as an example of faith and dependence on the Divine that all of us would do well to model.
- c) But I do think **Paul is acknowledging that it is healthy to grow**. We are meant to develop. We are not to live in childhood forever; though we would do well to bring the best deposits of childhood forward into what comes next; to turn folk songs into worship.
- d) But **healthy things grow**. Healthy things develop. Healthy organisms grow, carrying forward what they need for the season to come, like the squirrel harvesting his nuts for the winter, or the tree storing its nutrients. Healthy things grow, allowing themselves to be transformed, at times leaving behind what is no longer for them, what served for a past season but does not serve for the next, like the butterfly emerging from its chrysalis. Healthy things grow. **Healthy faith grows**.
- e) In the last sentences in this passage, Paul holds out hope that at some future point, we will experience some sort of fullness of knowledge, perhaps **full union with the Divine**. I don't know exactly when he expected that moment of clarity to come, and I don't know if I think about it in the same way as Paul did. But in his voice I hear his hope that at some point **the cosmic veil may drop away**, that he will see the Divine fully face to face, but he knew he was not there. **We are not there**. I'm pretty sure we won't be there tomorrow. Probably not next year. And I don't know about next decade or next century. But in the meantime, **we are in a process of becoming, growing as we seek to hold on to what is core and essential** - what Paul describes as faith, hope, and love, and let go of what no longer serves. Because **healthy things grow**.

III. Now friends, I want to be clear about **what I mean and what I don't mean about growth**. In our community, part of our evolution has included recognizing the impact of social structures and frameworks in our world that have distorted our view of God and one another, frameworks we've named as our contemporary version of idols. Frameworks like capitalism and patriarchy and white supremacy that conspire together at times to give us a model of growth that is **intended to ultimately serve the idols**. So growth becomes simply a numbers game. Likes on your social media post. Clicks on the website. What's your level of engagement. For a spiritual community, growth often means more butts in seats and more dollars in the bank. **But is that kind of growth the best measure of health?** Is that what we mean when we think about a community of faith and say "healthy things grow"?

- A. Don't get me wrong, I do believe there is a place to acknowledge that **increased engagement can be a sign of health**. I'm not trying to say it's not at all. I think that numerical and financial growth can reflect that a real felt need is being met as people are finding the spaces that bring life to them in transformative, redemptive ways, and want to give of themselves to those spaces and tell others who would benefit from those spaces too. Every time we have a season where new folk find this Haven community and we sense their gratitude to experience a kind of belonging, it's energizing, it's life giving because each person brings with them fresh insight and vitality that becomes part of our evolving and helps inform what we will become. **I think that's part of healthy growth.**
- B. But **numerical growth alone cannot testify to health**, because we all know that there's plenty of toxic crap out there that sells out on the supermarket shelves or goes viral on YouTube or draws people to the Capitol building on January 6, forcing us to reckon with the truth that in our evolutionary world, **unhealthy things grow too.**
- C. So the question we face is how might we live into a process of evolving that **stays in alignment with our values as individuals and as community**? How do we evolve in a way that lives into our vision of **smashing idols rather than submitting to them**? How do we measure the health of our growth beyond numbers and dollars? How do we identify if we're growing in the kind of understanding of love that Paul was speaking of? I don't claim to have the answers. I hope that in engaging this process over the coming months, starting today, continuing next week at our Haven retreat, and going forward likely through at least the end of this year, we might together experience some of what Paul saw on the road to Damascus; some of what I felt God encourage me toward during my sabbatical. I hope that in the process of thinking, of questioning, of experimenting, of listening to each other, we will hear the voice of the Divine, we will experience Jesus speaking to us within the context of our Haven community, we will be reminded how far we have come and invited into what we are becoming. I hope and pray that we will **healthfully grow as a community evolving**. Amen.

Questions for Reflection and Conversation

1. How do you think about spirituality evolving? What shifts have you seen in your own faith journey?
2. Do you think it's possible for a community to evolve together? What might that look like?