



# Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

"Where We Come From, How We Arrive"

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How many of us here have heard of the poem ["Where I'm From,"](#) by George Ella Lyon? If you don't know this poem, it's a short and sweet poem that lists various aspects of the poet's upbringing, starting with the lines

"I am from clothespins,  
from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride.  
I am from the dirt under the back porch."

It's very evocative of a particular childhood and by the special magic of poetry, invites us into a similar consideration of our own history. If you DO know this poem, you may very well know it because you wrote your own version as part of a class or a workshop - it's a popular activity to get a group of learners to consider their own stories and histories, and to gain empathy for the stories of others. How many of you have written a "Where I'm From" poem in this kind of exercise?

Last year, the Board of UUCYork and I did a shared activity called a "start-up" where we shared stories and histories of ourselves and of the congregation, facilitated by our congregational representative from the Central East Region of the Unitarian Universalist Association. One of the first things we were asked to do was a "Where I'm From" poem. I'm going to share the end of mine here.

[...]

I am from my grandmother's  
Dreams of traveling

And my father's longing for  
    A home  
I am from misdirection and  
    Uncertainty  
And the old recipe box with  
    Cards written in a careful,  
    Tiny script.  
I am from Gilead  
    And Middle Earth  
And I am from the stars  
    And from garden tomatoes  
        I would never eat.

Even though it's been more than a year since I wrote this poem, I can still recall the feeling of touching each of these memories - the things that formed me, the very specific meanings that they contain, things no one but members of my family might be able to explain or picture in the same way that I do - but, magically, also things that ring true with others. When we shared our poems I found it happening again and again - hearing what shaped someone else, the things and the relationships that led them to be the person they are today, completely outside my own experience, and I said "YES." Again and again. I recognized it, even though I hadn't lived it.

In the [\*"I Am From" Activity Guide\*](#) developed by the University of Minnesota's Global Programs and Strategy Alliance and the Center for Educational Innovation, they outline the pedagogical strategies in the exercise to facilitate communication between students of diverse backgrounds (particularly international students). Near the end of the guide they list things to consider when choosing this activity for the classroom. First on the list of considerations is this: "Keep in mind that for some students, thinking about their background may evoke painful memories that they prefer not to revisit. Students should not be forced to share their poems if they are not comfortable doing so. Be sure to give students the option to reflect on another formative time in their life (i.e. college, study abroad, an extracurricular activity, etc.)."

Revisiting those things, people, moments, and activities that were most formative for us can be deeply challenging - no matter what part of our life we think back to. People of all backgrounds, with varying levels of privilege, have things that formed them that...well, that hurt them.

On this Mother's Day, a holiday that evokes large and often complicated emotions in many of us, I want to pause here.

I want to honor all the complications, the joys, the struggles, the triumphs, the losses that brought all of us here, today, as the people we are right in this moment. Whoever you are, wherever you are from, whomever you are from, you are whole and holy.

[pause]

We're going to return to our [reading](#), where we'll do some meaning-making together this week. By comparing herself and her own growth to the struggles of a baby Weddell seal, Alexis Pauline Gumbs seeks to create a sense of connection between all creatures, no matter how they are mothered. I want to invite you into considering these struggles in a curious and generative way.

"The mother Weddell seal will push her baby into the water against her will. She will force her child's head into the water while the baby coughs and sputters and struggles and squirms. She is new here. She does not know that she can breathe underwater. Until she does. And then everything changes. By the time weaning is over she will be able to dive 2,500 feet below the water. Stay there for an hour if she wants to. Find a tiny hole she made for air after swimming twelve kilometers away. Move gracefully between frozen and liquid worlds. But she doesn't know."

The fact is that there are parts of growing up that will challenge us and scar us. The fact is that some of us found family members and other guardians to be helpers to us, and some of us found them to be hindrances.

We are all from so many places. We are all from so many people. And there is so much we don't know.

Just a few paragraphs later, Gumbs writes, "And I am grateful for all of my mothers, biological, chosen and ancestral, mammal and otherwise [...], who would shock me into knowing my capacity, trust my lungs more than I thought I could. To breathe in ways I haven't breathed before. To learn my blood in ways I didn't know it."

We are all born not knowing our capacity, not knowing of the joys and the struggles, the sputtering and squirming that we'll go through before we arrive at the squeals of triumph, the tears both happy and sad that form us into whole beings. Alexis Pauline Gumbs writes this to consider not only her growth as a child but her growth as an adult.

In an ideal world we never stop learning, never stop growing, and even through our struggles we find people, again and again, to both push us and to comfort us in the face of so much learning and growth.

Growth hurts.

We know this. In our bones we do. And when we meet someone and hear their story and know they are facing similar struggles that we may have faced before, we can empathize. We can say "YES" to their struggle, to their story.

And sometimes, by mutual consent and by the magic of synchrony, we find new teachers and new guides. We discover new ancestors.

In seminary we would do a ritual at the beginning of the school year for new students, and another ritual at the end for all those completing their course of study. We would ask each student to picture those who "loved them into being."

To be loved into being is so much more than a biological meeting of sperm and egg, although for many of us our parents are the first people we think of. Maybe one more than another, maybe both. Maybe we have more than two parents, maybe we think of stepparents and grandparents around us too. There are so many ways to mother, to nurture, to love and to care and to grow.

To be loved into being is to be nurtured physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

To be loved into being is also to be challenged - like the Weddell seal mother, there are those in our lives who know what we are capable of even when we do not. Who love us and trust us into our full selves.

To be loved into being is to be encouraged to pause and heal.

To be loved into being is to discover the gifts of our ancestors - our ancestors of blood and our ancestors of spirit, those whose lives provide models for our own living. To be loved into being brings us into deeper relationship with everyone who mothered us, who nurtured us, who healed us and challenged us.

We give thanks to all those incredible beings who loved us into being. We give thanks to all those who have challenged us and comforted us, who had a dream for us bigger than we could imagine for ourselves. We give thanks to every single line we could say, every single name we could sing, in the tapestry that creates our loving, living, breathing, struggling, joyous selves.

So may it be. (Happy Mother's Day.)