



Bella Uber -

I have been attending this church my whole life. And growing up, I was acutely aware that my faiths and beliefs set me apart from those around me. I didn't attend one of the popular mega churches in our area. The 40-minute drive to church felt like hours with me and my two siblings, one which is in a car seat crammed in the back of my family's red Prius, especially when it seems that we passed at least 300 other churches on the way. Although I love my church, it felt lonely going without any of my classmates. I spent so much time during the school week with them. When people asked where I go to church, I'd often evade the question with a lie, saying either I don't go or it's too far for you to know. Although I never wanted to misrepresent myself, it seemed easier to deflect than to explain.

The summer before my sophomore year, this all changed. That summer, through the coming-of-age trip to Boston, I discovered a more profound sense of my faith and who I was becoming. The trip played a crucial role in this transformation, helping me understand the origins and foundations of my religion, values and purpose, which established a sense of clarity about who I was. The trip provided a perspective shift that I never knew I needed. Being surrounded by those who not only shared my values but shared my everyday high school experience was like a breath of fresh air. Now feeling the confidence to fully embrace my faith, I have developed an even stronger sense of self-assuredness and purpose. It has given me the strength to be involved in church groups that would otherwise feel out of reach to me, such as the Youth Adult Committee and Racial Equity Task Force, promoting racial equality, equity, and awareness within the church.

In the summer of 2023, the YRUU community traveled to the Arizona-Mexico border, seeing the firsthand effects that the border control had on the land and especially on the people. We had the opportunity to speak with many different individuals impacted in different ways by the injustices the border takes part in. While traveling along the border, we saw a group of young women and children getting caught by border patrol. Witnessing this change my life forever, inspiring me to become an immigration lawyer and make a change that will last past my generation. While one person can change lives, a group of people, especially those in this congregation can change the world. It is more important now than ever in this political environment marked by legislation that promotes hate, and oppression, and sets us back decades, to hold our UU values that every person has inherent worth and dignity, no matter race, religion, sexuality, gender identity, age, disability, nationality, political belief or education level.

I believe generosity has the power to change lives, and I invite you to be a part of something more, our justice learning trips for youth. At the heart of unitarian universalism values a deep commitment to justice, equality, and the inherent worth of dignity of every person. These trips are more than just a history lesson. They're an opportunity to engage with the past in ways that inform our present and strengthen our commitment to build a more just and compassionate world. By supporting these journeys, you help provide access to educational experiences and community engagement opportunities that will inspire action and change. Your generosity will ensure that everyone, regardless of financial means, can take a part in these powerful experiences. Every donation, big or small, moves us closer to a future where love and justice guide all of our steps.

Connor Shear -

I've been going to this church on and off since I was a kid. It felt like just a thing we did on Sundays. And if I was lucky, I got donuts out of it. Then came 2020, the worst year of my life. Arguably, everyone hates middle school. It seems designed to be hated, and you get packed in with 200 other kids who also hate everything and it's horrible. This combined with the world shutting down at the age when I was supposed to figure myself out, set me back socially. I still to this day struggle with talking to new people and in front of a bunch of people. That year changed everyone's lives. I was 12 in 2020 and I figured out I was transgender. In the sixth grade owl class here at church, we briefly touched on gender identity and I began to understand that there was something different about me.

The truth about my own gender identity didn't hit me until late January 2020. At the time, I was only coming to church sporadically. And the core values of the church weren't as present for me, and so I convinced myself that all organized religions were out to get me. My goal in life was to hide, and I tried to figure it out all alone while the world collapsed around me. Finally, ninth grade happened. I missed taking eighth grade owl due to COVID, so my peers and I got the pleasure of taking coming-of-age odyssey, an eighth grade owl at the same time.

Every Sunday, I was here for three hours. And over the course of the year, I slowly began to realize what church truly was about. For the first time since realizing I was transgender, a year and a half before, I had to talk to others and couldn't just disappear into the background. Being transgender in a church, in a group full of cis people and one other gender queer person was off-putting. If I was online, I could surround myself with people like me, and reality was a kick to the chest. It was terrifying. And being at church so often for the first time in years was messing with my brain.

At the time, I was convinced none of them liked me, but I would eventually learn otherwise. Sometimes I still feel like that, I could never pinpoint an exact time that something changed, but it was over the years of why are you you. Being transgender was not something that mattered to the people around me. I started to engage with YRUU and add my input, listening, doing the lock-ins I could. And I did it all the same way, as me. As I grew through high school and started to come to church every week, wanting to for my own joy, I started to understand that a facet of myself was not a defining factor of life.

While my gender will always be something that is a part of me, it is only one aspect that I can't even guarantee being the one people are looking at. I realized over each YRUU class that people didn't mind. It wasn't the first thing that they filed away in their brains. And despite that, they still wanted to be my friend. I settled into my gender identity as a transgender man while being surrounded by peers at church, that reminded me what our core values are through their actions. Just being themselves, just by talking to me and not bringing up that I was trans, just letting that fact exist. And the core beliefs of radical love and community of my peers is what brought me back here, what helped me become the guy who is standing up here talking and saying that the church is intertwined the very center of my being and plays a special role in becoming who I am today.

Dascha Ruprecht -

As people, we have an innate instinct to hold our past close to us, mainly so we can learn from what has failed. I often find myself revisiting my past when I'm unable to sleep, laying, scrolling on my phone through old photos. Mainly ones from periods of my life where I was at my lowest. I zoom in on my face or my body, or the people I'm with, and search for meaning echoes of who I was then and who I am now. We all have moments when we look back, not just to remember, but to measure how far we've come or how far we think we haven't. I would love to call this ritual reflective or advantageous in any way, but that would not be true.

The truth is that up until recently, I've only viewed the woman I've become within the context of the girl I once was. That's what becoming is, right? It's the process of change and transformation with a focus on identity. How else can I acknowledge how much I've changed without looking back at all the things I've lost or endured that have made me this way? I recently had an experience that changed my definition of becoming. Every other year, my family goes to visit my grandparents in Siesta Key, Florida for Christmas. This beach is my favorite place on earth, a place so deeply woven into me I feel

a part of me will always be there. Everything about it is breathtaking. The bluest waves crashing onto white, soft sand, blanketed by fresh, salty air, all of it seems to nullify everything that's been weighing on me. But what really makes it perfect are the people I'm with when I'm there. My sisters, my dad, my mom, my aunt, and most importantly, my grandma, Chris, and grandpa, Terry.

Every time we're visiting, we all have dinner one night, usually Christmas Eve, on the beach. This year, it was different because my grandpa, Terry, was bedridden due to the stage four cancer he had throughout his entire body, something that was only discovered a little over a month before. During our visit this year, I spent time on the beach, but it was tainted knowing that Siesta Key would never be the same for me without my grandpa there. I didn't get in the ocean. I didn't enjoy the sun. I just sat there or paced along the shore not knowing what to think or how to feel. This year, instead of dinner on the beach, we raised a toast to my grandpa, Terry, because that day on Christmas Eve, he had passed away. He took his last breath in a hospital bed with the perfect view of the beach in front of him.

At that moment, as I watched the sunset with my family next to me, all the uncertainty I had been carrying left me. Life is too short to define yourself using any feelings other than love. We all come into this world through love and we all aim to die the same way, surrounded by those who love you in a place you love. You could argue that our purpose in life as humans is to love, so why root your identity in anything else? In my grandfather's last days, he was not thinking about what he wasn't. He was thinking about all the good times he had with his parents, his brother, his children, his wife, and all the people he loved. And now that he's gone, I think of all that he did. His academic legacy I hope to carry on, and the pure passion he had for engineering and piloting, a type of passion that I channel into my art.

I look forward to going to Siesta Key again for Christmas. It's still my favorite place in the world, not only because a small part of me will be there, but a part of my grandfather too. The Florida beach will not be the place where I lost him. It'll still be the place where I used to be buried in the sand by my sisters, the place where I would spend hours in the ocean trying not to get swept up by waves. And the place where I was able to share my last conversation with my grandfather, the man who would pick me up on his shoulders when I was young and let me wear his hats, even though they would fall off my head, and now the man who changed the way I view who I am.

The way I see it now is that the pain and trauma in our lives do not make us who we are. Every single one of us can look back at our past selves and find something we were doing wrong, or remember something that hurt us and changed us. But part of becoming a better version of yourself is holding your joy closer than where you hold your pain. You are not who you are because of an absent parent. You are not who you are because of a failed relationship. You are not who you are because of a loss you endured too soon. And although I'm sure these experiences have taught you a lot and allowed you to grow, you are not who you are because of the pain you felt.

When I think about who I am today, I think of what I love. I think of my family. I think of my ability to create, my passion for painting and drawing, things I feel like I was made to do. I think of every single

person in here and how this community has opened me up so much to where I'm standing in front of you all and sharing it. So, I urge you to leave this service with an openness to reconsider your definition of becoming. What if it isn't about the pain that shaped you, but about the love you choose to carry forward? What if you are not just a product of what happened to you, but of who you decide to be? That's the journey. That's becoming. Thank you.