

## **Be Yourself**

By: Rev. Arlin Roy (10/19/25)

I don't like to shop for clothes. I don't want to look at stuff while over my shoulder, some smarmy guy who doesn't want to be there either and doesn't like sucking up to strangers, is waiting to pounce. Last year, I got lucky at Kohl's, which has no sales help. When I couldn't find jeans, I wanted in my size, I reluctantly settled on a pair only somewhat OK, went to the changing room, and there I found three pairs of jeans, each a little different, in my size. I certainly don't like to shop for shirts.

Except, every July (while I am on vacation in Provincetown) I like to shop for semi-casual, dress shirts at the local thrift store to see my psychotherapy clients. I look for casual and dress shirts with button-down or spread collars, long sleeves, in windowpane plaid, checks, or striking colors at Provincetown's Methodist Church thrift store. Call me "cheap," I'll take it as a compliment. Or, maybe "frugal" is more accurate. I am also in Provincetown for the dunes and beach I enjoy on a run to Herring Cove beach and back, where the sand is usually firm enough to run on and the horizon's blue infinity of small waves is soothing. I visit some of the fifty art galleries, and a town with sixty restaurants usually has some nice ones where I savor something delicious, and there is always some new

theater that is energetic and striking. But it is a great bonus that my mid-twenties granddaughter also wants to go to the thrift store.

Here's the layout. The Methodist Church is your typical 60's modern church building. You enter into the social hall, which (during the summer) is filled with second-hand furniture, clothes for all sexes, pictures, dishware, appliances, jewelry, tchotchkes, books, CD's, and various odds and ends. Everything, except the dishware, is one-of-a-kind. The tchotchkes feature little ceramic nymphs, unicorns, and cowboys, miniature plaques with sayings like "Today is the first day of the rest of your life," and tiny pitchers of unknowable usefulness. Prices are very low, volunteer staff are helpful and quirky; one four-foot-three gray-haired woman who knows where everything is wears different headgear each day—one day a princess tiara, another fanciful bug antennas. Usually, I don't like thrift stores, with their odor of old sweat, dust, and peed-on seat cushions, but this one smells clean, perhaps because it gets rid of everything when it closes in October and regenerates in May.

When I find new (some with tags still on) or nearly-new shirts for \$6 that retailed for \$100, I feel happy. I have wondered why such fine shirts have been donated, but no theory seems to fit. I do not think of myself as very style-conscious, but I am eager to receive the cast-offs of those who are. This year, at my first shopping visit, I found four shirts of top brands like Brooks Brothers, Jos. A.

Bank, and Forsythe's of Canada. I'll also risk spiffy Italian brands I've never heard of but they feel good. It also feels good that the merchandise is presented nicely by store volunteers.

I met two thrift store volunteers in Puerto Rico last January. I ran into Jo Ellen six months later at a Representative John L. Lewis "Good Trouble" demonstration in downtown Provincetown, commemorating the anniversary of his death. Jo Ellen has always been a rebel and her husband, Jack, frequently volunteers at the thrift store and the food pantry. They are Catholics but approve of how the thrift store donates profits to twenty-five charities. Shopping where the proceeds go to good causes is reassuring.

I shop for shirts at the thrift store so I don't burst into tears—or rage—at odd times. I feel angry, afraid, sad, or powerless at some point in every day, even on vacation. A lot of the political picture and news sometimes causes me great waves of surging anguish. The crushing amount of violence in Gaza, Ukraine, and American media stimulates my adrenaline, and it is energizing in a good way to be among others who—for very different reasons specifically—because they are gay or transgendered or simply wildly expressive of whatever they want—fight back by living their dreams. On any given day, walking down the main street, you might encounter cowboys, many men in gold lame dresses or short shorts, a portly middle-aged man in a G-string and tutu, or Vikings in metal hats with cows' horns

and thick black leather shorts. The Hat Sisters, two men (now deceased) who wore different, exuberant, huge, matching hats every day, are venerated in the history museum. All of this intermixes into tourist families with little kids, swarming bachelorette parties, patrons of the sixty restaurants. It is a carnival of identities. Most year-round inhabitants of Provincetown have chosen to live there for safety from social discrimination; as a minister for a little faith that wants to respect people who are simply being true to their essence, I know I need to stand with them.

There is a very old Universalist Meeting House downtown that every Sunday stands for the free expression of truth. I find attending there comforting. When we first started going to Provincetown there was a service every Sunday in the Meeting House basement, because it was cooler there, attended by a stalwart group of a dozen little old men and women listening to excellent sermons by an aged lay minister. And then they hired a firecracker of a lesbian minister. The Rev. Kim Harvie went down the main street handing out her card in bars and stores, telling people to come to the Meeting House on Sunday. Only a couple of years later the AIDS pandemic hit and The Meeting House was full every Sunday. I did a memorial service for a dear friend there. Memorial services and weddings there were as much about liberation for a class of people—gays, for example--as the people being celebrated.

Pastor Martin Niemoller was historically inaccurate in his successive listing of groups attacked by German Nazis when he says “In Germany they first came for the Communists and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn’t speak up, because I wasn’t a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn’t speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me—and by that time no one was left to speak up.” Actually, German Nazi prejudice was initially focused on Jews, but his saying is accurate in its essential meaning--we must stand with the freedom of the oppressed, if only because autocrats eventually get around to persecuting anybody who thinks, feels, or speaks up for themselves. Authoritarians hype general social anxiety to suppress free expression for unconventional people and those they love. Provincetown is, for me, that fortunate coincidence of several forms of beauty and a wild, weird, and reassuring faith in expressing one’s truth. And when I’m too tired or distracted to do all of that speaking and standing up, I’ll go to the thrift store. And after I’ve had that little bit of refreshing distraction, I’ll go right back to confronting authoritarians.

I’ll stand up anywhere for the right to be myself and your right to be yourself wherever I am. This is not simply frou-frou and tissue paper, it is intensely, seriously meaningful. This isn’t confined to Provincetown. Unitarian Universalist

congregations are dotted all over this country as social islands of refuge for people who need the protection of freedom, reason, and tolerance. Islands of refuge enable people to know who they are and what they think because they are encouraged to express themselves. As we hear ourselves saying and behaving our truth, we know it more clearly and examine it more reasonably. Some of these expressions are seemingly frivolous, or wrong-minded. But underneath the hilarity and hijinks is the most central concern of all—the serious pursuit of meaning. Paul Tillich, the pre-eminent theologian of the past century said it this way, and I quote:

The situation of doubt, even of doubt about God, need not separate us from God. There is faith in every serious doubt, namely, the faith in truth as such, even if the only truth we can express is our lack of truth. But if this is experienced in its depth and as an ultimate concern, the divine is present; and he who doubts in such an attitude is “justified” in his thinking. So, the paradox got hold of me that he who seriously denies God affirms him. . . .there is no possible atheism, there is no wall between the religious and the nonreligious. The holy embraces both itself and the secular. Being religious is both unconditionally concerned, whether this concern expresses itself in secular or (in the narrower sense) religious forms. . . .

In the status of *doubt* you are in the status of truth. And if all this comes together and you are desperate about the meaning of life, the seriousness of your despair is the expression of the meaning in which you are still living. This unconditional seriousness is the expression of the presence of the divine in the experience of utter separation from it. (F. Forrester Church (ed.) The Essential Tillich, The University of Chicago Press, 1987, pg. 72)

Through paradox, Tillich spotlights how the focus of our attention is what matters. Tillich was the grandson and son of German Lutheran clergy, so he was contending with theology from Day One. I want to focus on his last sentence:

“This unconditional seriousness is the expression of the presence of the divine in the experience of utter separation from it.” To simply breathe, little Paul Tillich would have had to distance himself from the adult orthodox theologians sitting around his dinner table. He would have had to get to something more profound than his currently accepted names and labels. And as a chaplain in World War I, he needed to reconcile what he had learned with what he had experienced. Just as we must reconcile the values, we have with what we are experiencing.

When the Oct. 18 No Kings Protest emails started arriving, they mentioned this, and I quote: “Whether they’re cutting jobs, deploying ICE and the National Guard, or ripping away healthcare from hardworking families, this administration wants us to fear: for our bank accounts, for our freedom, for our health, and more. No Kings emails headlined: “On Saturday, wear yellow and lead with joy! . . . fear cannot win when we choose to live with joy. Joy is the active decision in the face of oppression that renders their tactic useless.” (No Kings email, Oct.14, 2025, 3:12PM)

Authoritarianism is grimly purposeful. Our natural response is a mirror-image—the initial emotional tendency is “fight fire with fire.” But that degrades a message of peace and love to just another dismal confrontation. Angry blowback does not convey an alternative message to the vast population of bystanders, nor does it help us sustain our spirits for years of struggle to come.

This jogged my memory of the Sixties. Despite the many thousands of young men drafted and killed or maimed in Vietnam for imperialism and intense American racial discrimination, there was fun and joy. It was necessary. We had to keep our spirits up and focused on the ultimate truth that love could win against hate. We had to be the future we wanted. And, likewise, we now need to be the future of peace. We need to stand with love. Last Sunday, the Rev. Kym McNair likewise admonished us that only focusing on the pain of survivors of domestic abuse does not honor their strength and the peaceful future that we can all construct. Last Sunday, you unanimously passed a resolution against authoritarianism. We are rarely pushed to do that, but you all voted that you wish to actively work toward America being a caring community. We need to be the people who live differently, who celebrate our values gladly, and day after day, week after week, and year after year, pay attention to the ultimate meaning. We will not be derailed by doubt, because nobody can ever fully grasp the ultimate meaning. Your definition of ultimate meaning may not be the same as your neighbor right now, to your right or your left. It doesn't have to be. You just need to follow the principles that guide us toward a fulfilling, truthful love.