It was in a letter to a friend whose son had died of polio that the physicist Albert Einstein wrote these words on Feb. 12, 1950:

“A human being is a part of the whole called by us universe… He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. The striving to free oneself from this delusion is the one issue of true religion. Not to nourish the delusion, but to overcome it is the way to reach the attainable measure of peace of mind.”

Some of us would agree with Einstein: that we are part of the whole we call universe, or some call God. We emerge from it and return to it, and while living our lives are deeply intertwined with All That is and with one another.

Our religion nourishes this sense of being part of the whole… but this is not what our society would have us believe. Western individualism is the water we swim in. It is the ocean our churches are surrounded by—the waves lapping at our doorsteps. It doesn’t put much emphasis on interdependence or nurturing our sense of ultimate belonging.

On a personal level, individualism tries to convince us that we are on our own, we don’t necessarily belong, and that if we feel isolated this reflects a profound reality. This, even though we are part of a vast, creative, complex, beautiful, unfolding, evolving and quite possibly eternal whole - that some of us call universe, others of us call God.

Individualism also tells us that our primarily identity and value is as consumers. Think, for a moment, of the number of advertisements you are exposed to in one day.
This message is so loud and constant that it is easy to begin to believe it ourselves. It takes full advantage of our human desires and longings - and promises to satisfy it with more stuff, with pretty, shiny things.

*On a communal level,* individualism does not encourage a sense of humility— a sense of connection and debt to those who came before us. Nor does it encourage a sense of connection to those whom Jesus called “the least of these.” It doesn’t encourage a sense of responsibility to the natural world and all beings. The primary question of governance can become “What’s in it for me?” instead of “What is necessary for the Common Good and for the good of our planet?”

*On the theological level,* individualism can even thoroughly infiltrate religion. One can see it working in obvious cases, such as the prosperity gospel - the theology that God blesses those He favors with material wealth. But sometimes we can also see it in our own faith, Unitarian Universalism, when our commitment to freedom of conscience is not balanced by commitment to community and our interdependence. And some argue that individualism is seeping into faith not just in these cases but in much of Christianity.

Last month, I shared some words from Rev. Robin Meyers, a United Church of Christ minister who challenges the church to be a community of resistance- to Empire, Orthodoxy and Ego. Meyers chastises his own faith, Christianity, for what he calls its “obsession with personal salvation.”

He quotes Eric Fromm, who once said, “The real opposition is that between the ego-bounded man, whose existence is structured by the principle of having, and the free man who has overcome his ego-centricity.”

Meyers also argues that the Gospel was not intended to be an individual prescription to get into heaven but a guide to communities. He quotes Richard Horsley who says, “…modern Western individualism led to the idea that Jesus and the Pauline letters were addressing *individual* faith and morality, and not communities, peoples and institutional structures.”

Meyers concludes, “I believe self-absorption is the anti-gospel.”

Well, we live in a society that promotes self-absorption and ego-centricity. So how do we move from a Self-centered faith to an Other-centered faith?
Could it be that our own longing for a sense of belonging, for being part of a magnificent whole could lead us there? Could it be that this shift is a natural part of the human faith journey?

It turns out that there are predictable and distinct stages of what we call “faith development” in children, youth and adulthood. In 1981, a United Methodist minister and theologian named James Fowler published his theory that there are six of these broad stages, although many of us hit a plateau at some point and don’t move on to the next stage.

Like all stage theories, it is easy to oversimplify what happens, but Fowler’s stages of faith can offer an overall framework to understand the religious journey we have been on and help us see where we want to go. It can help us as parents or mentors of young people in a community composed of many different generations. It can remind us of the importance of inviting strangers to join us - to explore the next stage of their faith journey. It can create opportunities for connection in interfaith dialogue.

So I’d like to take just a few moments to describe Fowler’s stages of faith. (For those who are really interested, there are copies of a chart of these stages at the back of the sanctuary.)

The Children in our preschool, Kindergarten and first grade classes are in **Stage 1**, an intuitive stage.

How many of you have children who are in preschool through first grade? As you know, for them, fantasy and reality are mixed together. At the same time, they are forming their most basic ideas about God or the sacred—picking up information from experiences, stories, images and people. They are listening and watching all of us closely.

The children in our Elementary program are in **Stage 2**, the mythic-literal phase.

Are there any parents or teachers of elementary aged children here? They understand the world in more logical ways and believe in the justice and reciprocity of the universe. They tend to accept the stories told to them by us, their faith community,
but understand these stories and various religious metaphors and symbols quite literally. Their deities are usually anthropomorphic, or human-like.

Most people move on to the next stage, **Stage 3**, as teenagers, starting around age 12.

Who has a teenager, or volunteers with them? Interestingly enough, this is called the “conventional stage” - but we might not want to tell them that! They are developing a personal religious identity but still conforming to authority of parents, congregation or peers. Teens often have several different social circles and have a need to “pull everything together” by adopting some sort of all-encompassing belief system.

At the same time, they may not realize they are operating from *inside* a belief system, and thus have a hard time seeing outside it. They often become attached to the forms of their religion and can become extremely upset when these are called into question. Most people in this stage rely on some sort of institution such as a church, a mosque or synagogue to give them stability. This is the stage at which many people remain for their adult lives.

*But that’s not the end of the religious road for many of us! There are three more possible stages to go!* 

**Stage 4** often begins in young adulthood, when people start seriously questioning things on their own.

This is the Skeptical and Individualistic stage, sometimes a stage of angst and struggle. Has anyone here gone through a stage like that - a questioning phase? People start questioning the assumptions and authority structures of their religion and become aware of conflicts in their own beliefs. They have a new openness to the complexity of faith, and begin to see outside their own “box” and realize there are other “boxes” out there. Often, people in Stage 4 become disillusioned with their former faith. This stage often is very non-religious, and some folks stay in it permanently.

*If only they knew about a religion where it was OK to question beliefs, where it was OK to be skeptical, where it was OK to think for oneself…*
Ah! Yes! Our religion! Unitarian Universalism! Perhaps it is made for people in Stage 4… the Stage in which people tend to be allergic to religious community. What a conundrum.

**If** someone in Stage 4 **does** return to a religious community, they just might find themselves moving into a new stage, **Stage 5**.

Stage 5 is a mid-life stage… so if you’re in or past mid-life, you’re in luck! Rarely do people reach it before then. In Stage 5, people return to sacred stories and symbols, but this time without being literal or stuck in a theological box. They also return to community, as their need for individual self-reflection gives way to the important role of community in faith development.

Once you’re at Stage 5 Faith, you’re able to see the value of the earlier stages you went through - both developing and questioning your belief system, both relying on religious community and questioning things on your own. This is the phase in which we begin to accept the paradoxes of life, appreciate the mysteries of life, and become more open to others’ faiths.

Now, I would be wrong to suggest that we should ever get achievement-oriented about faith development! But there is that within me that says **“Yes! Stage 5 is what we’re aiming for!”** This is the goal: to get to the point of embracing paradox, mystery and community!

Doesn’t that sound sort-of sophisticated and fun? And maybe just a little confusing and sometimes frustrating? But who wouldn’t want to be so highly evolved religiously?

But wait! You may be thinking, “Didn’t she say there were Six Stages in this theory?” I’ve got Stage 5 covered, what about Stage 6?

**Stage 6** is called “Universalizing Faith” or by some, Enlightenment.

The person in this stage looks at all people with compassion, and can related to anyone at any stage, of any faith. Sounds good, right? We can do that, right? We’re “Universalists” after all! Well, not many of us get all the way there.

The types of people who fall in this stage are people like Gandhi and Mother Teresa.
The good news is that there’s always something to reach for! The good news is that it is possible to continue our spiritual and ethical growth through our entire lives. Ours is a life-long faith. Even when we embrace paradox, mystery and community, even when we make progress expressing universal compassion, we can keep deepening in this kind of faith until the day we die.

A person in Stage 5 faith might look back on their religious or spiritual journey and say, “It’s all good. It was the path I had to travel. Yet, when I look back, I see a road never to be walked again. I’m on a new path now, and this path is made by walking.”

_Caminante, son tus huellas_

_el camino y nada mas;_

_Caminante, no hay camino,_

_se hace camino al andar._

Our paths are made by walking.
Our paths are made by walking - but not by walking alone.
They are made by walking together.

This week, we received a lovely email from a former North Parish member, Charles Thompson, who was here from 1980 through 1987. The email was about his pride in the congregation after seeing a recent photo of the church with our Black Lives Matter banner.

After I wrote Charles back, he also shared an article about his Civil Rights experience in 1963-64 in Chapel Hill, North Carolina which we included along with his email in the church Enews last week. But what I want to share today is the story about his experience here, in this congregation.

Mr. Thompson wrote, “One more note about your – our - church: The first time I attended a service there, I didn’t know a soul, and to a native Southerner, New Englanders can seem a bit, well, reserved. At some point in the service, David Blanchard asked if anyone had an announcement to make. A rather severe-looking
fellow of seventy or more stood up to talk, and I thought, oh, no, here we go with something about church business and money.

“Then the fellow asked for volunteers to work with him in ‘our jail,’ in Lawrence. He was a member of the Samaritans. The simple compassion with which he talked about the jail and the inmates there flabbergasted me. I had never heard of the organization, and the Presbyterian church I grew up in would never have been involved in or countenanced a program of the sort he described.

“People sometimes say that they are ‘humbled’ by this or that, and I never find their avowals of humility very persuasive. But I was humbled by that fellow and what he had to say, and I kept coming back to the church because of him.

“David Blanchard used to preach an annual sermon about what Unitarians believe in. During the sermon, he asked the congregation how you tell the difference between a Unitarian and a mainline Christian. The answer: give them a choice between going to heaven and going to a discussion of heaven. I am tempted to say, the real way to tell the difference is to watch and see which ones behave like Christians. Those are probably the Unitarians. All the best to you and your congregation, of whom I remain very proud.”

--Charles Thompson

I was glad to hear about Charles’ first visit to North Parish, and the older gentleman who made such an impression on him by talking about the jail. I appreciate his sentiment that, in the end, our behaviors are more telling than our discussions.

But I would note one humbling thing: when it comes to our behavior and our compassion, we’re on a learning curve just like everyone else.

We have a great deal in common with people from other faith traditions who are at the same stage of faith development as we are - sometimes more in common with them than with people at a different stage in our own faith tradition. Like us, there are Christians and Muslims, Hindus, Pagans, Buddhists and people of other traditions who embrace paradox, mystery and community. We are all traveling together on a path
towards compassion for all beings, striving to free ourselves from the delusion of separation.

Before we die, before we draw our last breath, may we know that we are connected, that we are part of a vast, creative, complex, beautiful, unfolding, evolving and eternal whole.

Amen.

Reading: *Caminante no Hay Camino*, by Antonio Machado (July 1875 – Feb. 1939)

Caminante, son tus huellas
el camino y nada mas;
Caminante, no hay camino,
se hace camino al andar.
Al andar se hace el camino,
y al volver la vista atras
se ve la senda que nunca
se ha de volver a pisar.
Caminante no hay camino
sino estelas en la mar.

**Translation #1: by Mary Berg and Dennis Maloney**

Traveler, your footprints
are the only road, nothing else.
Traveler, there is no road;
you make your own path as you walk.
As you walk, you make your own road,
and when you look back
you see the path you will never travel again.
Traveler, there is no road,
only a ship's wake on the sea.

**Translation #2, by Asa Cusack**

Traveler, there is no path,
The path is made by walking.
By walking the path is made
and when you look back
you'll see a road
never to be trodden again.
Traveler, there is no path,
only trails across the sea.