

agency & acceptance



How do we practice agency in our personal circumstances or as groups in society? What systemic factors make our agency possible (or limit it)? What does acceptance of others look like, and how can it be life-giving?

welcome

Welcome to a new season of the Meaning Making Project!

If this is your first time joining us, these packets are created by a collective of Canadian UU ministers. Revs Arran Morton, Fiona Heath, and Lynn Harrison and I work together, taking turns editing and writing these letters, but we each contribute to all of the packets. We hope that the questions, quotes, and activities provoke conversation and reflection with family and friends as well as in your small group and congregation.

This year we are taking a new approach. In addition to inviting reflection on our own personal spiritual growth, we are asking how we shape and are shaped by our collective experiences. What are the values and practices that nurture the kinds of communities that will help us meet the future together?

This month, we are exploring agency and acceptance, powerful practices for individuals and groups.

Both agency and acceptance rely on our ability to be intentional with our attention.

Agency is our ability to make our own choices and shape our own lives through our actions. To have agency, we must first be able to attend to ourselves – to know our needs and values. This allows us to shape our world from inside out.

Acceptance is our ability to acknowledge and accept what is. To find acceptance, we must be able to attend to what is in front of us right now without turning our eyes because it is uncomfortable, or getting pulled away. When our attention is distracted, we lose our connection to our own being and our ability to see what is happening in the world.

Issues of agency and acceptance underly many of the challenges we are facing. Large companies are putting significant resources into their ability to deliver our attention.

Writing about proactive mindfulness, Serge Prengel notes that the insidiousness of the digital economy is the way it uses the brain's attraction to particular cues – novelty, movement, faces, etc. – a skill that kept us safe for thousands of years – to turn it towards an outside agenda:

A biological capacity that evolved to help us navigate the physical world is now continually recruited to serve an economic marketplace, shifting our center of gravity from our own immediate lives to external commercial priorities.

I am not against cellphones; I have social media and use it. I notice over time that my use veers between being solely directed by me and being a magpie following every bright shiny offering. Wow, an art workshop on dyeing fabric with native plants, how cool is that... and down I fall into the rabbit hole. Mostly, it's a mix of both.

Somehow, I need to remind myself that what I am seeing is not random – it's based on other items I've clicked on. But it feels in the moment like a "discovery."

Back in June, journalist Paul Wells interviewed Alexander Shelley, outgoing Music Director of the National Arts Center (NAC) Orchestra (Paul Wells June 26, 2026).

They got onto the topic of how people respond to the Shelley's choice of repertoire on social media. Which led, as it does, to a conversation about cellphones and the way they make us feel like we are curating our experiences, when in fact the platform is refining its understanding of what to show us.

The live music experience is fundamentally different. Wells says this is why he values live concerts:

I think the reason I still come out to concerts — there's a million reasons, but one of them is, I think it's healthy. It's a trust exercise: you fall back into someone else's hands.

This is also, I think, one of the value of live worship. It's not a TED talk, you can't pause and come back. You are in the room, thinking what you think and feeling what you feel, surrounded by other people who are also reacting to what is happening. Those of us who plan and lead services know that you can put a lot of time and attention into a service, and sometimes – often – the unexpected happens. Sometimes – less often – something indescribable happens and we all feel it but few of us can put words to it. Shelley names both agency and acceptance as twin poles in a well-lived life:

Shelley names both agency and acceptance as twin poles in a well-lived life:

But for me, I'm going to act as if I have agency. I'm going to act as if I can define my own future — but I'm also going to try and find the distance to let go. There's such enormous beauty in accepting that things will come across my path that I have no control over.

The question, of course, is how and when we choose to use them.

As Reinhold Neibhur says in his beloved prayer, it all comes down to having the wisdom to know which to apply, and when:

God, grant me the serenity to accept what I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

This packet is an invitation to notice agency and acceptance at play in your life and the world around you. Where is the center of gravity in a given issue – within you or somewhere else? To what extent are you shaping your own life, and to what extent is life shaping you?

Wishing you a meaningful month,
Yours in faith,
Karen

Paul Wells (June 26, 2026), ["The Q&A: 'There's enormous beauty in accepting things I have no control over' An exit interview with Alexander Shelley as he finishes 11 years as music director of Canada's National Arts Centre Orchestra,"](#) Paul Wells, Substack

Reinhold Neibhur's prayer: there are many versions of this prayer, including an early version shared by Neibhur's student Winnifred Wygal; this is the version as adapted by AA.

Serge Prengel (undated), www.proactivemindfulness.com



QUESTIONS

- In what situations do you have a stronger (or lesser) sense of agency? What influences or impacts your sense of agency?
- When and how and does your identity impact your sense of agency?
- What does agency feel like in your body?
- Where or with whom do you find it easiest to practice acceptance and where is it more difficult? What makes these situations different?
- Have you made a conscious practice of accepting a person as they are? How did it go? Did anything shift?
- Where could you most use acceptance right now (yourself, a relationship, a situation...) and what might this look like?
- How do you figure out when it's good or useful to practice acceptance and when it is not?
- How do you relate to people or situations that you want to impact, but can't?
- How do you experience the difference between attempting to exert agency and attempting to exert control?
- How do you understand the relationship between agency and acceptance?
- Have you ever exerted agency by practicing acceptance? What was that like?
- What process, activity or metaphor best expresses your sense of your own agency? *Consider human activities (e.g. sculpture, collage, carpentry) as well as the more-than-human (e.g. nest-making, seed growing) and non-human (e.g. plate tectonics, algorithm).*
- When have you felt a sense of agency as part of a group or community?
- What methods, processes or experiences help you maintain your sense of agency when participating in a group?
- What has come to light as a result of paying attention to agency and acceptance this month?
- To what extent are you shaping your own life, and to what extent is life shaping you?

QUOTES

Strong communities are born out of
individuals being their best selves
Leanne Betasamosake Simpson

I am so tired - so tired of being whirled on
through all these phases of my life, in which
nothing abides by me, no creature, no
place; it is like the circle in which the
victims of earthly passion eddy continually.
Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*
(British Unitarian)

Progress is impossible without change, and
those who cannot change their minds
cannot change anything.
George Bernard Shaw

A life spent making mistakes is not only
more honorable, but more useful than a life
spent doing nothing.
Also George Bernard Shaw

What's changed? It's not that I got smarter
or started trying harder...It was developing
a sense of personal agency, which I think
about as the capacity to both see, and act
on, all the degrees of freedom we actually
have.
Cate Hall

God, grant me the serenity to accept what I
cannot change, courage to change the
things I can, and the wisdom to know the
difference.

Reinhold Niebuhr, as adapted by AA

Whatever your labours and aspirations in
the noisy confusion of life, keep peace with
your soul.

Max Ehrmann, from *The Desiderata*

Existence is a project, and one must act to
define it.

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of
Ambiguity*

There is agency in accepting another
person's autonomy
Lynn Harrison

**VULNERABILITY,
FORGIVENESS, AND
ACCEPTANCE ARE PRIVILEGES.
LEANNE BETASAMOSAKE
SIMPSON**

According to the settler stories of
Indigenous deficiency, our people were
supposed to vanish into the sunset long
ago... It is not happenstance or luck that
Indigenous people and our lands still exist
after centuries of attack.

Daniel Heath Justice

MORE QUOTES

Can't you just be like the rest of us, normal and sad and fucked up and alive and remorseful?

Yolandi in All My Puny Sorrows by Miriam Toews

That my agency is riven with paradox does not mean it is impossible. It means only that paradox is the condition of its possibility.

Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*

After you have prioritized and you start working, knowing that what you are doing is the most important thing for you to be doing at that moment is surprisingly powerful.

Daniel J. Levitin, The Organized Mind

Unfortunately, too often our standards for evaluating social movements pivot around whether or not they "succeeded" in realizing their visions rather than on the merits or power of the visions themselves. By such a measure, virtually every radical movement failed because the basic power relations they sought to change remain pretty much intact. And yet it is precisely these alternative visions and dreams that inspire new generations to continue to struggle for change.

Robin D. G. Kelley, Freedom Dreams: the Black radical imagination. Beacon Press

But there is a critical point about differences between individuals that exerts arguably more influence on worker productivity than any other. The factor is locus of control, a fancy name for how people view their autonomy and agency in the world. People with an internal locus of control believe that they are responsible for (or at least can influence) their own fates and life outcomes. They may or may not feel they are leaders, but they feel that they are essentially in charge of their lives. Those with an external locus of control see themselves as relatively powerless pawns in some game played by others; they believe that other people, environmental forces, the weather, malevolent gods, the alignment of celestial bodies-- basically any and all external events-- exert the most influence on their lives.

— Daniel J. Levitin, The Organized Mind

RESPONSIBLE ACTION DOES NOT MEAN THE CERTAIN ACHIEVEMENT OF DESIRED ENDS BUT THE CREATION OF A MATRIX IN WHICH FURTHER ACTIONS ARE POSSIBLE, THE CREATION OF THE CONDITIONS OF POSSIBILITY FOR DESIRED CHANGES.
SHARON WELCH

WISDOM TRADITIONS

Daoism: Knowing other people is intelligence, knowing yourself is wisdom.
Ursula K Le Guin translation of Lao Tzu's
Tao Te Ching

Judaism: "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly now, love mercy now, go humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it." - from texts of the Pirke Avot (wisdom of the Jewish sages)

Hinduism: "You have a right to perform your prescribed duty, but you are not entitled to the fruits of action. Never consider yourself the cause of the results of your activities, and never be attached to not doing your duty." - Bhagavad Gita 2.47

Make the best use of what is in your power, and take the rest as it happens. Some things are up to us and some things are not up to us. Our opinions are up to us, and our impulses, desires, aversions—in short, whatever is our own doing. Our bodies are not up to us, nor are our possessions, our reputations, or our public offices, or, that is, whatever is not our own doing.
Epictetus

Rather than letting our negativity get the better of us, we could acknowledge that right now we feel like a piece of shit and not be squeamish about taking a good look.
Pema Chödrön, When Things Fall Apart

Clearly recognizing what is happening inside us, and regarding what we see with an open, kind and loving heart, is what I call Radical Acceptance. If we are holding back from any part of our experience, if our heart shuts out any part of who we are and what we feel, we are fueling the fears and feelings of separation that sustain the trance of unworthiness. Radical Acceptance directly dismantles the very foundations of this trance.

Tara Brach

[Cultivate] a sense of personal voice and agency. Insight and energy give rise to new life as we speak out and act out our own version of truth, while checking and correcting it against the truths of others. But many of us lack confidence in our own voices and in our power to make a difference. We grow up in educational and religious institutions that treat us as members of an audience instead of actors in a drama, and as a result we become adults who treat politics as a spectator sport. And yet it remains possible for us, young and old alike, to find our voices, learn how to speak them, and know the satisfaction that comes from contributing to positive change—if we have the support of a community.

Parker Palmer, *The Five Habits of the Heart*

AGENCY, ACCEPTANCE & CLIMATE CHANGE

I don't know about you, but for me the most upsetting moment in *An Inconvenient Truth* came long after Al Gore scared the hell out of me, constructing an utterly convincing case that the very survival of life on earth as we know it is threatened by climate change. No, the really dark moment came during the closing credits, when we are asked to . . . change our light bulbs. That's when it got really depressing. The immense disproportion between the magnitude of the problem Gore had described and the puniness of what he was asking us to do about it was enough to sink your heart.

Michael Pollan, "Why Bother?" in *Drawdown*

The danger of memory is going to it for respite. Respite risks entrapment. Don't debauch yourself by living in some former version of yourself that was more or less naked. Maybe it felt better then, but you were not better. . .
from *Weeds* by Diane Seuss

The buildup of greenhouse gases we experience today occurred in the absence of human understanding: our ancestors were innocent of the damage they were doing. That can tempt us to believe that global warming is something that is happening to us—that we are victims of a fate that was determined by actions that precede us. If we change the preposition, and consider that global warming is happening for us—an atmospheric transformation that inspires us to change and reimagine everything we make and do—we begin to live in a different world. We take 100 percent responsibility and stop blaming others. We see global warming not as an inevitability but as an invitation to build, innovate, and effect change, a pathway that awakens creativity, compassion, and genius. This is not a liberal agenda, nor is it a conservative one. This is the human agenda.

Paul Hawken, *Drawdown*

Our number one challenge isn't biodiversity loss, climate change, polarization, countries falling apart, or AI. It is our widespread illusion of insignificance — the belief that there's nothing we can do about it.

Otto Scharma

Spiritual

Practices

Daily Affirmation

For years I have had a daily gratitude practice; each morning while I drink my tea I reflect on the previous day and write down three experiences (moments, connections, things) for which I feel grateful. This has helped my well being tremendously, reminding me of the good in my life.

I also struggle with getting things done - procrastination is one of my talents! Recently I came across an accomplishment practice that is helping to improve my sense of personal agency. Every evening I name three things I accomplished that day, whether that is work or personal. This allows me to see that I am getting things done, especially on bigger projects which feel overwhelming. Reminding myself of what I have crossed off the to-do list strengthens my ability to do things. I stay gentle with myself, sometimes the accomplishments are doing the laundry or getting the dishes done, and that's okay. I know in the long run this practice helps me take action.

Rev. Fiona Heath

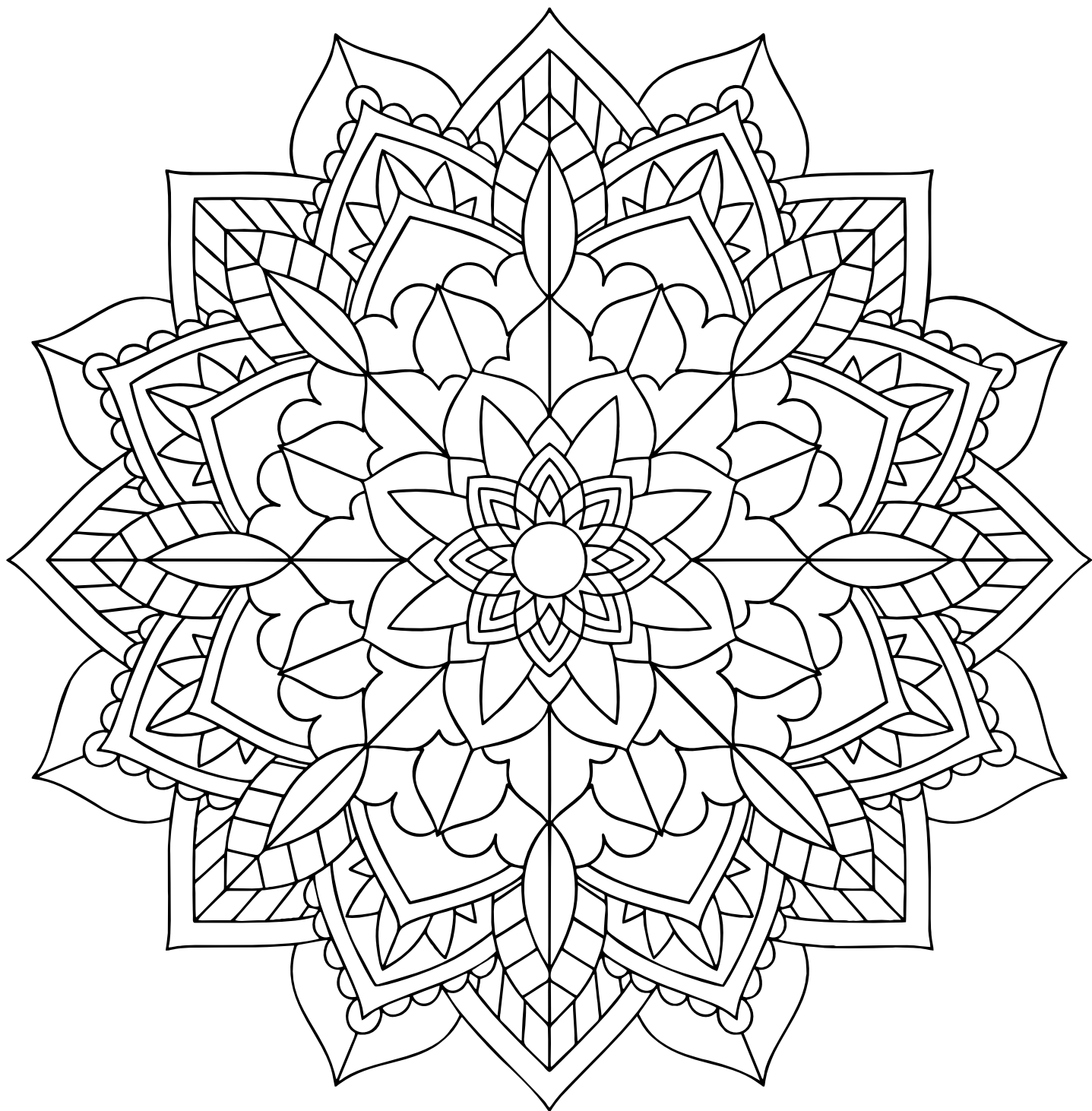
Journalling

Many of us struggle to move into action, to reach towards dreams or goals in a practical way. We may get lots done in some areas of our life and not much at all in others. We may be struggling with our sense of agency, feeling that we can't act or aren't capable of acting.

I invite you into a practice of personal reflection - through writing, drawing, movement - whatever practice brings you to story telling. Find a time in your life in which you felt strongly about something and worked to achieve it. Tell yourself your story, why you wanted this, how you know it was possible, what steps you took to create what you wanted. This could be as simple as I wanted a lemon cake so I made one, or as complex as I wanted to help refugees so I created a committee to sponsor families.

Take a break if needed, then return to your writing. Identify the steps you took: the intention, the imagined result, the skills you had, the help you needed, your response to setbacks. These are your tools for personal agency.

Colouring



mandala

Grab some felt pens or pencil crayons. When the unknown make itself known in our lives, taking on an enjoyable task that has a clear beginning and end can help. Colouring also invites acceptance. We might choose a particular colour thinking it will have a particular affect. Or perhaps we aren't as tidy as we would like. How do we relate to the mandala when it starts to look different than we desired? Colouring allows us to play with agency & acceptance in a way that is bounded by space and time. Print the mandala in this packet, and try it for yourself!

Practices

photo: DianaGP/Pexels

Together we have . . .

We often forget the collective achievements of community life, not noticing how much we have already done together! In a small group, chose a recent or relatively recent accomplishment of the congregation that at least a few people in the group participated in. This might be a big deal such as achieving green sanctuary status, helping a refugee family, or a building transformation. It might be something smaller like hosting a successful event or adding a beautiful artwork to the space. Ask everyone to share their story of that accomplishment, moving from those who participated to those who witnessed. Everyone has a piece of the story, hearing all the stories deepens our understanding and enriches our sense of possibility. Give yourselves a round of applause when you are done!

Sociocracy Rounds

Experiment with a practice used by a growing number of Canadian UU communities.

Sociocracy rounds are a way of sharing speaking opportunities equitably.

- A speaking order is set.
- The facilitator shares a question or proposal and each person has the opportunity to speak, in order.
- Passing is always ok.
- After the first round, if there is one or more people who want to speak again, everyone gets the opportunity to speak again, in order.

When rounds are new, they can feel artificial and cumbersome at first. As the group gets used to meeting this way, the benefits start to emerge. So if you want to try this, it's good to use the format for at least three meetings!

CHALICE LIGHTINGS

Have you heard the sound of the earth singing,
Shining high and bright this morning?
Listen. There is bird song in the early morning.
There are pebbles underfoot.
There is earth and rock, solid and dense.
There is river, always pressing on.
I am here they say,
Each with their own voice.
I am here.

Is it only humans who are challenged to “find” our
own voice?
That distinctive sound of conscience and confidence
Brought into being
By belonging to the earth, to each other,
and all the beings, singing.
– Karen Fraser Gitlitz

I’m learning that happiness is an emotion that’s a
result of circumstances. Joy, though, is a spiritual
engagement with the world based on gratitude. It’s
not the big things that make me grateful and bring
me joy. It’s more the glory of the small: a touch, a
smile, a kind word spoken or received., that first
morning hug, the sound of friends talking in our
home, the quiet that surrounds prayer, the smell of
sacred medicines burning, sunlight on my face, the
sound of birds and walking mindfully, each footfall
planted humbly on the earth.
-- Richard Wagamese

I live my life in widening circles
that reach out across the world.
I may not complete this last one
but I give myself to it.
I circle around God, around the primordial tower.
I’ve been circling for thousands of years
and I still don’t know: am I a falcon,
a storm, or a great song?
--Rainer Maria Rilke, transl. by Joanna Macy

photo: Cottonbro/Pexels

When all you have is a few minutes

QUICK CLIPS

Widening Circles

Written by **Rainer Maria Rilke**
Translated and read by **Joanna Macy**

I live my life in widening circles
that reach out across the world.
I may not complete this last one
but I give myself to it.

good could this be the moment that we
understood we can't measure

ED Na

ARIAMILAGROS V

acceptance find a comfortable and quiet
space to sit

FINDING HOME

A Shift

Acceptance isn't surrender—
It's the shift in perspective,
The quiet shift
From victim to survivor,
From trapped to free.

It's standing in the same storm
But knowing
You are not the same as before.

Jim Compton

APTNI Director of Program
go down in a history of Aboriginal
television as two very

orget who i am
constantly around other people

itude to see myself clearly - rupi kaur

"Acceptance"

I'll never
understand

could get behind because this is
something that everybody has

LONG FORM

Moodacity looks at agency through a lens of emotional regulation.

The Power of Agency: The Seven Principles to Conquer Obstacles, Make Effective Decisions, and Create a Life on Your Own Terms by Paul Napper and Anthony Rao (2019)

Pema Chödrön, When Things Fall Apart

Neo-pagan activist and author Starhawk shares ideas for building collective agency for activism.

Sharon Welch, a member of the UU Peace Ministry and a Fellow of the Institute for Humanist Studies, speaks about “Belonging not Belongings” <https://uucomo.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Chapter-4-Belonging-Not-Belongings.pdf>

WITH CHILDREN

Deidre Havelock, Heartbeat Drum: The Story of Carol Powder, Cree Drummer & Activist (2024).



Watch “Rock Your World” by Chubby Cree (above). For more resources for congregations and families, check out Meaning Making’s Children & Family Packet



I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept.
Angela Davis

**“we cannot
live without
each other
& you
belong only
to yourself”**

**Kai Cheng
Thom**

From
“What the Queer
Community Should Have
Told Us”

Meaning Making Project

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photo: Casnafu/Pexels

