

Agents of Flourishing - Sermon Text

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Meaning Making Worship Service Oct 2026 (Agency & Acceptance)

It is salmon season and there I stood in the grocery store looking at beautiful orange fillets, the ones advertised on special, and as I stood there, I faced an ethical dilemma. How could purchasing a salmon filet possibly be a theological or ethical dilemma you may ask?

Further exploration disclosed more information on the label including previously frozen and farmed and it was on a Styrofoam holder covered with plastic. When I looked in the display case there were also salmon fillets on ice, fresh and ocean wise, so not farmed, and ready for the charming human behind the counter to wrap my choice in recyclable butcher paper, for only about 40% more in cost.

I of course had the choice of which to purchase, because I have the privilege of being in a grocery store that has the choice, as well as having the financial resources to consider making such a personal choice. Note that my pondering did touch on being a vegetarian, remembering times in my lived experience when I had to use food banks, and recognition that I have running potable water ...

Now this particular choice may not seem, to you, to be an ethical dilemma in any way and yet the internal debate about this choice was magnified by my holding the focus for this morning's service, the monthly theme of agency and acceptance, of being an agent of flourishing to heart.

This ethical dilemma, this wrestling with the choice, is a consequence of being grounded in a faith that asks me, demands of me, to be deeply thoughtful about the choices I make, that requires me to accept and respond to my inherent agency. Our 1st Principle articulated as affirmation of inherent worth and dignity, from my perspective, includes recognition of personal agency and responsibility as well.

Agency is often spoken of as if it were entirely individual. Our individual choices matter to our wellbeing and our contribution to the greater good. The ways we respond to choices, the values we enact, the courage we summon—all of these are real and meaningful expressions of agency.

Truth is though that agency is never exercised in a vacuum.

Each of us lives within systems—economic systems, social norms, cultural expectations, political structures—that shape what choices are available to us and how costly those choices may be. Some of us can take risks because we have safety nets. Others cannot.

Some voices are amplified; others are ignored or silenced. Some bodies move through the world with ease; others encounter barriers at every turn.

To talk about agency without talking about systems is to tell only half the story.

Consider something as simple as time. The ability to reflect, to plan, to engage in community life—these require time. Yet time is unevenly distributed. Those working multiple jobs, those caring for family members without support, those navigating chronic illness or systemic discrimination often have far less capacity to exercise what we might call “choice.”

Or consider safety. The freedom to speak one’s mind, to organize, to dissent—these depend on whether one can do so without fear of retaliation, violence, or loss of livelihood.

So when we ask, “How do we practice agency today?” we must also ask, “Under what conditions does agency become possible?” How and what does the privilege we hold impact our agency?

In Unitarian Universalism, we affirm both the inherent worth and dignity of every person and the interdependent web of existence. These are not separate ideas. They remind us that while each person carries inherent value, that value must be supported by conditions that allow it to flourish.

Practicing agency, then, becomes both a personal and a collective act.

Personally, it means cultivating awareness: noticing where we do have choice, even in constrained circumstances. It means aligning our actions with our values, even in small ways. It means resisting the pull of apathy, the quiet voice that says, “Nothing I do will matter.”

Collectively, practicing agency means working to transform the systems that limit it.

It means asking both, “What can I do?” as well as, “What can we change together?” It calls us into community, into solidarity, into the slow, often imperfect work of justice.

Agency is strengthened when it is shared. It does not mean that everything is within our control. It does require our engagement. It does require considering the circumstances of others ability to exercise agency. It required accepting limitations, our own and others.

This is where acceptance enters.

Acceptance is sometimes misunderstood as resignation. It is not.

Acceptance does not mean approving of injustice or abandoning the work of change. Rather, it is the practice of seeing clearly—of recognizing reality without denial or distortion. It is the willingness to encounter people as they are, not as we wish them to be.

Acceptance is about letting go of expectation and the assumptions that often accompany or even cling to expectations.

Acceptance asks us to loosen our grip on control—not because control is bad, rather because it is limited.

Think of a relationship in your life—perhaps with a friend, a partner, a colleague. At some point, you may have wished they would change: be more attentive, more responsible, more understanding. You may have tried to influence them, to encourage growth.

The relationship that come to mind for me was the longing for a deep and meaningful relationship with my dad. Then there came the moment, when I realized he just was not a deep and meaningful person, according to my expectations. He was kind, funny and loved to dance. He wasn't interested in deep conversations about ethics and theology. When I let go of my expectations, accepted who he was, we danced and our relationship flourished.

Acceptance in that moment was not giving up on him. It was releasing the illusion that I could somehow remake him or that he needed to be remade. It was choosing to meet him honestly, without projection, or at least some of my projections. It required the real practice of our 1st principle and respecting his agency.

And paradoxically, acceptance can create the conditions for change in ways that force or expectation cannot.

When people feel seen rather than managed, respected rather than corrected, they are often more able to grow. Acceptance can be life-giving because it affirms dignity. It says, "You are real. You are here. You matter, even as you are becoming."

This is true not only in personal relationships, also in communities.

In a pluralistic society, we are surrounded by difference—differences of belief, identity, experience, and perspective. Acceptance does not require agreement. It does not mean we abandon our values. It means we approach others with curiosity rather than immediate judgment, with a willingness to understand before we respond.

At the same time, acceptance must be paired with discernment.

Not all behaviors are acceptable. Not all systems are just. Acceptance of people does not require acceptance of harm. This is where the tension returns: how do we hold firm to our values while remaining open to the humanity of those with whom we disagree?

Perhaps the answer lies in remembering that agency and acceptance are not opposing forces, rather they are complementary practices.

Acceptance grounds us in reality. Agency moves us to respond.

Acceptance helps us see clearly what is. Agency asks what could be.

Acceptance invites humility—the recognition that we do not control everything. Agency invites responsibility—the recognition that we are not powerless.

Together, they form a kind of rhythm.

We accept the world as it is in order to understand it. We exercise agency to transform it where we can. We accept again when we encounter limits. We act again where new possibilities emerge.

This rhythm can be life-giving because it frees us from two extremes: despair and domination.

Despair says, “Nothing can change.”

Domination says, “Everything must change according to my will.”

Between these lies a more grounded path: engaged presence.

Let us bring this back to our lives today.

In your personal circumstances, where do you have agency? It may be in how you speak to yourself, be kind, in how you treat others, show compassion and curiosity, in what you choose to pay attention to, in the small acts of care or courage you offer each day.

Our meditation today invites agency of care and concern. Actions of kindness to self and others. The power of love, the core of our faith, that

...

speaks gently

when anger would be easier.

...

To become a harbor

when others are adrift.

To remain rooted

*when fear pulls at every branch.
... reminds us that*

*We do not always see
how far kindness travels.
Its path extends beyond sight,
moving from heart to heart,
crossing distances we cannot measure.
In troubled times,*

*love is not a retreat from the world.
It is the way we help
the world endure.¹*

Be an Agent of Flourishing, your own, others and beyond. And where are you called to acceptance? Perhaps in acknowledging limits—of time, of energy, of control. Perhaps in making peace with uncertainty. Perhaps in allowing yourself to be human, unfinished, and still worthy.

In our wider society, facing as we are, the polyocracies of this time, we enact our agency in addressing inequality, in protecting the vulnerable, in sustaining the earth, in building communities of belonging. These are not tasks for individuals alone, cannot be accomplished individually, all of us together are needed.

Acceptance is needed in recognizing complexity, in listening across difference, in resisting the urge to reduce one another to categories or caricatures.

The work of our time is not to choose between agency and acceptance, it is to practice both with wisdom, and in so doing become agents of flourishing.

There is a story often told in various forms about a person standing at the edge of the ocean, trying to hold back the tide. No matter how hard they try, the water comes in. Eventually, they stop, exhausted, and simply watch the waves. In that moment of acceptance, something shifts. They begin to notice the patterns, the rhythm, the beauty. And with that understanding, they learn not to stop the ocean, rather to move with it—to swim, to sail, to navigate.

We cannot control the tides of the world. Neither are we helpless before them. We can learn where to stand, when to move, how to work together.

¹ <https://bobmcketchnie.substack.com/p/anchor-of-love>

We can build vessels strong enough to carry us.
We can care for one another when the waters are rough.
This is agency rooted in acceptance, the invitation to be Agents of Flourishing.
There is no single answer. Only a practice, renewed each day.
May we have the courage to act where we can.
May we have the wisdom to accept what we cannot control.
And may we cultivate the compassion to hold ourselves and one
another with care along the way.