

# TO BE DEFINED

A Sermon Preached by Pamela Patton  
Unitarian Church of All Souls, New York City  
May 14, 2017

I'm glad to be with you this morning. I'm glad you decided to come to All Souls today. You might have done something else on this spring morning, but after hundreds of decisions you've made this morning, we're here in this sanctuary together. If you think backwards from when you sat down in the pew where you find yourself now, you decided which pew, which door of the sanctuary to enter, whether to walk or take the bus, how much time to allow to get to church, which articles were worth reading in today's paper, white shirt or green, pancakes or yogurt, how long to stay in the shower, whether to press snooze...

As Eleanor Lerman's poem *Starfish* describes, life lets you choose the way you have your eggs and your coffee.

These sorts of decisions feel mundane and mechanical, maybe even inconsequential, but in fact they construct the continuum of your life. If you contemplate this continuum backwards, there is one decision before another before another, and they add up to your unique life.

These decisions—how you dress, what you eat—are palpable, and we acknowledge them as decisions. But I would argue that we each made hundreds of other decisions this morning that are not so obvious. In Lerman's poem, she asks "Are you old enough to appreciate the moment? Too old?" Though we have many experiences in our lives that relate to not feeling old enough or feeling too old, we usually don't see the feeling as a choice.

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Buddhists believe it's possible to make a decision in each moment, and they define a moment as lasting 1/65 of a finger snap. Only great lamas have a sense of this degree of granularity of time, but the very possibility is an invitation to a new beginning, a new way of being and thinking, over six billion times each day. Gus Cutz, a teacher at Shantideva Meditation Center here in New York City, puts it this way, "...in each moment a brand new administration is in charge, whether we realize it or not. Each new administration decides whether it will continue to implement the policies it has inherited from the one that came before, or whether it will instead decide to move in a different direction."

The belief that each moment makes way for a new administration, a new beginning, is predicated upon the idea that we are making many more decisions than we're conscious of. You made a decision whether to pay close attention to the taste of your coffee or tea this morning, whether or not to smile at the first person you encountered on the

sidewalk today, whether to listen during the meditation. And you made a decision about how you feel about Mother's Day—is it a day that celebrates the precious bond between you and your mother, is it a day that elicits sadness because you are estranged from your mother, is it a day that makes you long to be loved unconditionally, is it a day when you are thankful for your children and all they teach you, or a day which is complicated because you are not a mother? Whatever you feel, there is a possibility for new awareness about your perspective, perhaps in a way that allows you to wonder, as Lerman's poem wonders about the meaning of the starfish in the channel.

The poem expresses an openness to possibility.

*This is what life does. It lets you walk up to the store to buy breakfast and the paper, on a stiff knee. It lets you choose the way you have your eggs, your coffee. Then it sits a fisherman down beside you at the counter who says, Last night, the channel was full of starfish. And you wonder, is this a message, finally, or just another day?*

*Life lets you take the dog for a walk down to the pond, where whole generations of biological processes are boiling beneath the mud. Reeds speak to you of the natural world: they whisper, they sing. And herons pass by. Are you old enough to appreciate the moment? Too old?...*

*So life lets you have a sandwich, and pie for your late night dessert. (Pie for the dog, as well.) And then life sends you back to bed, to dreamland, while outside, the starfish drift through the channel, with smiles on their starry faces as they head out to deep water, to the far and boundless sea.*

The protagonist's awareness affords her choices beyond the eggs and coffee—she considers whether she is old enough or too old to appreciate nature's mystery. And she speaks of the intersection between her conversation about starfish over breakfast and her dreamlife in which she makes the choice about whether the starfish are conveying a message.

The poem invites us to wonder, to question how we define ourselves moment by moment.

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Ellen Langer is a Social Psychologist who studies the idea of psychological primes, the landscape of choice in an open, wondering mind. Her most recent book is titled *Counter Clockwise: Mindful Health and the Power of Possibility*.

In 1976 Langer and psychologist Judith Rodin led a study in which they gave houseplants to two groups of residents at a nursing home. One group was told they had responsibility for keeping the plants alive and they were also able to decide on their own daily schedules. The other group had their plants cared for by the staff and they were not given any say in their daily schedules. After 18 months twice as many people were alive in the group who cared for the plants and decided about their schedules as in the group who did not care for their plants and did not choose their schedules.

A few years later in 1979 Langer led another study in which men in their mid to late 70s went on a retreat for five days in New Hampshire. The setting for the retreat, a monastery, was retrofitted to 1959. Langer writes, “The men in the experimental group were told not merely to reminisce about this earlier era, but to inhabit it—to make a psychological attempt to be the person they were 20 years ago.” The men wore clothing from 1959, and they talked about Johnny Unitas, Wilt Chamberlain, the first U.S. satellite launch, and Jimmy Stewart movies.

Before arriving at the monastery, the men were examined for dexterity, grip strength, flexibility, memory, hearing, vision, and cognition. The results of the experiment were surprising: the men showed improvements in dexterity, posture, even in eyesight. Independent judges compared photos and said the men looked younger.

These studies offer us insight into the connection between mind and body. But more important is the underlying hypothesis about how we can flourish psychologically and physiologically, and I would add, spiritually. Langer believes that the key to our best selves is in recognizing our mindlessness by becoming aware of all the choices available to us. The way to become aware is to notice moment-to-moment changes around us and to look for new elements in our surroundings. This practice of noticing leads us to see that the way we define our personalities—our opinions, our proclivities, our wounds—is not fixed. In fact every moment offers a decision, a chance for a new administration with new policies.

The practice of noticing comes easily to us when we are on vacation—we are paying attention, expecting novelty—we’re alert and engaged with our surroundings. In our routines at home we operate on auto-pilot, assuming nothing around us is changing much. In fact, our environment, our jobs, our relationships are always different from one day to the next.

You can practice noticing this by actively looking for how people and places change. Look around at the faces on the train you take to work from one day to the next. Notice the fruit vendor’s display on the corner from one day to the next. Pay attention to changes in the facial expressions of someone you’re close to—or how they move their hands when they talk.

This approach forces us to explore the world around us and jars the conceptions we’ve already formed. As we start to be curious about what we thought we knew, we also

become curious about what we have been overlooking—our environment becomes more interesting to us.

When we have the expectation that each moment is unique, we are more alive.

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Mother's Day is an opportunity to become aware of how we see our mothers or mother figures, and how we see ourselves. As with all holidays, some people enjoy the opportunity to celebrate Mother's Day while others feel disconnected and lonely.

My friend Isabel is not a mother. She was engaged to a man in her 20s and he died before they were able to marry and fulfill her dreams of the family they'd create together. Decades have passed since Isabel's fiancé died, and she harbors sadness because she does not have children. Her own mother died a few years ago, and she associates their relationship with disappointment. Isabel has a gratifying career, much of which has involved working with children, but she has an aversion to Mother's Day.

A few years ago, Isabel was picking up lunch at McDonalds on Mother's Day. The cashier handed her a cheeseburger and a Diet Coke and then he proffered a yellow rose. He said, "We're giving yellow roses to all the ladies today." Isabel was taken by the rose's beauty and it reminded her of the yellow roses that her fiancé used to give her because they represented friendship.

It would have been easy for Isabel to reject or at least resent the yellow rose. Instead she chose to accept it as a symbol of spring and friendship.

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Whether it's Mother's Day or another concept around which we define ourselves, we have a choice and we can redefine ourselves over and over.

For me, this Mother's Day is a chance to redefine myself as a mother. I feel I am a mother most of all, more than I am anything else. But as is always true with transitions, I am being forced to scrutinize my identity because my oldest son, Vince, is graduating from high school next week and he is leaving New York to play baseball in the Dominican Republic for a year. Surely Vince leaving home makes me less of a mother...unless of course I choose instead to feel lucky to launch a boy I've done my best for and who has the courage and curiosity to take ownership of his journey. The choice is mine, and whatever I choose will affect the continuum of what's to come for me.

It only takes a moment, this moment...or this moment to notice our choices, to reconsider how we want to define ourselves and who we want to be.