

**Stretch Marks—Personal Reflections from Three “Unfinished” (Evolving) Women
Sermonettes Delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of San Dieguito (UUFSD)
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In Celebration of International Women’s Day 2015**

Emersen (a woman in her early 20s)

I don’t know about you, but I’m feeling “twenty-something” and tired. I’m feeling stressed out. I’m feeling a bunch of pressure.

As a young women I hear “these are the best years of your life” all the time. It doesn’t always feel that way. My elders say, “When are you going to finish college? You have to finish college.” “What are you going to do for the rest of your life? You need to have a plan.” “Are you single? Do you want to be in a relationship?”

The truth is I’m twenty-two year old young feminist female, reflecting on my stretch marks, and yes I do have quite a few already, trying to figure out how to navigate the world on my own. Sometimes I can barley think about next week let alone next year or the next five years. Where do I fit in this world?

Growing up, both my mother and father headed the Women’s rights movement. My mother was the CEO of a women’s health clinic where they provided contraceptives and abortions and my father spent many years passing laws and working to help young mothers get the prenatal care they needed. I can remember being held by my father, as my mother wore a bulletproof vest, protesters screaming and shouting threats at her. I can remember sitting in my stroller as we marched in the gay pride parade and getting up way too early for the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Breakfast every year.

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich said “Well-behaved women seldom make history.” My mother has certainly broken a lot of rules, and she certainly has made history. I’ve always hoped to do the same. I’ve always thought one day someone is going to Google me and an article is going to pop up that might make a difference in their life. I guess I have already done just that. If you Google me right now you will find a few articles people have written about the National Eating Disorder Association walk I chaired in 2013 and 2014. This is only the beginning. This is only part of my journey as a young women to empower other women and empower the next generation.

Currently I am a full-time nanny to nine-month old twins, child minder here at the UUFSD, and early child education major at San Diego City College. I truly feel my calling has found me. The future of the next generation is partly in my hands and that both excites me and scares me. I hope I am raising these children to be strong, independent, resourceful, smart and resilient. I hope they learn to realize that they matter and are important, and even though they are just one out of billions of people, that they in small way can change the world for somebody, somewhere.

Here’s to strong women. May we know them. May we be them. May we raise them.

Tiffany (a woman in her later 30s)

I've spent half my life trying half-heartedly to convince myself of a half-truth Gloria Steinem once said: I'm a fish, men are bicycles, and I have no need for them. You can tell by my tone I've become somewhat skeptical of this idea, but that wasn't always the case.

My mother gave birth to me when she was only 18 and raised my sister and I as a single mom for much of my childhood. She didn't seem to need a man, and given that I didn't have a father figure until my early adolescence, I felt for a while I didn't, either.

In high school, I fought for proper sex education after our conservative school board tried to dismantle it. I had seen the sacrifices my mom made after getting pregnant so young. Instead of spending prom night wondering if it would be the night I'd lose my virginity, I spent it being interviewed by a documentary film producer about how I wasn't going to let some stupid kid knock me up. My poor prom date, a German exchange student, had no idea what hit him.

My best friend in college was a lesbian who taught me I didn't even need a man to enjoy middle-of-the-night road trips or dart games and pitchers of beer. After college, I joined the Peace Corps, where I proved I could do just about anything with just about no help from anyone. Full disclosure, though: I did once ask a neighbor boy to kill a rogue rat, while I stood on a chair, just like the terrified housewives in those Tom & Jerry cartoons.

During my formative years I had boyfriends, sure, but I was also accused more than once of loving humanity more than one man. But then... I fell in love with one particular man, the man who is now my husband and the father of my children.

You might have deduced by now that relationships have not always been my strong suit. For years I had a hard time making my husband feel needed, because I still wasn't convinced I needed anyone. It's only been for a short period of history, after all, that women have been trying to 'do it all'. There haven't been all that many role models who have lived the dream, who have been a career woman, an activist, a thought leader, a volunteer, and a motheryou expect us to be a loving partner on top of all that?
Fish. Bicycles. You know.

But then I got to thinking: Fish are the creatures that emerged from the water to become the creatures that would walk on land and eventually ... ride bicycles. Fish evolved, in other words, and I'm happy to say my own views about the role of men in my life have evolved as well.

I realize now that I value my relationship with my husband not because he's a man, but because he's another human being, a human being who knows me intimately, a human being who holds me accountable, who sees me at my absolute awful, horrible, terrible no-good worst and still loves me for it.

OK, I'm not entirely blind to gender. Trust me, I'm well aware of my husband's 'maleness' every time he puts his clothing on top of the laundry hamper instead of inside it. But because my husband is a man, he also provides insights I would never come to myself. He reminds me that the way I see things might not be the way the entire world sees them. His simple, loving

presence is an invitation to stop trying so hard to prove I'm equal to, or better than, all the men of the world -- a struggle that often comes at the expense of my marriage. Instead, I'm inspired to show this one man, the man who matters most, I can be my own best self.

Disclaimer: I am in no way saying I need a man to 'complete me.' Many of the never-married, divorced, transgender and lesbian women in this congregation already know this to be true.

What I am saying is captured beautifully in Shel Silverstein's children's book, "The Missing Piece Meets the Big O." In it, Silverstein tells the tale of a wedge-shaped 'missing piece,' who tries to find the shape it fits into so it can roll along through life.

Various shapes come by, but none are quite right. "*Some had too many pieces missing*", Silverstein writes, "*Some had too many pieces, period.*" and "*Some rolled by without noticing*".

And then ... a beautiful Big O rolls by. Unfortunately for the little wedge, the Big O is not missing any pieces, but it suggests something miraculous: Why can't the missing piece roll all by itself?

"But I have sharp corners," the missing piece says. *"I am not shaped for rolling."*

And yet, the missing piece decides to try, and it goes liftpullflop liftpullflop" forward, over and over, until its edges begin to wear off and its shape starts to change and eventually, the missing piece becomes its well-rounded self. The Big O emerges once again, and the two roll off together, side by side, not gazing at each other, as Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, put it, but "looking outward together in the same direction."

It's a metaphor not just for the self-realization of any one individual woman, but also for the women's movement as a whole. As we've learned we can roll along -- liftpullflop, liftpullflop -- all on our own, the sharp edges of women's liberation -- the anger, the resentment -- begin to wear down and the shape of womanhood, the shape of humanity, begins to stretch. Those stretch marks are a mark of change. As women gain influence and autonomy and men begin not just to tolerate this reality but celebrate it, we are beginning to see that creating a world we all want to live in requires looking outward together, in the same direction.

Perhaps the greatest gift of women's liberation is that it has taught women to come out from behind the shadows cast by men. Yet there's another idea from which we women must now be liberated: The idea that we have to be all things, to all people, all the time. Sometimes the path to becoming our best selves is through another person, someone who can provide the yang to our yin and invite us to direct our attention inward rather than always and forever outward in a constant struggle to prove we are whole.

Men are not what 'complete us' as women, but the role they serve is to let us grow and help us be more fully ourselves. They help us to be the fiercely independent fish that we are, swimming free in a pond, perhaps with no need for a bicycle, but with an appreciation all the same that there are bicycles, some even built for two.

Lisa (a woman in her early 60s)

Many of you have met my 33-year old daughter. She has given me stretch marks – on my belly, in my heart, and in my understanding of myself. She was an adorable child and a good student. But she took the 10-year path to a college degree with major detours into places I don't want to know; and now sports a rainbow colored Mohawk hairstyle, piercings and tattoos; identifies as "queer in principle but not in practice" (whatever that means) and is a competitive weight lifter. In other words, she has not become the model braggable child I had expected – no perfect home, ideal husband, Nobel Prize, or beautiful grandchildren. And yet, I am extraordinarily proud of her and her courage to become who she was meant to be. I am proud of her ability to tell me about her life, even though she knows it's now what I would have chosen for her. And I know that she appreciates me and what I do, even though it's not necessarily what she would have wanted me to do. She has stretched me, and I am grateful every day for her and for our relationship.

I would like to think that I left stretch marks on my mother. But I'll never know for sure, since I never took the chance to talk to her about it. As her only daughter, I was a challenge as a kid. I'm sure I wasn't quite the daughter she wanted. But she left her mark – to this day, I worry about what she would think. I wish I had been able to ask her about her experience as my mother before she died. Instead, my mother remains an enigma – intelligent, attractive, well organized, kind and generous, and absolutely no self-esteem. Born in 1922, she was of a generation of women who were not encouraged to take credit for being competent, successful women. From her I think I learned to be confused.

I was raised with 2 older brothers and told I could be and do anything they could do or be. But don't call a boy I like, because I should wait for him to initiate conversation.

We had the mother-daughter talk that progressive parents have about sex -- you don't have to wait until you're married. Sex can be a very lovely experience when both people care about each other and take proper precautions. But when I told her about my first experience she was shocked and said not to tell my father.

I have had mixed messages throughout my life. Achieve, but not too much. Make sure your husband feels secure and don't let anyone know you earn more than he does. When you take care of your child you're being a mother. When he does it, he's babysitting and you should be grateful. So no wonder I was confused.

In 2010 I attended a retreat organized by Joan Anderson. It was, as advertised, a weekend to change my life. Joan has become one of my life mentors. Her latest book, *Stretch Marks*, was part of the inspiration for this service and where we got the title. Joan Anderson's focus is on the "second journey" of a woman's life. She says "the call to a second journey usually commences when an unexpected change is thrust upon you, causing a crisis of feelings so great that you are stopped in your tracks ..."

My second journey began with my decision to divorce my first husband after a 22-year marriage. It was the hardest decision I've ever made. I had been determined to make my marriage work, to learn from my parents' dysfunctional relationship, and make my family

better. My father left my mother after 32 years of marriage, and I did not want to be like him. But I also didn't want to be like my mother, who lived an anxious life trying to please someone whose needs she could not meet. I learned from my mother that the only problem with a guilt trip is finding the off ramp.

So my encounter with Joan Anderson through her books and in person, helped me accept that it was ok for me to take care of myself, I didn't have to feel guilty about leaving my marriage if I had given it my best try and that was what I needed to do.

Joan says, "We are born to be ourselves ... to look back again and again and befriend that person we once intended to become. Life, like a beach, is always rearranging itself. The trick is to welcome and then work with, not against, the changes, and in doing so deepen our innate strengths. ... The goal is to come of age in the middle of life rather than live out our days lacking purpose and energy."

In 1998, I left the Washington DC area to accept a position at Scripps Institution of Oceanography. I was in the final stage of my divorce, my only child was about to finish high school and go off to college, and I moved across the country, changed employers, and started my second journey in earnest. But my mother's voice was still there, and I carried my self-doubt with me to the left coast. I wasn't sure I could live up to the expectations of my boss who had recruited me for this job. I wasn't sure I could provide the emotional support my daughter needed as she left home and started her college experience. I wasn't sure I'd make friends and fit in Southern California, an area I barely knew. And if anything didn't work out, it was my fault.

I guess I lived up to the expectations of my boss who recruited me. But he eventually lost his position [for reasons that were NOT my fault] and with it, my professional situation changed. However, that closing door led to the opening of another and another after that, and eventually here I am, retired with a nice pension from UCSD, in the midst of a completely different journey I never anticipated. My daughter has had a somewhat bumpy road – I didn't do as well as I might have in supporting her, since I was still working on supporting myself emotionally. But she's good and nobody promised her a smooth life's journey anyway. And I do feel surrounded by friends and very well embedded in a loving community.

The retreats with Joan helped me see that I was ok. My experience was normal. It helped me focus on how far I had come, how much I have grown, and how to take good care of who I am now. I want to share some lessons I learned from Joan Anderson, from her book "Second Journey." I wish I could share this wisdom with my mother – she traveled her second journey pretty well even without a guide, but never gave herself the credit she deserved. I hope you will find these lessons helpful, too.

"Embrace change – knowing that life is always being reconfigured.

Befriend the person you are striving to become.

Welcome new paths. Enjoy the detours.

Strive to go deeper rather than just forward.

Know that most unnecessary demands come from the unfinished parts of self.

Beware of speed. It is often one's undoing.

Wholehearted is the way. Halfhearted will kill you...
Let go of what is outlived to make room for the unlived."

May we all be stretched by the love and courage and compassion we find in ourselves and in our loved ones. May it be so.