

## Who Are You Becoming?

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Raise your hand if you have heard of any of these people: Emma Gonzalez, David Hogg, or Cameron Kasky. Who are they and why do we know about them?

That's right, they are three of the students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. And we know about them because they faced a very difficult situation and responded to it in a way that might just make life better for a lot of people in this country.

As we all know, there have been many school shootings in recent years in the US, and yet most people, who have wanted to change gun laws to make it harder to get a gun and shoot people, have not been able to make our government change the laws. We hear a lot about thoughts and prayers for those affected, and then silence. No changes.

But after the shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School things were different. This time, instead of silence we got a new gun control movement, the #neveragain movement, because of Gonzalez, Hogg, Kasky, and their friends. Where adults have been silent, teenagers responded to the shooting at their school in a new way. Anger and hope replaced despair. Hundreds of thousands of people of all ages marched on Washington, around the country, and beyond. Politicians were pushed harder to put gun control laws into place and some states have already made some progress. And these students and their supporters are registering people to vote in November in the hope that the country will elect politicians with different priorities. This has all happened because a group of students, who could have responded to the shooting at their school the same way countless other students had before them, opted for something different, something profoundly challenging and yet something that might finally offer some hope.

Most of us do not have to make decisions quite like the Parkland students, and I for one am very grateful about that. But in some ways, all of us face moments in our lives when we have to decide what kind of people we will be. When prejudice is easy and compassion is hard, will we be prejudiced or compassionate? When despair is easy and hope is hard, will we despair or somehow find it in us to be hopeful? When we are tempted to hate others, will we give in to that temptation or will we do our best to love them? If all we have in those moments of decision is whatever strength we happen to have that day, it can be very hard to do the right thing. But fortunately, there's another way to think about being our best selves, and it goes something like this:

Who here likes to play a sport? How do you become good at the sport you play?

Who here makes any kind of art? Paintings? Drawings? Music? Who likes to write stories or dance? How do you come to make good art? How do you get better at playing the piano or the flute or the drums? How do you become a good writer or dancer?

Finally, how do you get to Carnegie Hall?

That's right. You practice. You put in a lot of time and energy. You paint bad paintings until you paint good ones. You practice batting all afternoon and maybe into the evening. You practice your instrument every day even when you really, really, really don't want to. And if you do this for long enough, and with enough focus, and with a desire to get better, you will probably get a lot better.

Our church theme this month is emergence, and one thing emergence means is coming into ourselves, becoming ourselves. Hopefully becoming our best selves. My song "Bringing in the Harvest," which you heard before, is about this idea. It uses images of farming and gardening to think about growing our own minds and hearts and spirits so that they are whole and beautiful. And if you think about actual gardening and actual farming, that's a lot of work, right? Why do people who garden or farm work so hard? Because the harvest will be lovely flowers and tasty food and, for farmers who live on what they grow, enough food to last through the winter. Similarly, when we work on becoming our best selves, we grow enough compassion and love and hope to last through the hard times, the times when we are tempted to be thoughtless and hateful and despairing. The best way to be ready for those times and to get through them is to have stored up some love and compassion and hope already. To have begun emerging into our best selves. To have spent hours practicing, hours harvesting.

Now you might wonder what I mean by becoming our best selves. What does that look like? Sometimes we meet someone and think, that's a good person. They seem to be kind. They are interested in us and not just in themselves. They do things to make the world a better place. And actually, Unitarian Universalism has something to say about the kinds of things we are likely to do when we are being our best selves. My little song "Everyone is Worthy" is one way to think about this idea. It says that everyone is worthy in the sight of love and if we believe this, we can show other people that we believe it. We can treat each other kindly in the name of love. We can work for peace and justice in the name of love. We can welcome in the stranger in the name of love. And we can work to save the planet in the name of love.

Let's start with treating each other kindly. When we are being our best selves, we are probably being kind to other people more often than not, just as we would want them to be kind to us. For me, being kind is about being friendly, considerate, patient, and generous. Even if someone is not a close friend, when I act kindly toward them, I am treating them like I would a friend. I am being considerate of their feelings, patient with their faults, and generous with my time and attention.

Welcoming in the stranger is a way of saying that we should be compassionate toward other people. My song "A Mile in Your Shoes" is about compassion, about wanting to learn about other people and to connect with them emotionally. When we are compassionate toward someone, we want them to be happy and we feel happy when they are happy. We feel sad when they feel sad, and if someone treats them badly, we are angry along with them on their behalf.

Then there is working for peace and justice. In our day-to-day lives, justice mostly looks like fairness. I think of fairness as treating all people well, whatever kinds of people they are, which means making sure I am not treating some people better than others. Our Unitarian Universalist

faith tells us that everyone has inherent dignity and worth, which means everyone has the same rights and everyone should have an opportunity to have a happy life.

Unfortunately, some kinds of people are not treated fairly because of their gender or the color of their skin or who they love or how much money they make. Our church says loudly and clearly that everyone should be treated fairly and should be treated well. When we talk about justice, we are talking about fairness not just for individuals but for groups of people. If women don't make as much money as men for the same work, that is unjust. If police officers treat people of color differently from how they treat white people, that is unjust. If same-sex couples cannot marry, that is unjust. And part of being our best selves is taking action in the world to treat everyone fairly and being part of social movements for justice.

So, these are some things we do when we are our best selves. We are kind to people. We treat people compassionately. We treat people fairly and we work for justice. How do we learn how to do these things? How do we get good at them? We practice.

If we want to be our best selves, we might start by seeing how other people practice being their best selves. That might be our parents, our teachers, our friends, or anyone we think does a good job being kind, or compassionate, or treating people fairly, or who works to make the world better for people who have a hard time. We can just watch what they do and say, or we can ask them how they go about making decisions to be good people. I have learned so much about this from many people in my life, including some people in this room right now.

We can also learn about people we don't know personally but who we know have made a difference in the world. If you are interested in the religions of the world, learn what Gautama Buddha, Muhammed and Jesus had to say about being kind and compassionate and treating people fairly. If you are interested in social justice, learn about Rosa Parks and Mahatma Gandhi and about people alive today who are leading movements against poverty, hunger, violence, or inequality. Read about Alicia Garza, one of the founders of the Black Lives Matter movement. Learn about Tarana Burke, who founded the #metoo movement to help women stand up against mistreatment by men. Watch documentaries with your family and talk about what you learn from them.

Then think about yourself. Who are you? What do you want to be like? Who do you want to become? Envision yourself as a kind person, a compassionate person. What does that look like? What would it look like to treat someone fairly? How would it feel to make a commitment to living in the world in ways that help others? If you were faced with a difficult situation where you wanted to treat someone badly, what could you do to treat them well instead?

If we can imagine ourselves as certain kinds of people, we might be able to become those people more easily. One reason that I find it so easy to sit at the piano and play is that I have thought of myself as someone who can play piano for a long time and I actually have played piano for a long time. So I have come to trust over the years that when I start to play the opening hymn, even if every note is not perfect it will be good enough for everyone to sing along.

Which leads us to actually practicing to be our best selves. On a day-to-day basis, we can make decisions to treat people well. We can listen to them with compassion and interest. If we see someone being treated unfairly, we can speak up and say that it is not right to treat people unfairly. And over time, we can learn about different justice movements and become a part of them.

How many of you have heard the phrase “practice makes perfect”? Do you think that’s always true? I don’t either. Sometimes we won’t be our best selves. Sometimes we will be unkind or we won’t pay good attention to someone else or care how they are doing. Sometimes we might not treat someone fairly. But the great thing about trying to be our best selves is that the next day we can try again and do better. Practice may not make perfect but practice definitely makes better, and better, and better. If we practice, we might get pretty close to becoming our best selves. And that will not only make us happier but will make the world a better place.

Who are you becoming? Who do you want to become? And what kinds of practicing can help you get there? Here is my hope for all of us: I hope that we all want to be our best selves and that we are all willing to practice so that we become living examples of kindness, compassion, fairness, and justice, so that others are inspired by us to become their own best selves and so that we all, in our small ways, bring our world a little closer to healing and joy. May it be so. Amen and blessed be.