

UNITY'S HISTORY and How It Applies to Your Life Today

Week #1 of a 4-Week Series, "Unity Basics"

Rev. Stacy Macris Ros

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So how did Unity begin and is it still relevant today? [Congregant: "Yeah!"] Yeah! Okay! I'm going to get to that question. I'm glad you asked it! [Congregants laugh]

Tonight we're going to start a four-week series on our "Unity Basics" -- our history, our teachings. And tonight I thought we'd go back to the beginning: the foundation. What's the story? What's the full story here? Because I think that the story of Unity is actually one of the most inspiring spiritual stories that you can hear.

Often when someone discovers Unity, or hears about Unity, one of the first questions is: What is unity? Or what does Unity believe? Or where did it come from? Or who's behind this? Or they most likely have heard about *The Daily Word*, and they're surprised and they say, "Oh, there's a church associated with that? I didn't realize that. I thought it was just a sweet little daily devotional."

But, in truth, Unity started with two ordinary people who chose to learn and grow in their spirituality. They were later in their lives: in their late 30s, early 40s. They chose to completely change their understanding of healing, of prayer -- even their understanding of God. And they refused to accept that life had to stay the way life was.

So, let's find out more. Let's start with our founder, Myrtle Fillmore. So, here's a picture of Myrtle. I chose a younger picture of her, because oftentimes we'll see an older picture at the end of her life when Unity movement was really much larger.

So here she is at a younger age. But Myrtle Page Fillmore was born in Ohio, 1845. She was the seventh of nine children. She was a sickly child. She was very weak. They think that she probably had a lot of respiratory problems; maybe pulmonary problems, but definitely respiratory problems. And she was always looked upon as just being weak and sick and an invalid.

She had a very religious upbringing. In fact, amusement was restricted in their house. But she was one of the favorites of her father. And so, a lot of times they would have some little inside jokes, and he taught her how to dance. And so, they had their own little fun amusements. But for the most part, the older siblings weren't allowed to really go out to the dances or to the city square at the time.

They were all very protective of Myrtle, because they all felt like she was so sick and weak that she should be bubble wrapped. They didn't have bubble wrap back in that time, but that's what we would say today. And what she heard was that she would always be an invalid.

Well, she went off to college -- very unheard of in those days. Oberlin College. And eventually she moved to Texas. Her health got so bad that she needed the warmer weather. So, she was about 29. She moved to Texas for the warmer weather.

Then we have our other co-founder here, Charles Sherlock Fillmore. I love his middle name. And again, I chose a younger picture of him, because so often we see them later in their lives. So, here's a younger Charles Fillmore. He was born in 1854 in a log cabin that his father built. He had a younger brother. They were on a tribal reservation. His father actually left, so his mother was a single mother -- tough woman.

Interesting note here: when he was about two years old, he was in the log cabin with his mother. And some of the members of the local Sioux tribe came, including the medicine man; picked him up -- he's two years old. Picked him up, took him out of the log cabin. As a mother -- I think this would terrify me, and then they brought him back later that night. He says he doesn't remember what happened to him, but he later says, "I feel like I was part of a mystical ceremony."

He studied in a one-room schoolhouse. And then later on, a teacher moved on to the reservation. Her husband worked with the government there. And she taught him how to read, and he turned out to love Shakespeare and the Transcendentalists. In fact, he named two of his children after a couple of those Transcendentalist writers.

But when he was around 10 years old, he was ice skating outside on a pond, and he fell, and he dislocated his hip. Medicine at the time meant that it became infected. They kept trying to do more and more to it. It got worse. So, he really almost lost his leg. But it turned out, after a year it healed, and he had one leg about two inches shorter than the other leg.

So, here they are, these two. They meet in Texas. She's a teacher. She has her own private school. He's working for the railroad. And they meet in a poetry club. Love that! I think that's sweet. Very 1800s! And they go on to marry. They get married in 1881.

They move to Colorado and then, eventually, to Kansas City for the real estate boom that was happening during that time. Eventually, they have three sons. Here's, again, later in life, them with their three sons. And that's Grandma Fillmore right there. She's one tough woman. We could do a whole message just on Mother Fillmore! Maybe I will sometime, because she was one tough cookie.

Neither, though ... Neither of these two -- especially when they're younger starting out -- neither of them looked like people who were going to someday start an international spiritual movement, especially one built upon this idea of prayer to heal.

But the turning point came in 1886. They go to a lecture by a Dr. E.B. Weeks, and they hear this: *"You are a child of God; therefore you do not inherit sickness."*

This changes Myrtle's life! She takes it as her affirmation: *"I am a child of God; therefore I do not inherit sickness."* Her whole life she'd been told she was sick; she was an invalid; she was weak; she would never get better. This was a new thought!

Now Charles Fillmore walks out of that same lecture and he thinks: *"Not impressed."* [Congregants laugh] In fact, he kind of thinks, *"These people are kind of crazy!"* And he wants to know the science behind it. He was a science guy: *"I want to know how does science prove what they're saying? How does science prove what's happening here with these healings?"*

So, he goes on to study that intersection of science and spirituality. He also loved, again, the Transcendentalists, but also all world religions. So, he goes on to study all the world religions, science.

But also he starts to watch Myrtle's healing happen. Every day, for up to two hours a day, she sits in the silence, what she calls "The Silence" or meditation. She practices prayer, affirmation, forgiveness. She asks her body for forgiveness. For over two years, she does this for almost two hours a day.

Here's what she writes in "Unity Magazine." You can follow along on your screen, I hope. She wrote, *"I went to all the life centers in my body and spoke words of Truth to them – words of strength and power. I asked their forgiveness for the foolish, ignorant course that I had pursued in the past, when I had condemned them and called them weak, inefficient and diseased. I did not become discouraged at their being slow to wake up, but kept right on, both silently and aloud, declaring the words of Truth, until the organs responded ..."*

She hears the lecture at the age of 41, and at the age of 43 -- two years later -- she's healed!

Well, Charles takes note of this. He witnesses her transformation, and he applies all of these same principles. [Lights flicker] Oh! [Congregants laugh] They're here with us, everyone. [Laughs]

So, Charles witnesses all of this. And so, by the end of his life, after he also blesses, prays, sits in the silence, affirms that Christ's divine quality within him, his own wholeness. By the end of his life, his leg had grown from being two inches short to about reports are between an inch and an inch-and-a-half. So, he made a difference also in his own healing over his lifetime.

Ultimately, they discover the power of their thoughts to create the reality, and the difference affirmative prayer can make in their own lives, as well as the lives of other people.

Word gets out. They start with about 20 people coming into their house, and suddenly the whole neighborhood is lining up outside their house. Because they're affirming wholeness. They're affirming the Christ within. They're affirming the divinity in every cell of their being.

They start by creating "Unity Magazine." Back then it was called "Modern Thought Magazine" in 1889. April 1889 is considered the beginning -- the start -- of Unity and Unity Movement. They began a prayer ministry called Silent Unity. That was begun in 1890. First you could write in, then/now call in, even email, even app your prayers in.

They start Unity School. They buy 58 acres outside of Kansas City, near Lee's Summit, Missouri -- now over 1,200 acres. But at that time, 58 acres they bought. They called it Unity Farm; now called Unity Village. You can retreat there. It's absolutely beautiful.

And eventually they begin "Daily Word Magazine" in 1924, Unity's daily devotional where you get a positive message and affirmation every day.

And it's interesting. I think Unity is most known for Silent Unity, our call ministry -- phone line prayer ministry -- as well as the "Daily Word." And the logo for Silent Unity. So, before World War I, they put in phone lines so people could call in. And, again, it's a 24-hour every day -- someone there to answer your phone calls.

And one night, some of the workers were leaving their shift. They were leaving their day shift. And so, the night shift had come on, and there was a light right where those prayer workers were. And they started to say, *"Wow, it's the light that shines for you. That feels like what we do here. The light that shines for you!"* And still to this day, that's the motto of Silent Unity Prayer Ministry: *"The light that shines for you."* Again, they're still there. Available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

The movement grew naturally, because people wanted this new way of prayer; of knowing, of claiming Christ's presence -- that divine presence within them; of claiming and affirming their divine identity and their divine nature; of affirming God's presence in every cell of their being. It catches on. It goes worldwide.

So, when someone asks you: What is Unity? A lot of times, does anyone tend to be like, *"Well, it's this ... I buh gah gah."* Has anyone done that before? No, just me and my husband. [Congregants laugh] Okay.

Well, here, if you want to take a picture of it or look at it later, here you go. Here's the definition of Unity by Unity here on your screen: *"Unity is a positive, practical approach to Christianity based on the teachings of Jesus and the power of prayer. Unity honors the universal truths in all religions and respects each individual's right to choose their own spiritual path."*

Unity finds the spiritual truth in all faith traditions because of Charles' study of religions and seeing their overlap. He started to notice there's a spiritual truth that is thread throughout all of the world's faith traditions.

So, what makes Unity different? We're very different than your traditional Christian church. Charles -- and I would agree with him -- one time said, Unity is very much a Christian mysticism, very much like Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism. We belong to the International New Thought Alliance.

And so, what is New Thought? Back in the 1800s, this was a new thought. So, they called it the New Thought Alliance. Well, we teach -- believe -- that God isn't a person or something, a Being somewhere else. That God is Love. that God is Presence, that God is Spirit expressing in us, through us, around us. That God is, in fact, the Allness of what is -- of all that is. The wisdom, the love that animates all living beings.

We also teach that prayer isn't about convincing a God. We pray from our awareness of oneness. Since God is not a person, but a Being, a Presence, Spirit, Infinite Life, Living Loving Spirit ... that's where we pray from.

Charles Fillmore said, *"God is not a person, but is Principle"* (capital P). Myrtle Fillmore said, *"God is Love; God is Healing, Wholeness; God is Spirit."* Famous Unity minister Rev. Eric Butterworth said, *"God is Presence and Allness."* Other names for God that you might hear in Unity would be Infinite Spirit, Divine Love, Eternal Loving Presence, Life Energy.

So, it's from this awareness of our oneness with this One Presence that we pray affirmatively, claiming the spiritual truth of the situation. We pray from a consciousness of knowing our connectedness to the whole and knowing our divine perfect wholeness as the Fillmores did. That, like Myrtle, we too can heal anything that ails our bodies and our minds. Or the divine wisdom that works within us can help direct us to those who can support us on our healing journey.

Unity and New Thought teaches that truth belongs to everyone. Just like the Fillmores, anyone can remember their divine identity and claim their inherent spiritual qualities and power to create a life that's abundant in health and wealth and love and peace and joy.

And it's not just about knowing these spiritual truths or law, but practicing them. Taking them into your life; taking action on them; embodying them; being them. Being the love in the world. Being the peace in the world.

And I think one of the biggest areas that we differ from traditional Christianity is also in the Bible. We look at the Bible -- we read the Bible -- not literally, but metaphysically, meaning beyond the literal. We look at the history that surrounds it. We look at the history that was left out of it. We look at the original languaging. Because the language makes a big difference between what did the Greeks and the Romans write, and what did the original Aramaic writing. What was the Hebrew? Many times it's much different.

So, we look at the languaging, we look at the history, and we look at a metaphysical view of the Bible. Ultimately, we see the Bible as our own story of the growth of our own consciousness; of the expansion of our own spiritual understanding.

So why does Unity still matter to me in my life? Because I grew up in Unity. I started in Unity at the age of five. I know I'm only 15 now, everyone ... [Congregants laugh] Okay; 51 years ago; 51 years ago, I started in Unity.

And I went off to college. I was away from family. I was away from my Unity church. And I just wanted to look and see: What do other faiths teach? What do other families ... And actually in high school and college, I loved going to church with my friends, because I like to see their tradition. And I also liked to go to other faiths just to see how we're similar. How are we alike with one another?

And yet, I kept coming back to Unity. I didn't stay in Unity because I grew up in Unity. I stayed in Unity because it changed my life in positive ways. I stayed because it helped me to navigate very challenging situations with grace and with strength. It helped me in the dark night of my soul. I've had several big health challenges in my life, the last one being between the end of 2015 and the beginning of 2023.

And it was Unity and their teachings that helped me embrace the teachings more. In fact, just like Charles Fillmore, I would say I really questioned the teachings. I really pushed back on some of the teachings and came out the other side emboldened and embracing those teachings that allowed me to heal.

Unity teachings and practices helped bring greater peace. It lowered my anxiety, which we know helps with the healing process. Unity and its teachings helped me discover my purpose -- much like Charles and Myrtle Fillmore: through my own spiritual work, being able to help others discover the power within them to live an abundant, peaceful, joy-filled life.

Unity also taught me that we're all expressions of this intelligent, infinite Universe. That we really are powerful creators. We have unique gifts to share. So, if you have an interest or a strength, that's how this Life Energy/Spirit expresses through you.

One time I was at Unity Village for classes, I believe, and I was walking up the stairs. There's a beautiful rose garden -- Myrtle's Rose Garden. And as I was walking up, I noticed how beautiful this rose garden and the roses were. And, as I got closer, there was one particular grouping, and they were, I think, yellow with white and peach maybe. Just beautiful.

And, as I got even closer, I noticed that there was one rose that had some browning on some of the petals. And there was another rose that was missing a petal. And yet it didn't matter! What came to mind was the idea that we're all flowers in God's garden. That every flower -- even with the browning edges or a missing petal -- is beautiful and unique in expressing life. And that's our strength! We don't have to be perfect. It actually adds to our uniqueness; adds to the bountiful beauty of the garden of life.

Unity has also expanded my understanding of God. And it's not the same God I had as a five-year-old. Not just because of my age, but because Unity itself -- as a movement -- continues to grow and expand its understanding of God and spiritual law and principles. That, as we learn and grow, we stretch our spiritual beliefs. We expand our understanding of God.

Unity encourages us to continue to learn and grow and expand our consciousness. Not just stay in the same old beliefs, but to keep pushing. To keep pushing yourself.

Going back to Myrtle: she had a growth mindset. She was willing to change her understanding of God. She was willing to change her understanding of how she could tap into that Divine Intelligence within her. And she chose not to stay stuck in old beliefs about health and healing, but instead to embrace a new idea -- a new thought -- and it literally changed her life. And not only her life, but our lives.

And Charles said at the end of his life; he said, *"I reserve the right to change my mind."* I reserve the right to change my mind ... meaning he was passionate about learning and growing and always evolving his spiritual beliefs and his spiritual understanding. And that means maybe letting go of old beliefs in order to embrace new ideas, new understandings.

So, from our Unity founders, we're encouraged to have a growth mindset. We're encouraged to allow our spirituality -- our spiritual maturity -- to grow and change over time as our consciousness and our spiritual understanding grows and expands and changes over time. To remember our divine identity.

In 1931, Myrtle Fillmore made her transition. But here's the interesting part of that. She was 86 years old. For about a month or two before that, she kept working with her secretary to get her things in order; to get her affairs in order; her business in order.

And it was a couple days before she went out to Unity Farm where she said to one of the Unity workers, *"I feel like I have something more to do. I feel like I can do more on the other side of the invisible veil."*

Of course, the worker said, *"But we need you here, Myrtle!"*

And she said, *"Don't worry; I'm always here."*

Well, she goes out there at Kansas City -- downtown at the time. So, she goes out to Unity Farm, and she goes and picks some apples off the trees in the acre. The next morning she's ill, and two days later she makes her transition. Eighty-six years old. Had healed herself at the age of 43 from very serious illness.

Charles Fillmore continues for another 17 years. In 1948, he made his transition at the age of 93, almost 94 years old. One of the last things he says is, *"What I taught was true."*

So, he's known as the intellect of Unity. She's known as the mother of Unity, but that heart of Unity. And they make a big impact on the world.

I wanted to share with you their dedication and covenant. This is three-and-a-half years after they started Unity in 1892. Here's what they write; you can follow along on screen. They wrote: *"We, Charles Fillmore and Myrtle Fillmore, husband and wife, hereby dedicate ourselves, our time, our money, all we have and all we expect to have, to the Spirit of Truth, and through it, to the Society of Silent Unity. It being understood and agreed that the said Spirit of Truth shall render unto us an equivalent for this dedication, in peace of mind, health of body, wisdom, understanding, love, life, and an abundant supply of all things necessary to meet every want without our making any of these the object of our existence. In the presence of the Conscious Mind of Christ Jesus, this 7th day of December, A.D. 1892."*

And what if we all lived with that kind of intention? To know that, as we express our divine purpose, we're supported and provided for by an abundant, wise, loving Spirit?

And Charles felt, and it's said right here -- great book, by the way, everyone, by James Dilleat Freeman, who wrote our Prayer for Protection and the prayer that went to the moon. But in "The Story of Unity," he writes that Charles felt that his life purpose was the development of his own spiritual qualities so that he could help others find and tap into the Spirit within them.

And what if we all lived with that intention? To grow and learn about our own inherent spiritual qualities so that we could offer the same to others? To heal ourselves so we can heal those around us and ultimately heal the world?

And the Fillmores also believed that life was meant to, quote, *"Be something grand and wonderful."* And what if we all lived with that intention: that life is meant to be something grand and wonderful?

The beauty of their story is what they taught through their own lived experiences: the power of prayer and positive thought; that Mind-Body connection; the spiritual-science connection. They were ahead of their time. That healing is possible. You must commit to the idea of healing and then release the outcome. That faith and knowing it's an abundant universe. To hold on to the dream even when things looked bleak.

Things looked bleak when they were going through the Great Depression or World War II. They had to move back from the farm, back to the city, back to Unity Farm. There were some really bleak times, but they held on to their faith and knowing that it was an abundant universe they would be provided for.

We learn that God is Principle: not a being. That we are it -- that we're expressions of this God, of this Love. Therefore, being empowered! Not to reach outside of ourselves to a stern, judgmental God that's calling all the shots, but that we are inherently good. That we're born of original goodness. And that life is meant to be grand and wonderful.

So, Unity didn't begin because two people wanted to start a church. They actually didn't want to start a church! It began because two ordinary people discovered that changing consciousness changes life. That our mind, connected to Divine Mind, creates our experiences. That the power of positive, affirmative prayer changes us at a cellular level.

And that's still our invitation today. The invitation today is to trust the Presence within you and around you. To remember your divine nature, your inherent goodness. To keep growing, and to dedicate your life to expressing more harmony, more peace, more spiritual truth, and more love.

That's the story of Unity, my friends. That's the invitation for you today. So, blessings on your journey.

Blessings, everyone.