

Change, Challenge, and Coming Together

I would like to introduce this section through Words of wisdom by Rev. Nancy MacDonald Ladd:

“Physicists say that a wave is a dynamic disturbance in a medium. It moves through whatever substance it is composed of. By its nature, a wave propels. It has momentum. Perhaps it is momentum. A wave is the opposite of stasis. The dynamism of a wave means that it will try to expel the force of change it carries by any means necessary, either by traveling onward and altering the future, or by violently pushing backward, swamping the space it left behind. On nearly every level, as Unitarian Universalists, people of faith and communities, we are overcome with dynamically crashing waves of change. The storms come up and wash over us, one after the other, leaving little room for anything more than the duck and cover of self-protective reactivity.”

Change brings a double-edged experience. One aspect is the loss of what got left behind in the dip of the wave. We are all facing the loss of what is being left behind with the changes that are going on in our congregation. And the more the lost elements meant to you, the deeper the suffering. We need to acknowledge that as part of living as human beings with feelings. But, change also brings the excitement of contributing to the building of an as yet to be envisioned future. We can ask ourselves, have we lost control of that future, or will it be a co-creative endeavor? In between the losses from the past and the emergence of the future lie the waters of uncertainty.

A famous quote from W.B. Yeats comes to mind, “Turning and turning in the widening gyre The falcon cannot hear the falconer; Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold...” Interestingly, I had to look up the word gyre to be sure of how to pronounce it and what it meant. I found that it also has an oceanic meaning: a large, circular system of rotating ocean currents formed by global wind patterns.

Clearly, we are in a period of strong winds of change - globally, nationally and locally. When I set out to plan what to say about change, I decided to focus on what our UU denomination has to teach us about navigating change. I looked for turning points in our UU history, breaks from other traditions in the initial formation of Unitarianism and of Universalism, changes in theological orientations, and the 1961 merger of the two different denominations. It was

there I found a strong illustration of the challenges involved with finding a center that can hold. So, I would like to focus on those challenges and the strategies our denomination used to manage them.

Unitarianism and Universalism had several elements in common - a focus on social reform, religious freedom, commitment to education and democratic values - but there were also some clear differences in tradition and emphasis that have proved difficult to integrate. Unitarianism was more prevalent in urban areas and Universalism in rural areas. Unitarians had moved away from traditional Christianity toward humanism, science, reason, ethics and human potential. Universalists had deemphasized doctrine in order to focus on love, compassion and inclusion. Universalism was also more apt to include elements from its roots in Christianity.

The tensions raised by the merger of these two denominations continue their influence to this day. As chair of Worship Arts I have struggled for quite some time with these kinds of questions. What should the religious experience be? Is it theistic or atheistic? Is god language viewed as inclusive or alienating? Should sermons aim to challenge you intellectually? Should they try to lead you toward community action? Is there room for contemplation of the transcendent? Is social justice based more in ethical responsibility or is it more of an expression of love and compassion? Should services strive to connect with your feelings? Some might put it this way, is a service more of a seminar or a spiritual support space? What is the desired place and type of music in a service? What about rituals, are they valued or viewed as boring or irrelevant? How important is an ordained minister? What is more important, a focus on philosophy, ethics, science and literature, or a service that feels more emotionally expressive with an emphasis on compassion, connection and healing? Should the emphasis be more on personal responsibility and growth or on acceptance and inherent worth?

This is a long list of questions for discernment. What can hold this multitude together? In my research for this program, I found a classification scheme for UU congregations as Unitarian leaning, Universalist leaning, Social Activist leaning and Blended. It was suggested that to figure out what our congregation is we should look at who keeps coming back. I would say we have people of all stripes who keep coming back, even in spite of turmoil. So, for that, and from my experience on Worship Arts at BUU, I say we are a blended congregation. So, what does my research have to say about blended

congregations? They are harder to manage than more uniform ones. They require balance, transparency and skillful leadership. They take higher emotional intelligence, stronger communication skills and more intentional design. They have to hold a wider range of people together, adapt over time and create genuinely unique community spaces. Along with Deb Mitchell's wise and courageous 3-year-old grandson we can do hard things. We have resources, talents, skills and desire to do it.

For examples of how to approach creating a resonating space for all, I looked to what our denomination has done to unite this diversity of beliefs and styles. They deliberately decided not to depend on creedal unity. Instead, they focused on shared principles and inclusive sources. Unitarians got freedoms of belief, reason, and the scientific method. Universalists got moral grounding in love, human worth, compassion, and encouragement of spiritual growth. We all got the importance of social justice, free and responsible search for truth and meaning, the right of conscience, use of the democratic process, peace, liberty and justice and respect for the interdependent web of all existence.

The newly developed UUA envisioned UU as a pluralistic, values-centered religious community. Their emphasis in constructing resources and in training have encouraged blending the various threads within the denomination. They have produced model service guidelines that include intellectual reflection as well as emotional/spiritual elements; a balance among sermon, music, silence and ritual; intellectual challenges as well as moments of connection, compassion, and transcendence. They have tried to use inclusive language that can resonate across beliefs. Covenant, rather than belief, is viewed as the organizing idea. Differences in belief are expected. What matters is how people agree to treat each other, how we live together and act in the world. Covenant includes both ethical responsibility and an emphasis on loving relationship.

We can do well to remember these strategies and apply them within our congregation as a spiritually and practically meaningful way to take our community on into the future.

I would like to quote another poet, TS Eliot,
"We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, remembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree
Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.

A syllabus from a web class sponsored by UUCT and UU of Phoenix ended the first class about challenges in the use of language within our denomination with this list of reflection questions: **Do you feel that what we do together in a UU Sunday service is worshipping? What role does faith play in your Unitarian Universalism or spiritual life? Do you consider yourself a person of faith? Could faith be a process as opposed to, or as well as, a system of belief?** I would like you to take a few moments to reflect on these questions as part of a process of discernment about who we are and who we want to be.

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