

TRUST THE UNFOLDING
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
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OPENING WORDS *Welcome to This Place of Possibility!* ~ Marianne Hachten Cotter

Welcome to this place of possibility!
This is love's hearth, the home of hope,
A refuge for minds in search of truth
Unfolding, ever beautiful, ever strange.
Here, compassion is our shelter,
Freedom our protection
From the storms of bigotry and hate.
In this abode, may we find comfort and courage.
Here may our sight become vision
To see the unseen,
To glimpse the good that is yet to be.

Come, let us gather in this place of unfolding.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *perfect square* ~ Michael Hall

(A piece of paper finds that as it is torn, cut, crumpled and shattered, it learns to transform itself.)

READING *from Hallelujah Anyway: Rediscovering Mercy* ~ Anne Lamott¹

Rilke wrote: "I want to unfold. I don't want to stay folded anywhere, because where I am folded, there I am a lie." We got folded by trying as hard as we could to make everyone happy, to please everyone, and to fill every moment with productivity. Our grown-ups said this would bring approval, and approval would bring satisfaction, and they would like us more. But we also learned to sabotage ourselves so that they wouldn't feel eclipsed. High achievement made the family look good, but also seemed to be another nail in Dad's coffin. We agreed to get folded at school and in jobs, to get ahead, shine the family star, fill our Swiss-cheese holes. We got folded and fooled into airless states of accomplishment, estrangement from ourselves, squandering our very short lives. Then we folded ourselves so we wouldn't annoy or embarrass our kids.

Self-importance fueled by performance anxiety, people-pleasing, sloth, and bad self-esteem, wrapped us into small crisp squares like professionally laundered shirts.

I was there this week. I liked it briefly, because folded feels like home, small, familiar, hugged. I like smells of soap and steam and starch. Then it becomes oppressive and disorienting. Even a lot of caffeine and cheery new curtains don't help.

We got creased in those places such a long time ago that it seems hopeless to begin the great unfolding now. Our integrity got broken. I am not sure we got strong at the broken places, although people love to say this happens. In truth, when I broke my toe, the doctor said, "It will take forever to heal, and never be quite as good as it was." Life

¹ <https://tinyurl.com/lulun2x>

101. It still hurts sometimes. This was just a toe bone. Big parts of us got broken, parts of our hearts, minds, and beings. Yet we keep getting up, lurching on. We dance with a limp.

When other people look hunched or pummeled, I know what to do and say, to help them recolonize their bodies and lives. I say: Stop the train. Be where your butt is. Maybe shift from foot to foot, as in chanting kirtan, or swaying a baby to sleep, because ritualized shifting keeps you a little shaken up – good shaken, unstuck. I would say: Life can be painful, but I am right here, and you have a good heart. This heart is who you are, not your bad mind.

I would tell a person: You have the right to remain silent. Would you like a nice cup of tea? Some M&M's? Let's sprawl, unfold these creaky wings.

MESSAGE

I suspect that all of us have watched a spider weaving a web...maybe particularly that long drop...the unfolding of an unseen thread...when the spider seemingly leaps into space without a plan or destination, then hangs in mid-air...and yet, the thread unfolds, and eventually a web is created.

Pete Seeger wrote a song about it...originally called "Natural History" and later renamed "Spider's Web." Here are the lyrics:

The spider, dropping down from twig,
Unfolds a plan of her devising,
A thin premeditated rig
To use in rising.
And all that journey down through space,
In cool descent and loyal hearted,
She spins a ladder to the place
From where she started.
Thus I, gone forth as spiders do
In spider's web a truth discerning,
Attach one silken thread to you
For my returning

We go forth as spiders do. We don't spin literal webs, but we are made of a web of stories unfolding. There's a story unfolding. Always. And there is a particular unfolding that is happening here, and within me, and I need to speak to it. This is of particular interest to those who attended the White Supremacy Teach-In last week; I sure wish all of you could have been here.

We took some risks. I co-led the service with Sheena Howard, and we took the risk of not being totally in control of what would happen when...there was no planned out and scripted order of service. We risked talking about a difficult subject that was sure to bring up shame and defensiveness and hurt...which it did. We risked using language that would not be comfortable to everyone, including ourselves. We risked stepping into our own vulnerability, knowing that we wouldn't do it perfectly, and that we would screw up.

And I did. Screw up, I mean. If I were given the gift of a do-over, there are some things I would do differently. For example, we offered participatory moments when folks were asked for comments or questions. I wish I had prepared better for that; while I still believe it wasn't a time for debate, in a do-over I would suggest a silence after each comment...a time to let the words settle.

We did one role-play during the service, and in a do-over, I would have reflected on how best to assign parts. What happened is that Jane, a person of African ancestry, asked to play a role that I had imagined would be played by a white person...and in my surprise, I reacted poorly. In other words, in the process of handing out roles, I came face to face with my own racial biases. Please let me have a do-over.

And most important of all, in a do-over I want to be a better advocate for Vanita. There was a point in the service when she, a brown person, expressed that she has been hurt here, and I responded to it just as I responded to all the other comments, which was to go on to the next person. I wish that I had stopped. I wish that I had asked everyone to notice what Vanita said and the courage it took to say it. I wish that I had said to her: "Thank you. I see you. I hear you. I'm so sorry you've been hurt by the white culture here...and by my white privilege. I promise to show up better for you next time."

This is an unfolding story because I have some choices now. I can shrink up from the mistakes I made and sweep it all back under the rug, choosing never to bring up the topic of white supremacy again. Or, as I suspect you already know I will do, I can choose to continue the difficult work of undoing white privilege. I hope you will choose that with me...and that we allow ourselves and each other as many do-overs as we need...to learn...and to keep going...no matter how hard it is to face ourselves and what must be done. What I promise is that I will stay in it with you, and that we will discover untold, surprising gifts in this process.

There were many people last week who wanted to speak but we ran out of time. Later, I learned what Sheena's father, Bruce Howard, would have shared, had he had the opportunity: Bruce would have told us that he grew up in a small village...in a time and place that was both racist and homophobic...and then, as life would have it, his daughter is a lesbian who married a brown person. He says it took his daughter, Sheena, to bring him forward to where he is now...he was not going to lose their daughter because of the bias and discrimination that he learned as a child. He has been changed, and is changing still. His words for us: "If I can do it, any, and all, of you can do it."

We can, each of us, unfold. We can, each of us, trust the unfolding. How do I know that?

Don't you just like the image that Ruth helped to create a bit ago...that of being folded like a crisp shirt...creased, folded in, hiding ourselves...and of our unfolding as a process of re-occupying our bodies and our lives? Unfolding, at least in that sense, is the act of becoming more present...present to the pain as well as the joy, to the struggle as well as the celebration, to be able to see ourselves and one another with more clear eyes. Using that metaphor, one might rightfully ask how we can trust the unfolding. Clearly there were good reasons for folding ourselves up...fear, self-protection, shame, ambition, playing by the rules, the desire to be liked and to fit in. And in some ways, the folding up has worked, right? It shields us...puts

a layer of polish on...makes us rather impenetrable to forces that might hurt or break us. Seems like a good thing. Even a trustworthy thing...that is, to fold up.

So, why trust the unfolding? Well, first, there are downsides to all that self-protection. Impenetrable equals an inability to connect. Impenetrable means that we are not seen. For some, being impenetrable also affects the ability to experience one's own feelings. I think that's why Rilke said that he didn't want to stay folded anywhere. Still, it seems logical that if folding has worked, at least for some purposes, why should we trust the unfolding?

Let me go at this a different way. Do you know how so often people say the likes of "the universe is expanding as it should" or "life is unfolding according to plan?" Such words have always felt like an end-run to me, trying to bypass what it really feels like when faced with that threshold, that scary precipice, at which one might choose to unfold. Such words try to assure us to step out, or leap, on faith alone. "Just trust it. Things will work out." Now, maybe that's okay for some people, but it doesn't work all that great for me. I can accept that whatever happens happens...that no matter what, I can deal with it...but that it 'works out' as it 'should?' "Just take my word for it" is not the advice I want to hear when about to take a leap into unfamiliar territory.

So, I need another reason to unfold. I need to know what my unfolding will serve. I want to know what is being risked by NOT unfolding, because it is that potential, or loss of potential, that will motivate me to unfold and stretch and take those risks. I want to know, is it worth it?

Here's a very timely example. A few weeks ago, I invited y'all to watch a webinar presented by Black Lives UU called *Whose Faith Is It Anyway?* (If you didn't get a chance, it's still available... ask me for the link.) After nearly an hour of talking about creating inclusive congregations, one of the panelists, Dr. Takiyah Nur Amin, said this:

For UUism, writ large, we are concerned about risking the wrong things. Over the past few months, there's been too much conversation, as far as I'm concerned, that if BLUU continues its work, if people of colour and indigenous folks keep speaking up and out in our faith community, we're going to alienate the 'good white people' and that's not something we can risk. Or, if we continue forcing a shift in our institution so that it is more committed to equity, access, inclusion, and justice-making and liberation to our faith, that we're also going to lose middle-class people of colour who believe that salvation is [linked to being] in community with the 'good white folks.'

That is really not the risk that we should be worried about. We should be worried about who is never going to come through our doors if we never transform the space. Whose life is never going to be changed if we don't do the work that we're called to do? That is what we need to be concerned about. We're worrying about the wrong thing. ...

We push past fear by realizing that all of us are called to transform the world, to be stewards of it, to be caretakers of each other...And what we need to be saying is, what do we risk by not doing that?

I don't want to hear about spreadsheets, I don't want to hear about numbers, or butts in seats...what do we risk by accepting the mediocrity of not living out the full potential of

our faith? ...We have to do the work of community, or we're not doing anything at all...

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Dr. Amin is speaking about trusting the unfolding...about our tendency to fold up because of fear or perceived risk. You see, as a faith, we have already devised a plan...we have already laid out a vision for a beloved community. We just haven't unfolded ourselves enough to bring that vision fully into being. I believe that by aligning ourselves with our values and intentions, we can find enough trust to actually let go, and to let the unfolding happen. Because, if we are not taking risks for the sake of what's important to us, for our own wholeness, and for people we love, (even if we don't know them yet) then, as Dr. Amin suggested, perhaps we're not doing anything at all.

Now, I know from personal experience that one reason we stay folded up is shame. We have been taught that mistakes are bad, and that we should never show our imperfections. So we tend to respond to each stain by trying to hide it within yet another fold....always looking for one 'clean' side to show on the outside. And if you're anything like me, you have a lot of 'dirt' to hide.

As is his way, Quaker Parker Palmer has a wise word or two about this.³ Using a poem by David Ray as inspiration, he looks back at his many mistakes and where he's failed to live up to his aspirations. In this rear-view mirror, he sees that he could have trusted what was unfolding, even though it didn't seem so great at the time. Because, looking back, he can see all of his mess-ups as compost for the growing he needed to do. He suggests that our ability to make meaning of what has happened in our lives changes as life unfolds. "The good I do today," he writes, "may well have its roots in something not-so-good I did in the past." In other words, our past can actually be transformed by our view of it today.

Isn't that interesting? To me, this suggests that life unfolds 'as it should' if we are able to learn and grow and be changed by whatever has come our way. It's not necessarily pre-destined, but what unfolds, and how we unfold, is always there as necessary fodder for our ongoing transformation.

Last week's service didn't go perfectly. I made some errors in judgment. But that's not what I choose to be worried about, because here's what happened. While it was difficult, while it strained all kinds of risk-muscles, the willingness to pry back that first bit of fold in our white culture...to loosen it up, give it some air, let it breathe, hang out there in all its messiness...well, that is exactly what provides the much-needed compost for our healthy and creative evolution toward a more inclusive, self-aware congregation. I trust, really trust, that it does.

Sheena's dad had more one word...he would also have liked to tell us about the work of the author Wilbur Smith, who in his novels about Africa frequently uses the words "I see you"...a Masai greeting for those they wish to intentionally acknowledge. For Bruce, this is a way of truly "seeing" the PERSON standing in front of you. The whole person.

² <http://www.blacklivesuu.com/bluuwhosefaith/>, 51:00

³ <https://onbeing.org/blog/meaning-changes-as-life-unfolds/>

To say “I see you” is a way to greet...to really see and honour...each person in the totality of who they are...colour, gender identity, age, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, etc...and so I want to say it to you:

I see you. I see you. I see that you have fears, and folded up parts, and longings, and dirty spots, and dreams. I see that you have both growing edges and places in which you feel secure and firm. I see that sometimes you’re able to show up, and sometimes you’re not. I see that you have unshared pain and unresolved hurts. I see that you are not always sure of the path.

And, I trust that taking risks for the sake of what most matters is what will save us. As with the spider, what we unfold is what we will use to rise again. Our greatness is in this unfolding.

So be it.

READING *excerpts from **Thresholds*** ~ John O’Donohue⁴

To change is one of the great dreams of every heart – to change the limitations, the sameness, the banality, or the pain. So often we look back on patterns of behavior, the kind of decisions we make repeatedly and that have failed to serve us well, and we aim for a new and more successful path or way of living. But change is difficult for us. So often we opt to continue the old pattern, rather than risking the danger of difference... At any time you can ask yourself: At which threshold am I now standing? ... A threshold is not a simple boundary; it is a frontier that divides two different territories, rhythms and atmospheres. Indeed, it is a lovely testimony to the fullness and integrity of an experience ... that it intensifies toward the end [and]cannot be crossed without the heart being passionately engaged and woken up. At this threshold a great complexity of emotions comes alive: confusion, fear, excitement, sadness, hope... The time has come to cross.

To acknowledge and cross a new threshold is always a challenge. It demands courage and also a sense of trust in whatever is emerging...

... The script of individual destiny is secret; it is hidden behind and beneath the sequence of happenings that is continually unfolding for us. Each life is a mystery that is never finally available to the mind’s light or questions.... No threshold need be a threat, but rather an invitation and a promise. Whatever comes, the great sacrament of life will remain faithful to us, blessing us always with visible signs of invisible grace. We merely need to trust.

CLOSING WORDS #431 ~ Barbara Wells ten Hove

[O Mother of all...]
O Spinner, Weaver, of our lives,
Your loom is love.
May we who are gathered here
be empowered by that love
to [ever unfold and] weave new patterns of Truth
and Justice into a web of life that is strong,
beautiful, and everlasting.

So may it be. Amen.

⁴ <http://sage-ing.org/wp-content/uploads/BiddefordLentenMeditation3.pdf>