

Leaning In... to Thrive!
Pledge Sunday Celebration
The Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
Rev. Julie Stoneberg
NOVEMBER 18, 2018

OPENING WORDS *We Must Shine* (#50) ~ *Christian de la Huerta*

Christian was born in Cuba, and is the author of *Coming Out Spiritually*, which is a study of the historical and potential roles for LGBT people in religion.

We must shine. We must shine now.

This is the goal toward which we stretch, step by step,
in our own time, at our own pace.

As our beauty unfolds, and our hearts open, we become gentler and more
compassionate, yet brighter, more empowered, and fearless.

We have been holding on, holding back, playing small, hiding our light under a bushel.
Enough of that. It is time to let go.

We are needed now, all of us. All of us together.

All those who feel a calling to be who we are to the fullest, make a difference, to give it
all we got.

We are here together. Let's give it all we got!

RESPONSIVE READING *Connections are Made Slowly* #568

Connections are made slowly, sometimes they grow underground.

__You cannot tell always by looking at what is happening.
More than half a tree is spread out in the soil under your feet.

__Penetrate quietly as the earthworm that blows no trumpet.
Fight persistently as the creeper that brings down the tree.

__Spread like the squash plant that overruns the garden.
Gnaw in the dark and use the sun to make sugar.

__Weave real connections, create real nodes, build real houses.
Live a life you can endure: make love that is loving.

__Keep tangling and interweaving and taking more in, a thicket and bramble
wilderness to the outside but to us interconnected with rabbit runs and burrows
and lairs.

Live as if you like yourself, and it may happen:

__Reach out, keep reaching out, keep bringing in.
This is how we are going to live for a long time: not always,

__For every gardener knows that after the digging, after the planting, after the
long season of tending and growth, the harvest comes.

MESSAGE *Leaning In... to Thrive!* ~ Rev. Stoneberg

Sometime in my high school years, I came across a picture in a magazine of a VW bus painted

from bumper to bumper with 'flower power'. (Remember that?) I tore the page out and stuck it in a notebook. Time and time again I looked at it, until it was dog-eared and worn, imagining the day when I would buy an old VW bus, paint it in a rainbow of flowers, and drive it around the country, completely carefree. That bus was a vision of who I could be, and how I could live my life.

I'm sorry to say that that never happened, at least not literally. And, although its dream still resides within me, I have no idea what became of that picture,

At Thursday night's Board meeting, as we awaited our president who was delayed by the falling snow, Ben invited us each to share a recent "aha or insight" about being part of the Fellowship — a moment that spoke to us about why we're here.

Scott began. He told us of how inspired he is by how the reality of the broken stair lift has opened up of conversations with Beth Israel, conversations that we are ready for because of the work we've doing together (and if you want to know more about this, read Friday's enews!); Chris told of how sharing a building is leading us to have closer ties to the Jewish community; Steph shared about how important the connections are here...a place where we show up for one another; Heather Lynn shared about her first experience attending, when she was so warmly greeted that she kept coming back; Ben spoke of how our community conversations have changed our culture in a way that allows us to go deeper faster; Guy also shared of his first Sunday here...singing one of his favourite songs while sunlight streamed through the windows; Linda told me about the community spirit that is present around potluck meals; and I told of how Wednesday evening's Starting Point class had felt like the epitome of shared ministry. Your Board of Directors is passionate about this community, as well they should be!

In October, we had a service that focused on the power of a community that knows what it cares about, and you shared your ideas about what that is. What I particularly took note of were the action words that you used to describe those aspirations. You said we should, and do...support, advocate, foster, contribute, connect, take action, serve, care, share. This is beautiful isn't it? Support, advocate, foster, contribute, connect, take action, serve, care, share. It might even be like we understand that we are creating a place like heaven...heaven on earth...and that each of us has a role, in our individual ways, in contributing to making that happen. Each of us does what we are able...whether it's something we are good at, or that we are experimenting with, or that we are learning as we grow into our place in this shared ministry bus that is the Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough.

This month, we're considering what it means to lean in, and today, I want us to think about leaning in...in order that we might thrive. To thrive is defined as growth or development that happens with vigor. To thrive is to be strong, to flourish, and to prosper. To thrive is to be the vital liberal religious community that we aspire to be. And, the opposite of thriving is wilting.

This word, thrive, is used regularly to describe healthy plants. Strong, green, flowering. Lifting and opening themselves toward the light. Thriving.

If you, like me, have house plants, you might regularly turn them, because one side leans

toward the window, stretching toward the sun, and it just feels right to allow the other side of the plant to get the full benefit of the light, too.

This 'leaning' is called phototropism...which literally means an orientation toward the light. We've all seen it, right? Plants seeded under rocks growing almost sideways in order to find the sun...sunflowers turning their heads...new seedlings bending themselves into impossible arcs...all in the service of orienting themselves toward the light.

I have learned that while scientists understand how this happens, they still don't know what makes it happen. What they have observed is that cells on the shady side of a plant secrete something called auxin, and the auxin causes the cells on that side of the plant to expand, which means that side becomes longer than the other side, and that's what makes the plant bend. They also know that it is blue light that fosters the appearance of auxin on the shady side. But exactly why and how that all happens is still something of a mystery. Still, that's the way it is in the plant world... light is a highly sought-after nutrient.

If you'll allow me to use this as an analogy, let's imagine ourselves as plants, or this Fellowship as a plant. Plants seeking the light. The light of moral imagination. The light of connection. The light of service to something larger. The light of generative possibilities. The light of love and justice. The light as an antidote to all that which is not life-giving.

What kind of 'auxin' do we need? What is the blue light that will help us to bend? In what ways do we need to expand as we orient ourselves to those things which matter and carry meaning for us?

As often happens, just yesterday I came across something apropos for today. It was the On Being podcast¹; this week an interview with journalist Anand Giridharadas. He speaks of a world in which the winners...who are flourishing in financial wealth...have developed a language of generosity which allows them to ignore the injustice of the world. They speak of giving more, but aren't willing to consider taking less. In other words, they give in order to preserve the systems in which they continue to be in power and have more.

And then he and the podcast's host, Krista Tippett, spoke of this as a 'second hat problem', which is to say that many business people in today's extreme capitalistic society no longer ever wear a second, spiritual hat ...whether that be "strong community member" or "T-ball coach" or "volunteer for the Rotary Club" or church member. They never put on that second hat which can foster a parallel set of values...values that might be in conflict with the first hat. So, they never develop a set of values that competes with their business values.

I don't really want to talk about those capitalist billionaires out there. I want to talk about us. And I think the conversation from this podcast can also be applied to us. What are those experiences and commitments, that blue light, that help us develop the ability to bend toward the sun of love and justice? It is so so easy for us to become distracted by all of the false suns out there, and to bend toward them, often without us even recognizing that this is what is happening. As a society, we have created multiple competing suns, to the end that we have

¹ <https://onbeing.org/programs/anand-giridharadas-when-the-market-is-our-only-language-nov2018/>

become unskilled at discerning which is true, which truly matters.

What I'm proposing is that this congregation, a community like this, can be a place where we put on that second hat...a hat that might be a very different style than what we wear out in the world...a hat that sometimes doesn't fit very well...but still, a hat that challenges us to take a hard look at our lives and how we live our chosen values. Not for reasons of piety or purity or even prudence. Not motivated by guilt or shame or self-doubt. But rather because we are listening to the cellular call from deep within that wants to thrive...that wants to live to the fullest...that wants to bend toward our own true light.

I'd like to think that this Fellowship could be likened to A Bus Called Heaven²...not because it is junky and abandoned, but because it holds so much possibility. It is a place where community and connection can thrive and expand outwards, especially if and when there are Stellas who believe in it and struggle for its life. And, especially if and when we each bring our gifts...whether they be goldfish or cakes or soccer tables...and contribute them to the whole.

And sometimes, just as in the story, we meet obstacles that would have us give up...that would have us succumb to the 'regulations' and the powers that be...because those powers seem invincible, unchangeable, entrenched. Society swirls around us, overpowering us with busy traffic and noise. Society wears a really big hat, and uses it to spread myths about what is most important, confusing us about where to orient ourselves. But, it's because we have experienced being together on the bus, and the life-giving energy it gives us, that we're able to identify what is true and meaningful.

Okay. This is sort of crazy. I've now painted a picture of us as bent plants wearing tight little hats, riding on a flower-painted bus. Who is crazy enough to get on this bus? Are you with me??

Doesn't some achy little cell deep inside of you want to get on? Don't you increasingly seek a vision of a community in which we pay attention to each other and to our deepest values and are then able to make better life choices, even when they're counter-cultural? Better to be weird than wilting, right?

You know, a really beautiful thing about UFP is that there are lots of Stellas here. Lots of you see new and exciting possibilities here every day. Lots of you contribute a good portion of your time, and put on your values hat with regularity. Lots of you show up to ensure the ongoing thriving of this place that sometimes is a little glimpse of heaven on earth.

And, as the president of the UUA, Susan Frederick-Gray reminds us, this is no time for a casual faith. This is no time for letting your values hat gather dust in the closet. This is no time for allowing the best of ourselves to wilt in the light of so many distracting false suns. This is a time to lean into the thriving of this community. Giving out of generosity, but also choosing to pay less attention to that which does not serve the flourishing of life.

² A Bus Called Heaven was the children's story today. A picture book by Bob Graham, it tells of how an abandoned old school bus becomes a hub of community...not just for people but also for birds, and snails, and grass. And the lead organizer is a small girl named Stella.

Today we are celebrating the thriving of this community. But let us not forget what it is that allows for that thriving. Your presence. Your gifts. Your commitment. Your belief in the possibility of creating, together, a bit of heaven. It takes a very intentional choice to invest in the expansion of those part of us which help us to bend toward the light... the light of justice, the light of compassion, the light of human connection, the light of truly living our interdependence with the natural world.

So, put on your best hat, find your light and bend toward it, and then let's get on the bus together. I believe we are going somewhere important.

So be it.

RESPONSIVE READING *We Raise Our Voices* (#37) ~ *Jim Scott*

For all of life and the gifts we hold sacred,

We raise our voices.

For all of our relations we meet with compassion and grace,

We raise our voices.

For justice and peace and the health of all the cycle of life,

We raise our voices.

For the celebration of all who themselves can not, or may not,

We raise our voices.

For the remembrance of those who have taught, led, or inspired us,

We raise our voices.

For this moment in time that we are granted to share the wealth of each other's presence.

We raise our voices.

For the power of our collective voice and concerned action, with vision and love,

We raise our voices.

***CLOSING WORDS** *A Lifelong Sharing* ~ *Mother Teresa*

Love cannot remain by itself--it has no meaning.

Love has to be put into action and that action is service.

Whatever form we are,

able or disabled,

rich or poor,

it is not how much we do,

but how much love we put in the doing;

a lifelong sharing of love with others.

May we share love our whole lives long, celebrating and thriving in the bit of heaven that is this community. So be it. Amen.