

LEADING FROM WITHIN
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
February 15, 2015

OPENING WORDS *The Gates of Hope* ~ Victoria Safford

Our mission is to plant ourselves at the gates of Hope —
not the prudent gates of Optimism, which are somewhat narrower;
nor the stalwart, boring gates of Common Sense;
nor the strident gates of Self-Righteousness, which creak on shrill and angry hinges
(people cannot hear us there; they cannot pass through);
nor the cheerful, flimsy garden gate of “Everything is gonna be all right.”
But a different, sometimes lonely place, the place of truth-telling,
about your own soul first of all and its condition,
the place of resistance and defiance,
the piece of ground from which you see the world both as it is and as it could be, as it
will be;
the place from which you glimpse not only struggle, but joy in the struggle. And we
stand there, beckoning and calling, telling people what we are seeing, asking people
what they see.

Come, let us enter our time of worship through the gates of hope.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *Red Knit Cap Girl* ~ Naoko Stoop

*(A little girl with a red knit cap looks for ways to talk to the moon, and eventually learns it involves
being quiet in the dark.)*

READING *from The Sound of the Genuine* ~ Howard Thurman

Our reading this morning comes from a baccalaureate speech that Howard Thurman gave to
Spelman College in 1980. I suggest that you hear it rather like an epistle, written specifically to
this congregation. Consider that the “you” he speaks to is the collective “you” ...the collective
“us.”

There is something in every one of you (every congregation, that is) that waits, listens
for the sound of the genuine in yourself and if you cannot hear it, you will never find
whatever it is for which you are searching and if you hear it and then do not follow it, it
was better that you had never been born...

You are the only you (the only Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough) that has ever
lived; your idiom is the only idiom of its kind in all of existence and if you cannot hear
the sound of the genuine in you, you will all of your life spend your days on the ends of
strings that somebody else pulls...

There is in you something that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself
and sometimes there is so much traffic going on in your minds, so many different kinds

of signals, so many vast impulses floating through your organism that go back thousands of generations, long before you were even a thought in the mind of creation, and you are buffeted by these, and in the midst of all of this you have got to find out what your name is. Who are you? How does the sound of the genuine come through to you...

The sound of the genuine is flowing through you. Don't be deceived and thrown off by all the noises that are a part even of your dreams [and] your ambitions that you don't hear the sound of the genuine in you. Because that is the only true guide that you will ever have and if you don't then you don't have a thing. You may be famous, you may be whatever the other ideals are which are a part of this generation, but you know you don't have the foggiest notion of who you are, where you are going, what you want. Cultivate the discipline of listening to the sound of the genuine in yourself.

MESSAGE

Thurman said: Listen for the sound of the genuine. Cultivate the discipline of listening to the sound of the genuine.

Last week, I attended the bi-annual Institute of the UU Ministers Association, a five-day educational intensive that claims to be at "the cutting edge of education, worship, spiritual practice, collegial support and networking." It not only CLAIMS to be this...I believe it to be so. I CRAVE such opportunities for professional development, and am very grateful to you for believing in the value of such programming and for making it possible for me to attend. Very grateful.

Now, some of you know that because of winter storms, I arrived in San Francisco much later than expected, at approximately 3am our time, by then in the middle of the second night of no sleep. And, I still had a 3 hour drive ahead of me down the coast to the conference center. But gift of gifts, having offered to share my car with other stranded travelers who might be arriving at the same late hour, I ended by sharing my car with Rev. Jacqui Lewis, one of the program presenters. That drive was a highlight of my trip.

Jacqui is the senior minister to Middle Collegiate Church in New York City, a huge interracial congregation (not UU,) known for its music and arts, and for its social justice and activism. (I visited their website yesterday and confess to feeling some jealousy! What if WE could be like that!) Jacqui is a dynamic and passionate person, and in her presence, I felt seen and loved. We had instantly deep conversations, and I felt any propensity to feeling insecure slip away.

Now, each Institute features about eight in-depth programs...and a person can only do one of them. We register, months in advance, by listing our first, second, and third choices. During the drive, Jacqui asked if I was in her session, and oh my, how I wished I were. Rather, I had ended up in a program called *Leading from Within: A Circle of Trust*, advertised as a time to pause, reflect, and reconnect with one's calling. I told Jacqui that I was not looking forward to

spending time in quiet listening to the voice within...that I simply wasn't in the mood. I'd rather be in a session that was loud, and energetic... something that would feed my spirit...and my head. Shouldn't I be learning about love, or church growth, or how to be a better preacher? I really didn't fancy sitting in a Circle of Trust for four days!

So you can imagine the lack of enthusiasm I felt as I headed to my first class...having caught less than 4 hours of sleep. We were one of the smaller groups, with just 30 people, and met in a little ocean-side cottage with windows that faced directly onto the beach. I positioned myself in a corner of the circle where I could stare out a window, and prepared to 'tolerate' the classes that lay ahead. Still, even from that rather disengage place, I know that important seeds were planted in me....seeds of learning and deeper understanding that will take time to grow and flower. Indeed, I've already felt them growing.

All this to say, that I can completely understand if you might think that spending some of your valuable time in "Big Circle Conversations" meant to discern and articulate who we are as a congregation and who we should be in the world...well, I understand that this might not seem all that compelling to you. And yet, this is exactly what I'm proposing. (If you haven't read my article in our February newsletter, please do so.)

Why do I think we need to gather in some intentional conversations? Three reasons, really.

The first is the reality that the place of religion in society is quickly shifting. Do you think about that very much? I think about it ALL the time! How will we survive? Who will we be tomorrow, next year, or in 2050? What role do we have in shaping what will be? How can we lead the way in creating the future of religious community?

Second, the future is already unfurling quickly here at the Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough. We have several large questions in front of us. For example, to decide if we should move or stay, we need to know what role a building/space plays in supporting our mission in the world. In order to accommodate the coming generations, we're gonna need to shift the way we pledge and invest and budget and generally 'do money.' And, how about our children? Where and how will the children of tomorrow learn their values and feed their spirits? Will it be in Sunday programming such as we offer now? There are lots of critical questions before us.

Third, YOU, the community, are the only ones who have the answers. Not me, and not you as an individual. But YOU, as a community. You have the way inside of you. This is YOUR congregation. You might not know it, you might not trust it, but I believe that deep inside the heart of this community, you can find the truth that will inform our next steps. And without each of you, this community cannot find that way...at least not the most whole way.

So, as a result of my time in California, I am even more fascinated with how it is that a community, this community, can lead from within.

I began poking around on the website for the Center for Courage and Renewal, Parker Palmer's organization and the 'home' of the people who facilitated the Circles of Trust program. Curiously, in resources posted there, I found several references to a book the non-fiction bookclub read several months ago....*Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges*, by Otto Scharmer. It was not an easy read...difficult both to understand and digest. Scharmer explores a theory of what he calls 'presencing'...a particular practice of entering into place of discernment with an open mind, and an open heart and an open will. (Very Unitarian, don't you think?) In this place, says Scharmer, the boundaries between us are wide open, so that we operate in a common field, blessed by a kind of communal presence. Briefly, this practice or 'presencing' includes:¹

1. Listening to what life calls us to do - and in particular to pay attention to how we look from the outside. How do others see us? What does the world suggest that we do?
2. Connect and listen to one another in order to imagine possibilities for a common future. Pay attention to why it matters, and how exactly we will get there. Then put that future 'on its feet' by creating prototypes that might get us to what we want to create.
3. Take experimental deep-dive journeys into those places with the most potential...those ideas that seem to hold the best possible future....even though that future that may be an unfamiliar world...a future that is surprising and fresh and new.
4. Continue to observe and reflect. Suspend the voices of judgment so that new ways can open up. Keep practicing deep listening and connecting with wide open minds, hearts and wills. Create collective sensing mechanisms that allow the new possibilities to 'see themselves' and to continually make meaning.
5. Let go of the old self and the 'stuff' that must die. (Easier said than done, right?)
6. Let the future come...let ourselves be who we are already becoming.

Okay, I know that's a lot to take in...and that it's VERY abstract. All I really want to communicate to you is that in order not to be swept along by the tide of societal change, change that is driven by materialism and mindlessness, we will need to be very mindful, and proactive, about who we are and who we are to become. There are proven and innovative ways to do this. So, the question is, are we willing to commit to what this will require of us?

Let me come at this another way...from the place of democracy. Many people today are crying out about the shrinking of democracy...about how it is being squeezed out by big business interests and governments. Let's not forget that the use of the democratic process is one of our UU principles. Parker Palmer has written a book called "Healing the Heart of Democracy." In

¹ Gratitude to Peggy Antrobus for her thorough summary of Scharmer's work (And the numbers used here to not correspond directly to process outlined in the book.)

it, he speaks to five habits of the heart² that he believes can heal our communities, habits that would support us in practicing healthy democracy here in our congregation.

The first crucial habit, Palmer says, is **an understanding that we are all in this together**.

Despite how we often act and think, humans are profoundly interconnected beings – built for community - there's no way for part of the world to be mired in injustice while the rest enjoy justice. We are dependent on, and accountable to, one another.

Then, we must make a habit of **appreciating the value of 'otherness.'** Because of our backgrounds and life circumstances, there will always be **us** and **them**...but this doesn't have to mean **us vs them**. When we invite 'otherness' into our lives and our communities, when we walk across lines of difference, we find that the world is larger and much more interesting than we previously knew.

But encountering difference means that our core beliefs will be challenged and our worldviews will be shaken up. So, the third habit is the **ability to hold tension in life-giving ways**. We have to be able to admit that we don't know everything, and that we might well receive gifts of insight, energy, and new life from others.

The fourth habit...and a demanding one, is to develop and use our unique **voice and agency**. If there are things we need to say, visions we are called to bring into being, and gifts we've been given, we have to stop being the audience and begin to be full participants. This applies to us as individuals and also to us as a community.

Finally, we need the **habit of creating and being community**. Palmer says that it takes a village to do just about anything worth doing. The capacity to create and live in community means that we can actually achieve voice, and agency, and embodied democracy.

Oh, yada, yada, yada...a wise person recently told me that the best way to increase the distance between a Unitarian's head and their heart is to ask them to read a book...and here, I've been 'reading' books at you all morning. Will you take a moment with me and see if you can connect with your heart?

What questions do you find there?

Do the things of the world sometimes scare you...so that you wonder what is to become of us?

Do you come here longing for something that moves you...that gives you hope...and even though you find that we fall somewhere short of that, you still believe in what can be?

Do you feel called to something more? Are you longing for greater purpose? Are you nurturing some ember of possibility within?

Do you have a vision for this community...a vision that is a seed of possibility...a seed you really want to see watered and supported into being?

² <http://www.couragerenewal.org/habitsoftheheart/>

Open your heart. Look within.

I sat in that room in California...watching the crashing waves...sometimes wishing I was someplace else...yet determined to participate as fully as possible...and to look inside and to find my truth. In that space, I held you in my heart. I held all the ways that you are challenged to move forward, as well as the innumerable gifts that you possess....and I wondered if together, you will find ways to lead from a place of trust, and hope, and faith.

I'm your minister, but I do not have the answers for you. Only you have them. You are the ones who can choose to look within, to listen to the sound of the genuine within, and use what you find in order to be active co-creators of the future. Will you give this process...the practice of listening to one another in order to hear what lies at the heart of this community...a chance?

The Buddha said that any teaching, any practice, is just a method to experience reality and is not reality itself, just as a finger pointing at the moon is not the moon itself. Circles of Trust, or these proposed Big Circle Conversations, are only fingers pointing at the moon, yet we can use them to find the light.

Like the Red Knit Cap Girl³ in today's story, let us sit in quiet and dark, and wait for the moon to appear. It is always there for us. As we whisper our truths to one another, may the moon smile gently upon us, and give us courage.

Amen.

READING

Patient Trust ~ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (adapted)

Above all, trust in the slow work of the Spirit.

We are quite naturally impatient in everything
to reach the end without delay.

We should like to skip the intermediate stages.

We are impatient of being on the way to something
unknown, something new.

And yet it is the law of all progress
that it is made by passing through
some stages of instability –
and that it may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with us;
our ideas mature gradually – let them grow,
let them shape themselves, without undue haste.

Let's not try to force them on,
as though we could be today what time
(that is to say, grace and circumstances

³ Red Knit Cap Girl, by Naoko Stoop

acting on our own good will)
will make of us tomorrow.
Who can say what this new spirit
gradually forming within us will be.
Let us give ourselves the benefit of believing
that the Spirit is leading us,
and accept the anxiety of feeling ourselves
in suspense and incomplete...

CLOSING WORDS

~ *Rod MacIver (adapted)*

The journey toward our beauty is a magnificent struggle.

Achieving integrity between what we believe and how we live is a challenge worthy of the gift of life.

A thousand obstacles stand between ourselves and the honouring of our truth.

A thousand distractions...a thousand ego-generated delusions.

Let us together...dive down, find our beauty, our truth, our integrity.

Let us listen to that voice within. It is difficult, but out of this comes meaning, and meaning is all-transcendent.