

**WHAT IF??**  
THE UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP OF PETERBOROUGH  
REV. JULIE STONEBERG  
MAY 26, 2019 - ANNUAL MEETING SUNDAY

**OPENING WORDS**

~ *Mark Nepo*

When I drop my glasses  
in the airport and they're  
crushed in the walkway  
between terminals, I get to  
meet the three kind souls  
who help me on my way.  
Then I hear you crying  
after everyone has left  
and bring you water  
and hear your story.  
Ever since the lock on  
my door broke, I have  
more visitors.  
Now the road I always  
take is detoured, which  
I curse until I see the  
heron glide across the  
small pond I didn't  
know was there.

Detours can take us to such surprising places, where if we're paying attention, we can find unexpected beauty. Come, let us take a detour together.

**A STORY FOR ALL** *The Very Last Castle* ~ *Travis Jonker*

*(A child named Ibb gets curious about the noises she hears coming from inside the last castle...one that no one ever comes out of, and that no one ever enters. One day, she knocks.)*

**READING** *Map of the Journey in Progress* ~ *Victoria Safford*

Here is where I found my voice and chose to be brave.

Here's a place where I forgave someone, against my better judgment, and I survived that, and unexpectedly, amazingly, I became wiser.

Here's where I was once forgiven, was ready for once in my life to receive forgiveness and to be transformed. And I survived that also. I lived to tell the tale.

This is the place where I said no, more loudly than I'd thought I ever could, and everybody stared, but I said no loudly anyway, because I knew it must be said, and those staring settled down into harmless, ineffective grumbling, and over me they had no power anymore.

Here's a time, and here's another, when I laid down my fear and walked right on into it, right up to my neck into that roiling water.

Here's where cruelty taught me something. And here's where I was first astonished by gratuitous compassion and knew it for the miracle it was, the requirement it is. It was a trembling time.

And here, much later, is where I returned the blessing, clumsily. It wasn't hard, but I was unaccustomed. It cycled round, and as best I could I sent it back on out, passed the gift along. This circular motion, around and around, has no apparent end.

Here's a place, a murky puddle, where I have stumbled more than once and fallen. I don't know yet what to learn there.

On this site I was outraged and the rage sustains me still; it clarifies my seeing.

And here's where something caught me – a warm breeze in late winter, birdsong in late summer.

Here's where I was told that something was wrong with my eyes, that I see the world strangely, and here's where I said, "Yes, I know, I walk in beauty."

Here is where I began to look with my own eyes and listen with my ears and sing my own song, shaky as it is.

Here is where, if by surgeon's knife, my heart was opened up – and here, and here, and here, and here. These are the landmarks of conversion.

**MESSAGE**      *What If?*      ~ Rev. Julie Stoneberg

What if...? What if...?

It's a question we ask when we're problem solving. It's a question we ask when we're brainstorming. It's a question we ask when we're dreaming about possibilities. It is perhaps the quintessential wondering question. What if...?

Now...at the end of a month focused on curiosity, and as we sit poised for our Annual Meeting, perhaps you came prepared to hear a message about dreams and our future in this place. But I'm going to take you on a bit of a detour. I want to consider using this question...what if...to change our hearts and our minds.

What if?

At the beginning of the month, we talked about 'holy curiosity'...which I described as intellectual humility...the ability to enter into all relationships and learning knowing that we might not have the answers, and that the answers we have might not be right...to be willing to be vulnerable, and open. And to honestly wonder at life.

If we allow it, asking 'what if' might take us a bit deeper. For example: What if we're not as open-minded as we believe ourselves to be? What if we too often allow our reactions to be based in fear or distrust? What if our colonialist culture has an unseen influence on our beliefs and practices? What if the bias implicit in everything that I've learned so far doesn't align with my values?

What if curiosity is a necessary skill...especially in this pluralistic society. In the face of misunderstandings and disagreements...even when I think I'm right. What if I could practice radical curiosity?

While we love one another, my big brother and I couldn't be much further apart when it

comes to politics and religion. One summer afternoon, out on the pontoon, in the midst of a conversation with a nephew's new girlfriend (who by the way, was raised UU), my bother boldly claimed, "Climate change is a hoax."

I blustered and sputtered back at him... "Oh, my god, I can't even believe you said that!" I was both appalled and stupefied; the words in my mouth were filled with disdain for his ignorance. (The new girlfriend, thankfully, much more skillfully engaged in a dialogue, short though it was.)

I've thought often of that conversation, and wondered...what if I had been more prepared to respond with curiosity? What if I'd been able to be truly curious about his position? Like: Tell me more. What makes you think that? Why do you think the scientific world says that climate change is real?

Not as a ploy. Not as a trick. But because I want to really know his story...because I want to understand him...because I'm curious about how he has come to his beliefs...because I want to hear how his experience could be so different than my own...because I wonder what and who he listens to, and why.

But instead I grew incensed and indignant, and therefore had no real interaction. I just contributed to more awkwardness and distance between us. I was 'pre-offended'... reactive and judgmental...rather than ready to engage in a true relationship seeded with curiosity.

There are obstacles to curiosity, it seems. In this instance, there's a trigger, or a hook, that has to do with family expectations and history. I mean, this is my big brother, and he is, in other ways, smart and kind.

But that aside, I was stymied in my curiosity by a lack of skill in open dialogue across difference. I fear we have come to exist in bubbles of like-minds, like-politics, like-values. In most of our life, we can turn off that which we don't want to hear, and we are conditioned to see and hear the sources of information that we agree with.

But, I'm thinking that the biggest obstacle to this kind of curiosity is ego, or what might be better described as my individual identity politics. Identity politics in common usage, says Wikipedia, refers to a tendency of people sharing particular racial, religious, ethnic, social, or cultural identities to form and promote exclusive alliances...without regard for the interests of the broader society. All well and good, since many of these alliances are among and between marginalized groups who have needed to find solidarity and voice. All well and good, because group identity politics have helped many individuals to find a place they belong and to have a community of support.

By my lights, however, identity politics have created unintended backlashes. First by creating more polarities and partisanship. And, by fostering a tendency by many individuals, myself included, to be defensive... more occupied with claiming my own space and rights than in showing a concern or interest in the 'other'... whoever that might be. It's a kind of fragility...wherein I'm not sure enough of myself and my belonging to simply trust that I have an inalienable place and an immutable voice no matter what...to simply trust that I, along with my perspectives and beliefs, belong in the tapestry of all that is. Just as everyone does. (And frankly, the society that we've created doesn't easily allow for that kind of trust in our

belonging.)

When we act out of fragility, we cannot truly connect, because we're busy protecting ourselves, or worrying about holding onto whatever place or privilege we have, so we can't reach out and hold open a space for difference. Acting out of fragility demands that the other pay attention to us, or take care of us; it takes up all the space. With the consequence that the other is unable to bring their full selves into whatever connection we might have had.

Someone said to me the other day that they felt that those who were the mainstay of Unitarian Universalism in the past...by which I assumed them to mean 20-30 years ago...and who had found here a like-mindedness based in humanism, now feel that they have lost their community. That hurts. I don't like to hear that anyone has lost their community. Now, I could try to protect myself and whatever role I might have played, and get defensive and assert that changes in our faith tradition were the right thing to have happened...that things needed to shift...that secular humanism has seen its heyday. But what if that's not true?

And what would that say about our claim to be a place where all beliefs are welcome? And what would it say about us needing, or at least wanting, an affinity group of protection and identity around us? Without regard for others?

I wonder if there might be some way to foster a culture where each of us can stand on our own, knowing that we are accepted for who we are. I wonder if we could create a community where each of us can make space for difference, knowing that beloved community needs diversity...outloud and proud.

What if we could be that place? A place where we don't get defensive, because there's no threat to our identities. A place where we can be curious about the 'other' because we believe encountering difference is the way that we learn and are transformed.

What if?

What would it require of us?

Intention. Practice. A belief in the possibility? A sincere desire to be part of such a community?

I believe that our continued focus on deep listening...in our covenant groups, in our community conversations, even in our committee meetings...is one way that we learn how to be better at curiosity. When we choose to listen to another with the singular intent of understanding them and holding a space for them to explore and express themselves, we put aside our need to defend, counter, affirm, or expound. We step off the path we comfortably occupy, and choose to de-center ourselves. And, we just give the other the space to tell us who they are, knowing that we will be given a similar space in return.

And here's the thing. These kinds of detours off the usual path have to be intentionally chosen. Most of us have the luxury and the privilege of having it our way, with ourselves at the center, whenever we want. We have to choose the detour in order to create a shared space where everyone is welcome. It's not the usual path.

The father of one of my best friends worked his whole life as a railway lineman. When retired, and while wintering in the south, he decided to visit a UU congregation in Arizona. Stan presented well...fit and tanned...and he reported that when he was greeted at the door, he was told that he would really like it there, because it was a congregation full of retired lawyers

and doctors. He heard that he wouldn't fit in. He never went back.

We have got to stop claiming that we are all the same, or that we all want the same thing, or that others will want to be who we want them to be, or do their lives the way we do our lives. Yes, we share a beautiful common humanity, but we are different colours, genders, ages, abilities. We have differing beliefs and politics, and life experiences. We don't all believe in climate change. We would do well to make space for it all. Curiosity helps create such a space.

Really. Believe me. It need not be a threat to you if someone else has had difference experiences and has garnered different perspectives. They are a gift.

It is not necessary to share the same socio-economic status or have the same level of education in order to appreciate one another. Truly knowing another is a blessing. These places are, as Victoria Safford called them, landmarks of conversion. Places where we grow and are changed. What if we opened ourselves to these gifts and blessings?

What if?

Remember Mark Nepo's poem with which we opened the service. If his glasses had not been dropped and crushed underfoot, he would not have met the kind souls who helped him find his way. If he had not responded to someone's cries, he would never have heard their story. If the road had not been detoured, he would not have seen a heron glide across a small pond he hadn't even known was there.

Detours of curiosity...being willing to forego our chosen path for long enough to greet the other...being open to encountering difference...letting go of the way we think it should be. If we can make these things our spiritual practice, we can build up our inclusivity and diversity muscles.

Rev. Nathan Walker<sup>1</sup> wrote a beautiful piece that tells of how we are each other's spiritual trainers. I'm not going to share it with you, but I am going to riff off of it...

When we encounter one another,  
come not with an expectation  
to be coddled.

Think of each other as PSTs -  
personal spiritual trainers.

Know your own worth,  
Know that you matter  
Because you do.

Root yourself in a community  
built on complexity and  
greet one another as a gift.

Then flex your curiosity muscle.  
Exercise the spiritual practice of

---

<sup>1</sup> "Personal Spiritual Trainers" excerpted from Nathan C. Walker (2014) *Exorcising Preaching: Crafting Intellectually Honest Worship*. St. Louis: Chalice Press. <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/personal-spiritual-trainers>

training yourself to truly see the other.  
Take detours. Embrace the unexpected.  
Walk into unknown territory.  
Welcome what you find there.  
Train yourself to listen.  
Practice the art of moving aside  
and putting another at the center.  
Learn new ways  
to better your relationships, and  
then share what you've learned;  
help others practice curiosity.  
Because we are each other's  
personal spiritual trainers.

What if we could do that? So be it.

**READING**                      *Things to Think ~ Robert Bly*

Think in ways you've never thought before.  
If the phone rings, think of it as carrying a message  
Larger than anything you've ever heard,  
Vaster than a hundred lines of Yeats.  
Think that someone may bring a bear to your door,  
Maybe wounded and deranged; or think that a moose  
Has risen out of the lake, and he's carrying on his antlers  
A child of your own whom you've never seen.  
When someone knocks on the door,  
Think that he's about  
To give you something large: tell you you're forgiven,  
Or that it's not necessary to work all the time,  
Or that it's been decided that if you lie down no one will die.

**\*CLOSING WORDS**                      *~ William Henry Channing*

To live content with small means;  
To seek elegance rather than luxury, and refinement rather than fashion;  
To be worthy, not respectable, and wealthy, not rich;  
To study hard, think quietly, talk gently, act frankly;  
To listen to stars and birds, to babes and sages, with open heart;  
To bear all cheerfully, do all bravely, await occasions, hurry never.  
To let the spiritual, unbidden and unconscious, grow up through the common.  
This is to be my symphony.

May our lives be a symphony of open-hearted curiosity. So be it.

**EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME**