

Unitarian Universalists of San Mateo
Deanna Vandiver, Summer Minister
24 July 2011
“Do It Anyway”

Centering Quote

“We're not trying to succeed perfectly, because we know that's not possible in such a globalized, economically-fragile, morally complex world. Instead, we're trying to fail beautifully.

As William Faulkner said, ‘All of us failed to match our dreams of perfection. So I rate us on the basis of our splendid failure to do the impossible.’”

~ Courtney E. Martin, Do It Anyway

Story for All Ages, Part 2: “TURNING TO ONE ANOTHER”
by Margaret Wheatley

There is no power greater than a community discovering what it cares about.

Ask: “What’s possible?” not “What’s wrong?” Keep asking.

Notice what you care about. Assume that many others share your dreams.

*Be brave enough to start a conversation that matters. Talk to people you know.
Talk to people you don’t know. Talk to people you never talk to.*

Be intrigued by the differences you hear. Expect to be surprised. Treasure curiosity more than certainty.

Invite in everybody who cares to work on what’s possible. Acknowledge that everyone is an expert about something. Know that creative solutions come from new connections.

Remember, you don’t fear people whose story you know. Real listening always brings people closer together.

Trust that meaningful conversations can change your world.

Rely on human goodness. Stay together.

REFLECTION: by Cordelia Leoncio, Worship Associate

This morning's service was inspired by the Martina McBride song, "Do It Anyway."

"You can spend your whole life buildin' somethin' from nothin'," she sings, "One storm can come and blow it all away. Build it anyway."

To which I respond, "For the love of god, (insert expletive) WHY???"

I mean, why not be the person who just moves into something that someone else built? Why not pour your resources into being sufficiently insured? Why not rent?

Sure, there are the gifts that reveal themselves in the fullness of time. The strength and resiliency that can emerge from facing a challenge. Even the poignancy of thinking back on that somethin' that was built from nothin'.

I get that. I really do. In fact, six years ago today, I offered the following poem on what was my and Rob's twelfth wedding anniversary. I had yet to be diagnosed with postpartum depression, two-month old Pilar had been coughing up blood, and yet I scribbled this on a scrap of paper as Rob drove us to see a pediatric gastroenterologist at UCSF:

"I want to risk everything for love.
I want to walk up to the high stakes table that is motherhood and marriage
and being awake to each new day,
and gamble everything.
I want to reach out and place my bet,
even if my hands are trembling,

and lay down my sense of identity, my life as I know it, and all hope of certainty.

I want to remember that by standing at that table - where I will undoubtedly be stripped bare of my wager - I am winning big.”

Anyway, here’s what I get: Beyond the anxiety and vulnerability inherent to being in relationship, there can be roots digging ever deeper into faith and a blooming of love. For all its scariness and challenges, this can be such a lovely life.

Except when it isn’t.

And that’s how I come to ask, “(insert expletive) WHY???” Why do it anyway?

I am sorry if I come across as glib or snarky. I’ll just go ahead and tell you that I have been – am - suffering from disillusionment. And by suffering, I mean churning waves of nausea and murderous rage, cold sweaty panic and the hollowed out with a rusty knife feeling of immense loss – SUFFERING.

Is that vivid enough for you? Yeah (insert expletive).

So when Martina McBride sings, “You can love someone with all your heart, for all the right reasons, and in a moment they can choose to walk away. Love ‘em anyway,” I want to say, “Why not keep your heart for yourself? Why not question your reasons for loving so completely? In fact, why not make sure you’re the one to walk away?”

I could try telling myself that, no matter how this life turns out, it’ll all be worth it in the end. That there will still be loveliness in this life. And I do believe that’s true. I have had terrible things happen to me, and there is still good. There is still loveliness.

But leaving it at that feels like glossing over the suffering, which in itself, deserves to be acknowledged. It feels like overlooking that I am right here, right now, feeling terribly disillusioned and otherwise having a perfectly normal, non-pathological reaction to trauma.

Here is what I know: I have not been keeping my heart for myself. I didn't question my loving. And I am not walking away.

Four years ago, when my beloved daughter, Teodora was stillborn at full term, I rushed headlong into grief. I wanted to get through it, I wanted to get it over with. I was terrified of feeling that way for any longer than I absolutely had to, so I immersed myself in it, never really dwelling in denial beyond the incredible shock of giving birth to a baby that had already died. I knew the only way out of grief was to go through it and, by golly, that's the route I'd take. It was horrific and excruciating. I likened it to being set on fire and dragged naked through broken glass. Yeah, vivid. (insert expletive)

And yet, the journey itself was not without its beauty. Never mind that I'm a stronger person now, blah blah blah. And, by the way, surviving that tragedy did not so much teach me that I can survive anything, as it taught me that I do not want to. Anyway, it was only in the midst of allowing myself to feel all of the intensity of my grief – that being burned and cut away – that I could see, really see, what I was made of.

Do it anyway, she sings. Why? You're gonna need to find your own answers, but mine is this: Because facing my disillusionment is gonna show me what I'm made of. It's really all too easy for me to forget at other times, when life simply feels lovely. This is an extremely challenging time for me, and it's hard to remember that life can be lovely at all, and I am gonna see if I am filled with fear, hope, self-doubt, courage, despair, love or ? I am gonna remind myself that all of those things are precious and normal, as long as they are real. When all is said and done, I truly hope that I will find that I am made of integrity. Because if my life is going to be irrevocably altered – and let's face it, of course it will – my integrity is the one thing I want to be able to count on.

So what the (insert expletive) does any of this have to do with where we stand as a congregation? Or was that just a really long, kinda scary check-in? Yes, but there is also this:

This moment in time may not feel like standing on a precipice to you – and that is so completely fine – but we do have enormous changes taking place and even more coming our way. The oversimplified version is this: Through the capital campaign, we are dreaming and stretching. Through our search for a settled minister, we are opening our hearts and lives to a total stranger. Through this time of transition, we are going to see what we are made of.

Am I going to be plagued by doubt and apprehension and act like a naysayer? Am I going to be really gung-ho and then burn out when things don't come together as I'd hoped? Am I going to distance myself from UUSM until things settle down? Am I going to let myself feel hope and excitement when they show up? Am I going to express gratitude and awe for what we are capable of? Will I even be willing to see what is revealed about me along the way? There are so many possibilities, all of which, by the way, are entirely valid, if not always beneficial.

And then there's this: Finding out what I'm made of feels quite different when it is a shared journey, when it is one embarked upon while choosing to be in relationship with others. I don't get to set the pace. I don't get to choose the route. I don't even get to decide how or whether it will be shared. We are a congregation embarking upon a particular journey of transformation, one that is fraught with both foreseeable and challenges. We are individuals making up a religious community facing an amazing opportunity to grow, a holy invitation to do it anyway.

C'mon, my people. Let's find out what we're made of.

SERMON: “Do It Anyway”
by Deanna Vandiver, Summer Minister

When I first arrived here last August, several members of this congregation said, “it isn't fair. Intern Ministers come, we get attached to you, and then you go away.” And it isn't fair- especially because you know the ministerial intern program requires that we be intentionally 'out of touch' now

for a year, until General Assembly 2012 – where I hope to see many of you in Phoenix, AZ at our Justice GA.

Even though it is not fair, I am most grateful to say that you chose, as a congregation, to love me anyway. You even welcomed the spirit Carnival into your midst with loving curiosity, rocking this whole building with our collective joy, all the while knowing that this New Orleanian would be packing up her beads and heading home.

Your choice to love me anyway, even though you knew I would be leaving, has made a difference – in my life, in my ministry, and, I hope, in this congregation. Knowing that good-byes are inevitable, that heartbreak is possible, we have turned toward each other again and again this year, having conversations that matter, playing together and working together toward our vision of ourselves and the world transformed.

I have not yet managed to articulate the depth and breadth of gratitude I have for this community of beloveds.

Please hear

And receive fully into your being,

Into, as Rev. Lauren says, the bones of your bones

This most thanking

thank you

from my being,

from the bones of my bones.

To the Coming of Age youth who opened your rite of passage journey to me - THANK YOU. To the Age-ing to Sage-ing soul lights who folded me graciously into your gatherings with loving hospitality - THANK YOU. To

everyone whose commitment to anti-oppression and a more just and merciful community brought you to: A Dialogue on Race and Ethnicity (ADORE), our Building the World We Dream About class, the Open Door Committee and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Celebration, participation in our faith actions with the Social Justice Committee – THANK YOU. To every single one of you here today co-creating our collective spiritual practice of worship – THANK YOU.

It is clear to me that you do not just come to church – you are the church embodied. In the face of a year deeply marked by ever shifting ground, you have embodied a congregation with open, loving hearts and open, creative minds. You are a blessing – to me, to each other, to this world. Remember this. As the ground continues to shift, remember – you know how to live and love during earthquake season. Which, unlike hurricane season, I would like to point out, is year-round.

While you may repeatedly struggle with the “why” of doing it anyway that Cordelia has so eloquently named, I trust you to remember that you know deep in the wisdom bones of this congregation the “how” of doing it anyway. And it is the congregation as a body that I want to life up this morning.

There is a Sufi saying – “you think because you understand *one* you must understand two, because one and one make two. But you must also understand *and*.” Turning toward each other is deeply imbedded who and how we are in the world as Unitarian Universalists. Our faith calls us not toward perfection, but toward each other – toward the *and*. In this moment, Unitarian Universalists of San Mateo are called to discern the meaning of the *and* with particular intentionality.

Today you commissioned your Ministerial Search Committee to go forth and to turn inward, trusting them to discover for this congregation:

who we are now

who we *really* are *now*

who we think we are becoming *and*

who we want to become

in order to discern which minister to invite here next year as your candidate to receive the call of this congregation to walk with you toward your collective vision.

For some of you this is old hat, a familiar process.

For others, it may feel more like that first time on the bike without training wheels, just at the moment the hand balancing you with the seat lets go.

Some of you may be feeling surprise that the *congregation* is responsible for calling the minister.

A few of you may be visiting today and wondering what Search Committees have to do with worship. I thank you all for your presence as we wander on the path of UU polity and theology together.

The range of knowledge about Unitarian Universalist congregational polity in UU congregations ranges from “poli-what?” all the way to dissertations on the subject. Our polity is how we govern ourselves as a religious community – polity, from the same root as the words politics and polite. It is important that we explicitly name our polity often enough that it really can be commonly understood. While it is almost always a good idea to understand how one’s religious community is governed, it is particularly important at this time for Unitarian Universalists of San Mateo.

Why did we elect and commission as a congregation a Ministerial Search Committee? After all, most of the

congregations of mainstream Christian denominations in this country do not proceed this way. Ministers in those faiths are appointed from above and received by the congregations. The theologies behind such structures of polity are often quite different from our own. We are a covenanted community, governed (mostly) by a system known as *Congregational Polity*.

We do much more from a congregational level beyond calling our own ministers. Congregations own and operate our own places of worship, choose our own curriculum, determine when we will worship together, decide what by-laws and policies will bind us together, set our own budget, create our own covenant of right relations. This polity of turning to each other, of drawing our power and our authority from the congregation itself, shapes who we are in the world as a people of faith. As Conrad Wright proclaims:

Our polity is important because it defines the way in which we believe human beings should be related to one another for [religious] purposes, and it may be a guide or model for human relationships of other kinds. There are real differences between democratic, hierarchical, [...], and authoritarian patterns of social organization. Behind these social forms lie understandings of the nature of human beings...

Wright goes on to tell us that “polity is not a matter of casual social arrangements, but goes very directly to the heart of basic issues of theology.” *How* we are to together says a lot about *who* we believe we are as people and *what* we believe the ultimate questions are.

As a congregation, we have covenanted to affirm and promote not only the dignity and worth of every person, but also justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.

We are not simply on an independent free and responsible search for truth and meaning, we are also committed to acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.

We do not ever do this perfectly-but we do it anyway.

Your Ministerial Search Committee may not execute the search process exactly the way you would personally, your Board may choose to adopt different policies than you would have chosen. But in the mystery and the wonder of our polity, they are **you**, our congregation, embodied in the working leaders whom you have chosen to do our work. We are directed by our polity to turn toward each other, to the *and* of us. We are beckoned by our theology to do so with love, respect, compassion, and curiosity.

As UUs, we have an on-going call to deepen our understanding of our congregational polity. As UUSM, you are now called to know yourself anew as a congregation. Just as our bodies are ever being regenerated, cell by cell, so too is this congregation. While you are always you, you are also always becoming you.

A story is told of the geologist who specialized in beaches and shorelines and spent years studying the unique geological features of the Outer Banks of North Carolina. He was being interviewed as a huge hurricane was roiling over the Outer Banks. He told the interviewer that he was waiting for the storm to move on so he could get out there and study the impact of the hurricane.

“What do you expect to find when you go out there?” the interviewer asked, prepared to hear a litany of disaster – destroyed homes, eroded shoreline, downed trees, the works. She was surprised when the geologist replied calmly, “I expect to find a new beach.”

The geologist was curious about what the beach was made of – and what it would be after the storm. It would still be a part of the Outer Banks. And it would be transformed, requiring study and discernment to know it intimately anew.

You are ever UUSM. And you are UUSM anew. May loving curiosity invite you into the holy tasks of congregational polity. May joy and wonder companion you on your continuous journey of discovering what you are made of, of who you are even now becoming.

You will not do this work perfectly. But you will do it anyway, dear people of faith. For this, and oh so much more, I thank you.

Blessed be. Amen.

Sources:

Wheatley, Margaret J., *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*. 1999.

Wright, Conrad. *Congregational Polity*, 1997.

Commissioning the Ministerial Search Committee

BOARD PRESIDENT: I am Andrea Rosenfeld, President of your Board of Trustees. I come before you today to lead the sacred task of commissioning our ministerial search committee. [*Calling forth the members of the MSC*]. This unique committee was elected by us, using our fifth principle, “the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregation...” Having chosen this particular group of ourselves for the significant task of knowing us and search for the minister for us, we now take the time in our collective worship service to send them forth to their work with our blessings and care.

CONGREGATION: Thank you for committing your precious life energy to the holy task of discerning whom we will call our minister. We recognize that this is a deeply encompassing mission and we release you from other service commitments you may have to this congregation while you serve us in search. The work you do matters. We trust you to discover:

who we are now

who we really are now

who we think we are becoming and

who we want to become.

We know that there will be times in the search process when all you will be able to tell us is that you are working hard on our behalf. We trust the search process and we entrust you to do our work faithfully, in keeping with our mission, our vision, and our covenant of right relations.

With gratitude for your service, we bless you.

MINISTERIAL SEARCH COMMITTEE: We commit our precious life energy to the holy task of discerning whom we

will call our minister. We recognize that this is a deeply encompassing mission and we accept your release from other service commitments we have to this congregation. We believe that the work we do matters. We accept your trust and commit to discovering:

who our congregation is now
who our congregation really is now
who we think our congregation is becoming and
who our congregation wants to become.

We know that there will be times in the search process when all we will be able to tell you is that we are working hard on behalf of our congregation. We trust the search process and we accept your trust as we do our work faithfully, in keeping with our mission, our vision, and our congregational covenant of right relations.

With gratitude for your trust, we bless you.

ALL: We are a whole and holy community, seeking a minister to move forward with us in our vision. We will honor the search process, offering our trust and support to each other along the journey.

BOARD PRESIDENT: May it be so. Blessed be.