

Expectation in a Liminal Time
A sermon by Rev. Roberta Finkelstein, Transition Minister
UU Jacksonville, FL
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I'm not a poet like Rev. Marti, but I used to write poems when I was a child. This was one that I wrote about a morning at the beach with my cousins. Though I didn't know anything back then about transitional ministry I had apparently intuited some things about impermanence and change.

We built a castle at the edge of the sea.

Only my two cousins and me.

Then the tide came in and set it free.

My beautiful castle by the edge of the sea.

My beautiful castle by the edge of the sea.

You might say that we are beginning a time of building sandcastles together and a time of letting go of those things that are inevitably going to be washed out with the tide. Last week Rev. Linda reminded you that being a people of expectations means being able to hold those expectations lightly, not graspingly, surrendering to the tide that which is the tide's while holding fiercely to what is genuine to this community of faith.

To do that suggest that we invoke Janus. In the ancient Roman pantheon Janus was the God of Beginnings. His two-headed image appeared over gates and portals and the doors to the cities; a symbol of protection as well as newness. He had two heads so that he could look both backwards and forwards, as we will be doing. In his right hand he held a key. The key closes and locks the door of the old, when it is time. And then it unlocks and opens the door of the new. When it is time.

This coming year we will look backwards in order to understand the feelings, events, and ways of being that have brought you to this point. And we will look forward, carrying your strengths and your healing into your future. My

job is, in the words of a wise mentor, to “render more secure the passage between yesterday and tomorrow.” That passage has been called “that magical interim in which we always live: the sacred place right smack between yesterday and tomorrow.” The key to navigating that passage well is to embrace it as a gift of potential. Don’t hurry through. Don’t linger too long. Be here. And keep moving. I will accompany you; that is my calling.

How did I into this interim business? Well, it all started in the early 1950’s when my family ritual every Sunday morning was to pile into the Oldsmobile, drive across Queens and through the Mid-Town Tunnel, and pull up in front of the Community Church of New York, a Unitarian Universalist congregation. We started with Children’s Chapel, where my mom played the organ, then off we went to our Sunday School classes. Then it was back into the car for the long drive home.

Why did my parents spend all those hours driving to and fro, volunteering as Sunday School teachers, accompanists, and so many other things? My father was a first generation American. His parents fled Poland in 1911 – not a good time for Jews in Eastern Europe. He was culturally Jewish but agnostic at best. He didn’t pray or feel the need for worship. What he did need was a community of open-minded people who shared his ethical values. He wanted us to be religiously literate, spiritually aware, and morally invested in the world around us.

My mother traced her ancestors back to the Mayflower. Her Sunday was even longer than ours, because she went to the early Episcopal service every week before the journey into Manhattan. She wanted us to grow up in a community that provided a broad and generous religious education, opportunities for hands-on service and advocacy, and an affirmation of the worth of every living being.

So here I am – the product of my parent’s expectation that in Unitarian Universalism they would find the religious home that would allow them to retain

their unique and radically different spiritualities while offering the entire family opportunities to grow together in faith and to be transformed by our experiences of taking our faith out into the world.

What I learned growing up at the Community Church was that I was a worthy human being, even as a child. Even as a know-it-all adolescent. Even as a disaffected young adult. Eventually I learned something even more important: a religious community that offers all of that to kids like me and families like mine is worthy of all of the passion and commitment that I have to offer. That is why my parents made the sacrifices they did to bring me up in that community. And that is why I do the work I do today; the work of intentional transitional ministry.

I attended the Community Church from Cradle Roll through Youth Group. I was a member and lay leader in Arlington, VA, and have served in some ministerial capacity in congregations in Virginia, Maryland, New Hampshire, Florida, New Jersey, Vermont, Connecticut and Delaware. And now here I am, surprisingly semi-retired. Not what I expected, but what the universe apparently had in mind for me for this year was spending an intensive week every month with you.

Like me, every one of you bring your own personal histories with you into this sanctuary. The work of creating this intentionally diverse community, of melding all those experiences into a cohesive and functional unity – that is work for all of us. Whether there is an interim minister standing here or a developmental minister or no minister, the quality of your community is your shared work. Always. Right now there is work specific to the transition that we can tackle together in this brief time we have.

The craft of transitional ministry has been carefully developed by people who have studied congregational life in various denominations over many decades. They have applied the concepts of systems theory and organizational dynamics to life in faith communities. The research led to an experiential consensus as to what

needs to happen when a congregation is between ministers. What needs to happen, that is, if the next ministry is to thrive. I would sum up that consensus by saying you need to know the answers to those three questions: Who were we? Who are we? Who do we wish to become?

To know who you were is to tell the formative stories of this congregation's life; to share the narrative arc of your history. How were you founded? What have been the consistent strengths? The consistent challenges? What are the highlights, positive and negative, in your history? What lessons have you learned from your past? Are they the right lessons?

Let me illustrate with an apocryphal story from New England church lore. A new minister came to a congregation and noticed at the first service that everybody sat on the left side of the room. Halfway through the sermon, to his surprise, they all got up and moved to the other side. This happened week after week. When he asked about it the answer he got consistently was, "Oh, that's the way we've always done it." The choreography was apparently a part of their liturgy. Finally, on a visit to a home bound elder, he was enlightened. He was told that long ago, before the central heating had been installed, there was a wood stove on the left side of the room – the only source of heat. At the beginning of the service it wasn't fully fired, so people sat close to be warm. At about the halfway point it got too hot, so they all moved away. Now there is nothing wrong with a congregation claiming a move from one side of the room to the other as part of their beloved liturgy. But I would argue that it is helpful to know the story, so that the congregation today, sitting in a centrally heated sanctuary, could make an informed decision as to whether it is essential to their worship life to continue that practice. Or, as Linda said last week, being a people of expectation means leaving room to grow, room to change, room to breathe. Letting go of that which no longer serves the mission of the congregation.

Who were you? How can I help you in claiming and honoring the past and healing your griefs and conflicts? I begin that work this week with a series of appreciative inquiry-based conversations about your strengths. In group after group I heard stories of belonging: of feeling at home, of being welcomed just as you are, of being given permission to deepen spiritually through whatever theology or practice most resonated. I heard stories of identity confirmed: the great relief of finding a church home among fellow religious liberals who didn't ask you to assent to a creed or to give up parts of yourself in order to fit in. I heard stories of ongoing spiritual seeking, of experiencing unexpected transformations. And I heard stories of hope, and courage, and yearning for the ongoing health of this congregation that holds fast to core values and principles no matter what.

Next month I will facilitate a series of Loss and Transition groups that I hope you will participate in as well. Between these two sets of conversations we will have plenty of data for an exploration of your congregational DNA – the assumptions and practices passed on from generation to generation. What is the legacy you have inherited? Are there secrets hidden in old archive boxes, unresolved questions about your shared identity? The philosopher Santayana said it best years ago. “Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” I want to make sure that the only history you repeat is the history you want to repeat.

That will bring us to the next question: who are you? How can I assist you in illuminating your unique identity, strengths, needs, and challenges? This is what we might think of as the ‘looking in the mirror and seeing clearly’ task. What is your mission, really? Not just the words that make up your mission statement, but your real understanding of the reason this congregation exists. Are there needs out there that you see yourselves as uniquely positioned to address? What is your covenant with each other? Is this room truly a sanctuary, a safe and accepting oasis in an angry and fearful world?

The question of who you are in the present is almost inseparable from the question of who you wish to become. In this transition you have a chance to rediscover who you were, clarify who you have become, and dream boldly about who you might be in the future.

Clarifying your identity as a congregation will inevitably raise questions about the multiple dimensions of leadership, both ordained and lay, and navigating the shifts in leadership that accompany times of transition. Later in the year Rev. Marti and I expect to be working with you to examine and evaluate the infrastructure of the congregation. What kinds of decisions will best support you all in living out your mission. finding your passion, growing in faith, being inspired and transformed? To thrive and grow you need to have structures in place that nurture and enhance membership and leadership.

This transition process can only take place in an atmosphere of trust and mutual empowerment. Good and honest and mutually respectful communication is essential. So here's a question I would like you all to ponder: When you choose leaders, whether by election or assignment, do you allow them to do their best work?

Our nation has been crippled by a dysfunctional understanding of leadership. We elect people, then wait gleefully for them to fail. That toxic attitude has filtered down into other institutions in our democracy, poisoning traditional town meetings and hobbling voluntary associations at all levels. What I expect in every congregation I serve is a counter-cultural insistence on trusting and encouraging leaders, expecting not perfection but best efforts. I hope for an openness to bold experiments in leadership, even though that means risking failure. To that end I promise you that I will act, to the best of my ability, in trustworthy ways. Will you give me the benefit of the doubt? Will you let me know when I have let you down?

Will you talk to me and not about me? That one is non-negotiable! I fully expect you to talk to me and not about me. I will do the same for you.

To trust is to communicate directly, and honestly, and respectfully. That is a spiritual practice for Unitarian Universalists. Even when you are disappointed. Even when you are angry. Even when you are afraid. If we can practice that art of trustworthy shared leadership, then all of us - ministers, staff, board, lay leaders – all of us will feel empowered to do our best for this congregation. We won't worry about making mistakes, we won't worry about being criticized. We will all be able to get on with the work of affirming the inherent worth of every person, supporting support each other in our search for truth and meaning, caring for each other in times of need, and bringing about a beloved community of justice and freedom and love. And changing the world!

What will this congregation look like and sound like and feel like when those three questions have been answered? I have no idea. That is up to you to decide. The congregation's future belongs to you. How will we get the questions answered? I have no idea. Well, maybe I have some ideas. But the strategy will be worked out in collaboration with a Transition Team and with all of you. What I can tell you is that my work with you will reflect the passion and commitment that I learned from my parents and my home congregation all those years ago.

I promise you that I will be professional and ethical in all my relationships with you. I will work with staff and lay leadership as a coach, a resource person, and a pastor. I will tell you when I think you are on the wrong track, but I won't take it personally if you decide to keep going on that track. After all, in less than a year I will be boarding a plane back to Virginia for the last time, and you will remain here nurturing and sustaining your beloved community, secure in the knowledge that you are walking together towards your freely chosen future.

I opened with a not-very-good poem. I close with a much better snippet of poetry from T.S. Eliot that will be familiar to many of you.

“What we call a beginning is often the end,

And to make an end is to make a beginning.

The end is where we start from.

We shall not cease from exploration,

And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started

And to know the place for the first time.”

So my friends, let us begin.