

Making the Effort
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By Laura Smidzik

I have stood in front of this congregation on numerous occasions proclaiming a deep love for this church and our faith tradition. Unity-Unitarian Church is my spiritual home. It is the only institution in my life that I plan on being a part of *for the rest* of my life.

My connection to Unity is not rational. It is a something that transcends each individual relationship and experience I have here. What keeps me so connected is beyond naming and knowing.

I view myself as among the fortunate who found a place to worship which honors the inherent worth and dignity of each individual and asks us to deepen our spiritual lives **within** our selves and our families, **among** the community of this church and **beyond** the walls of this beautiful sanctuary where we gather today.

A few months ago I was nominated to the Board of Trustees Unity-Unitarian. The Board was in the process of creating new Ends Statements for the church. These are statements of what we are and what we strive to be as a church. The Board of Trustees held listening sessions called "Lift Every Voice" with people from Unity and key stakeholders outside of the church. Over 170 people joined in the sessions which were done through the process called Appreciative Inquiry. The sessions began with each person articulating a critical moment at Unity. The stories were as varied as each person who participated. Many were simple moments- some momentous- each was profound to the story teller in some meaningful way.

Each standing Board member summarized the listening sessions they attended and brought their perceptions forward to the full board. I just want to let you know that the Board is a creative bunch! One person summarized by way of song titles by the Beatles, another created a series of church signs (made from a web site called *Church Sign Generator* which boasts: "Ever seen those signs in front of churches with the moveable letters? Ever

wanted to rearrange the letters to make your own church sign? Well, now you can.”

As a newcomer, I was struck by the depth of their listening and how earnestly they summarized what they heard.

A particularly memorable moment in the many hours of meetings was when one Board of Trustees member candidly spoke of waking up in the morning and feeling unenthusiastic about engaging in this process. He had no profound moment to share and was uncertain where the Appreciate Inquiry process would take people.

As he wandered the rooms taking in what each person was sharing and listening to the tapestry of stories something happened...he *had* his moment embodied in the passion and honesty of the people in the rooms.

I was reading the Minnesota Public Radio website called “This I believe: A public dialogue about belief, one essay at a time.” A young woman wrote of a quote that her father gave her when she was struggling in school. It was a quote she ended up carrying with her throughout her life time. The quote said: “EFFORT: Life does not require us to be the biggest or the best. It asks only that we try.” Sometimes, amazing things happen when we show up. But, we have to make the effort, often despite our own reluctance, to engage.

Ours is a religion about the journey- not the destination. We don't live our lives in hope of being redeemed of our original sin or to be assured of a place in heaven. Today and now is as important as the past and the future. As Mary Oliver asks “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” What matters is living our lives with integrity, service and joy.

Throughout a number of meetings the Board of Trustees sat with sheets of newsprint surrounding us full of all the words, wisdom, hopes and dreams of the congregation. Our Ends Statements for the next five years evolved out of those words. The statements hold and push us as a church and as

individuals who worship in this inclusive religious community. The Ends Statements have three distinctive parts- within, among and beyond.

Let's start with **within**. The Board heard clearly that people at Unity strive to be their highest and deepest selves. The Ends Statement relating to within states that "the people of Unity-Unitarian Church have a deeply meaningful, transforming, liberal religious experience." This includes worship, pastoral care, personal and family-based religious practice and ritual, opportunities for growth throughout our lifespan and knowledge of our faith tradition and history.

As Ram Dass said:

I make the effort to maintain a ground of oceanic silence out of which arises the multitude of phenomena of daily life.

I just returned from California. A place I lived for many years after college. For a period of time I worked at the Saturn Café in Santa Cruz, a wonderfully counter-culture café with a reputation for making a mean chocolate madness dessert. During my break on evening shifts, I would often hop on my big, black bike and ride to the ocean. Oceanic silence-complex silence, alive, mysterious, vast, beautiful, chilling. "Out of the oceanic silence rises the phenomena of daily life." Daily life which I find sometimes energizes but is often mundane and trying. Getting caught in the tides of the same arguments with my children, my family, myself.

I make the effort to remember the inherent worth and dignity in each of us-my children, my family, myself. As the poem Desiderata says- "Be gentle with yourself. You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars- you have a right to be here. And whether or not it is clear to you; no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should."

What gets in the way of really believing this? As my 12-year old would say "Mom, are you kidding me?" I struggle to incorporate exercise and daily prayer consistently into my life. I often let the stress of all there is to do get in the way of being in the moment. Sometimes my parenting style is beyond juvenile. Admit it; we are human often caught in the tides of our daily existence.

So, I show up here. Sing, listen, and rejoice with those here whom I know and those I have yet to know. I weep, laugh and pray. I make the effort to *be here* and find that in this sacred place I often experience the holy.

Within.

The second End Statement falls is about “among.” It states: “Unity Unitarian-Church is a radically hospitable, spiritually vital and supportive community where:

- People of all ages and identities feel welcome and connected
- People generously give their time, talents and resources
- Shared ministry is actively encouraged
- We have the resources and facilities which support the needs of the church and the community.

I don't know about you but I feel deeply connected to many communities-my extended family, neighborhood, and the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) community. I remember when I joined this church around eight years ago. There were several occasions when I did not feel truly welcome. I felt invisible or excluded by language and practices. This was prior to Unity becoming a welcoming congregation for GLBT people and their families. Over the years I have seen change. I have heard the word “covenant” used as a way to explain our relationship to one another. For me, the word covenant calls forward a spiritual connection between us all.

The Board of Trustees heard a deep hunger for greater inclusiveness across race, gender, class and age. There is a restlessness and un-ease which gives me hope in the courageous places we may go together. When I say together, I mean it. I have watched the ministers of this church share their ministry in many areas such as worship, hospitality, community service and pastoral care. Our gifts are acknowledged and needed in this vital place where people drawn together by something bigger. *We all* create a

community which, as Ram Dass says, “sees the beloved in everyone and to serve the beloved through everyone.”

This does take effort though. When we can (which is not always) we need to find a way to be actively engaged.

I heard a radio message by the Ad Council late one night. The Ad Council did a series of ads around the same topic of “almost giving.” One ad starts with an image of a woman sitting in a rocker alone in a room. The voice over says: “This is Sarah Watkins. A lot of people almost helped her. One almost cooked for her. Another almost drove her to the doctor. Still another almost stopped by to say hello. They almost helped, they almost gave of themselves. But almost giving is the same as not giving at all.”

This is not an attempt to guilt you. Maybe it just resonated with me so much because I can count these “almost” moments each week in my own life. Instead, it is an attempt to have you think of what it means to be “among” each other at Unity. It may mean having a conversation with someone who is visiting or acknowledging someone you don’t know who is sitting next to you in the pew. Or, it may mean giving a more substantial amount of your own time, talents or resources.

Among.

The third End Statement speaks of beyond. It states: Unity Unitarian Church is a visible leader and partner making positive impact in our neighborhood and in the world through:

- A commitment to anti-racism and racial healing in covenant with people and communities of color
- Advocating in the public arena for our liberal religious values in response to prejudice, injustice, and oppression
- Proclaiming the transformative power of our faith
- Working with congregations and institutions around shared values
- Participating in the larger UUA movement

- Acting and investing in environmentally responsible and sustainable ways.

There is a boldness in our language in these final Ends Statements which stems from an eagerness to move beyond the walls of the church.

Our church, and many of its members, have been made a positive impact in the state, country and the world through their work and service. But, what does it mean for this church to be a visible leader in anti-racism and racial healing? How will we be seen as advocates in the public arena responding to prejudice, injustice and oppression? This is not just an effort of the community outreach and social justice ministries. It is part of what our faith calls us to do. It is echoed in the last two of the seven principles Unitarian Universalist congregations affirm and promote:

- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

I attended a Unitarian Universalist large congregation conference this past Spring. It was clear to me that what we have at Unity-Unitarian Church is exceptional. We bring our expertise, models and leadership to the larger Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations (UUA) which helps to foster other healthy churches. When we move beyond these walls we can make a difference in the UUA and in the world.

What holds us back? Many things. Sometimes it is a fear of either/or. If we work beyond Unity will the within and among parts we cherish suffer? Sometimes it is a sense of scarcity of financial resources and time. Some which is real, some perceived. Ram Dass says:

I often fail in these aspirations
Because I lose the balance
Between separateness and unity,
Get lost in my separateness,
And feel afraid.
But I make the effort.

The assumption behind the Appreciative Inquiry process which was used during the Lift Every Voice listening sessions is *what we focus on becomes our reality*.

Our Ends Statements challenge us all to live lives and create a church based on integrity, service and joy. As individuals, our personal realities change-sometimes we show up strong and sometimes we show up vulnerable. Sometimes we are immobilized in fear and at other times we are propelled by hope.

Be present and willing to make an effort to reach within yourself, among each other and beyond Unity-Unitarian Church. Our faith and our journey *is* the destination and they are as vast as the ocean and as simple as this moment.

May it be so and amen.

Readings

From *Desiderata*, by Max Ehrmann, 1927

...Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune. But do not distress yourself with dark imaginings. Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness. Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself. You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here. And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.

Therefore, be at peace with God, whatever you conceive Him to be. And whatever your labors and aspirations in the noisy confusion of life, keep peace in your soul. With all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams; it is still a beautiful world. Be cheerful.

Strive to be happy.

By Ram Dass

I make the effort
To maintain a ground of oceanic silence
Out of which arises the multitude
Of phenomena of daily life.

I make the effort
To see and to passionately open in love
To the spirit that infuses all things.

I make the effort
To see the Beloved in everyone
And to serve the Beloved through everyone
(Including the earth).

I often fail in these aspirations
Because I lose the balance
Between separateness and unity,
Get lost in my separateness,
And feel afraid.

But I make the effort.