

The Dance of Expectation
Rev Karen Gustafson
Unity Church Unitarian
September 25, 2022

“Before you criticize someone, you should walk a mile in their shoes. That way, when you criticize them you are a mile away from them and you have their shoes.”

This quip from Jack Handy is funny because it’s unexpected. We all have expectations. Comedy relies upon this, and the role of comedy is to help us laugh, even as we feel the discomfort of a challenge to those expectations. For better and for worse human beings are shaped by our relationship to the spoken and unspoken expectations of our families, our peers, our teachers, the media we consume, and, to no small effect, the value based institutions and communities which we sustain and sustain us. An expectation is a story within you. As parents and teachers we are encouraged to have high expectations for our children. “High” expectations are a stories with more specific outcomes. “Low” expectations allow for curiosity in the co-creation of a narrative.

The Dalai Lama wrote, “I am open to the guidance of synchronicity, and do not let expectations hinder my path.” Good for the Dalai Lama. For most of us, so many of the choices we make, minute to minute, are rooted in some level of conscious and unconscious appraisal of how we are meeting our own or others’ expectations.

For the past few weeks I have been navigating the path into a full realization of what it is to be your Interim Minister of Pastoral Care. There are big shoes to step into here. I am honored that you and your Executive Team have seen fit to invite me into this position at this tender and challenging point in the life of this church. As I wonder how spoken and unspoken expectations are shaping this relationship, I have been aware of my own relationship to expectation.

I was schooled early in the dance of expectation by my father who was a dreamer and doer, whose life had unfolded along a path of welcomed surprises... one of which was me, who was born fourteen years after the last of his first three

children. I was a high spirited teenager with ample opinions about how things should be. This led to surprise and disappointment when others did not fall in line with what I knew to be the “right way”.

My father had a ready and willing ear for my accounts about the shortcomings of others, and when I had spent my fury he would gently help me down off my high horse and ask, “What did you expect?”

This came to me, not as a judgment about my unrealistic hopes, but as a real question, a starting place for reconstructing a more measured response. My father did not speak of success or failure but more of incomplete understandings, misjudgments and honest mistakes that could be turned into lessons or strategies for repair.

Years later my father’s wisdom came to me as I was introduced to the idea of covenant.

In my years of witnessing and welcoming newcomers into various UU congregations I came to see a kind of trajectory of engagement that has been helpful to understanding the relationship between expectation and covenant. As I describe this, I invite you to consider your own path and how this applies to you.

Anyone who chooses to cross the threshold into a Unitarian Universalist church - or perhaps a value based organization of any kind, comes with a need or an agenda. You show up for the first time because you are lonely and seeking friendship or community; you have children, who you have carefully sheltered from your own oppressive childhood faith, who are now asking questions that you cannot easily answer or who are being queried by other children about what church they attend; you are in a life transition seeking solace and connection. You are a curious seeker willing to entertain the rumors of intellectual and spiritual enrichment or good coffee and cream filled donuts. So you come, perhaps only with high hopes and low expectations..

And if you find some measure of what you seek, your immediate need met in the moment, you will return and perhaps in time enter the next ring of engagement, the place of selfish service. In this place, you offer up what you will out of a strong

sense of self interest. You love to sing and so you join the choir; your children love the RE program so you volunteer as a way to get to know what they are learning. You add your experience of grief to a group that supports one another in loss. In all of these cases the very act of your participation feeds the whole.

And in time, I tell these curious seekers, it may come to pass that you recognize needs beyond your own wheelhouse and seek to offer your time and talent in ways that demand some deeper level of commitment - to join or lead a ministry team; to serve on the Board or Search Committee or Stewardship Team or to raise your pledge. Along the way, you may recognize that this is a special kind of service, one infused and informed by the spiritual practice of shared ministry. Sooner or later an awareness might overtake you that says, "these are my people; this is my beloved community with whom I am partnering to keep on moving forward, informed and bound by the covenants we share.

When I present this to newcomers to our churches and to our faith, I offer two guarantees. I have always thought that there is a certain arrogance attached to guarantees which are in and of themselves a form of expectation. But here they are: along with the guarantee that grief will change with time, is the guarantee that if you stick around long anywhere, with anyone, something will disappoint you.

And as often as not in THIS beloved congregation, it will produce a different kind of disappointment from your garden variety disappointments that can be attributed to twists of fate or simple inattention or a tolerance for hypocrisy.

This is, after all, the kind of faith community that holds promises in covenant at the heart of its very being, promises that include affirming and promoting justice, equity and compassion in human relations, the use of the democratic process, inherent worth and dignity of every person. Those who left the faith traditions of their childhood due to perceptions of hypocrisy, observed in those who did not practice what they preach, certainly might long for the right to expect better. The promise is the story we want to be true. The promise becomes our expectation. The disappointments can become our undoing.

The good news is that covenant is not at its heart just about the promises but about what we do with our unavoidable disappointments.

Suppose that what covenant asks of us is to look at our disappointments as opportunities to examine our expectations? What might have been missing in our understanding of the situation? What was unknown or unspoken about the hopes and expectations of the others who figured into the result? What allowances might have been made for an unexpected outcome? What was the lesson about what could and could not be controlled? How might we move toward each other in the spirit of compassion and greater understanding and begin again in love? In my developmental work as an interim minister I have often spoken of the need for “expectation management”. Sometimes this is as simple as reminding folks in the process of launching a new or evaluating an existing program about the need to “right-size” to the available resources. Is there money and staff and volunteer support to sustain an idea past the “WOW” stage? Sometimes expectation management involves assessing readiness, delaying a start until there is sufficient buy in. Sometimes it is more about letting go until a better time. Always it is, I think, a matter of calculating in good faith the likelihood that there will a way to deliver on the promise.

Occasionally I have been accused of raining on someone’s parade, being a wet blanket, a killjoy. In my defense, I think I am calculating the odds of disappointment. We need to risk to grow. Risk inherently involves the potential that things may not go as planned. One measure of the health of a system is its capacity for moving beyond a complicated disappointment - to understand it as an opportunity to examine our expectations. What might have been missing in the understanding of the situation? What was unknown or unspoken about the hopes and expectations of the others who figured into the result? What allowances might have been made for an unexpected outcome? What lessons were learned about what could and could not be controlled?

In a faith community we are accountable to each other not just as individuals but to the whole that we create together that is greater than the sum of the parts and to the spirit that holds us in covenant. Asking these questions can become a spiritual practice that guides us in the ways of our togetherness.

The road of together is messy and healing is an ongoing process for ourselves as individuals, as well as collectively. The point is not to never step on each others’ toes, but to have a process to return to the dancing. Covenant is a promise, and it’s also a practice through which we co-create a collective and inclusive story by

stumbling through uncomfortable situations in a process where repair can occur within and between us. This is most difficult when we are new to the experience of navigating this dance or when we cannot hear the music.

Consider Emily, who at sixteen came from living with her mom in a household of two, into my daughter's household of two adults, two children under ten, and a dog, making five under the same roof in a 1300 square foot home. Any time more than two people were in the kitchen together, people were in each other's way. Emily was always apologizing in these times, and felt like she didn't belong. At some point, Emily needed to be told what living in community with others is about. "We are many in a small space. We will have our toes stepped on, we will make mistakes, we will be left with someone else's mess to clean up, we will get frustrated and impatient sometimes, and it's okay. This is how we do family. We grow and we learn and we do better over time."

And so it is in the togetherness that is church.

Expectations are the root of the need for covenant. The chorus of quotations, soundbites that enter our psyches through many paths create a kind of cacophony of contradictory messages and stories that has become so familiar that we hardly recognize it. Conflicting expectations exist within us, so of course they exist between us. When our expectations or stories are in conflict with one another, we can turn to the promise of our UU principles, the ideals "We the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association covenant to affirm and promote", the story we want to be true, and we can engage in practices that allow us to create a collective story that is full of messiness and healing, laughter, and disappointment, mistakes and growth. This is how we do covenant.