

To Boldly Go Where...

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September 3, 2023

One of the many requirements that one has to complete in order to qualify to be a UU minister is that of being a chaplain in a hospital. I completed this at an inner city hospital and it certainly provided me a number of growing experiences. One of the floors I was assigned was the CCU, or Cardiac Care Unit. One day a 38-year-old man was brought in after having suffered a mild heart attack. He was significantly overweight, and he told us that he never exercised. He recovered, and before he was released the head nurse and I went to have a conversation with him regarding his future health. Diane—the nurse—explained to him that the heart is a muscle and that the more it is used, the stronger it gets. Not only that, she explained, the heart will actually grow more arteries into the existing muscle if exercise demands an increased flow of blood on a regular basis. She explained to him that if he was to live a normal span of years, he was going to have to exercise more and grow those arteries so that he would decrease his chances of having a second heart attack. Neither of us left his room confident that he would take her advice.

When I saw Diane almost 10 months later she said, “You’ll never guess who came to see me last week.” Sure enough it was this young man. Apparently he had thought hard about what she had said and decided he would try to get some exercise. It didn’t go well. The first day he went for a walk he made it four houses from his own before he had to turn around and go home in total exhaustion. He could feel his heart pounding and was afraid he was going to have another heart attack. He became depressed at the thought he could only walk four houses from his own. But he remembered what Diane had said about the heart needing more blood and, as a result of his walk, he tried to imagine his own growing new arteries feeding the heart muscle with the needed oxygen. The next day he tried again and made it five houses before he had to turn around. He imagined more arteries. And he decided he would try to increase his distance by a house a day. That’s it—a house a day.

He said keeping at it was the hardest thing he ever did. He wasn't just growing new arteries and feeding a muscle, he was growing and feeding an entirely new way of life. He was startled at how fast a house a day added up to blocks and blocks. He was even more startled when one day as he went for a walk, he realized as he reached the fourth house from his own he was feeling strong and vibrant. He kept imagining those new arteries finding new pathways into his heart. He came to find Diane and thank her for providing him with images he could use in order to visualize a new life.

A number of years ago, well, decades actually, I remember reading an article about a brain researcher at Brandeis University outside of Boston. He said that what they were discovering about the brain is that early in life it creates pathways—maps—avenues of synapses as it were, that the brain follows time and again. Habits, ways of behaving, motor coordination, reactions to stress. All these pathways become the brain's default routes. The researchers were learning that coordinated bodily movement is more than just 'muscle memory.' Coordinated movement requires coordinated pathways in the brain. He and his fellow researchers started working with people who, as a result of cranial trauma had their brains 'established pathways disrupted or even destroyed. These patients' brains had to create new pathways, new avenues of synapses, in order to re-coordinate the body, or develop a new way of performing basic tasks. Just as with the young man who had the heart attack, the the discipline of developing new habits, and therefore new pathways, was extremely hard work.

New pathways physically in the heart. New pathways, physically, in the brain. And the work and discipline it takes to develop them.

Being human, there is another place where we can grow pathways, but these are not physical, but spiritual. Again, I read an article decades ago. It was about a couple whose adult daughter went to work in Africa for an NGO. During her time there she was

murdered. Two men were arrested and during the trial they confessed to the murders. They were convicted and sentenced to death.

The parents of the murdered woman had been deeply opposed to the death penalty. They had stood on the principle that killing people to show that killing people is wrong made no sense. But now it was their own daughter, bone of their own bone, flesh of their own flesh. And part of them really wanted these men to know the same terror and same fate as their daughter. Part of them, borne out of pain, craved for “justice” based on the concept of “an eye for any eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life.” For them, the death penalty moved from being an abstract concept based on principle to a desire for retribution based on despair and broken hearts.

Before the men were executed, however, the couple realized that this desire for retribution was destroying them—physically, emotionally, spiritually; it was eating their bodies and their souls. They came to understand that their opposition to the death penalty was more than just an intellectual principle of their minds; it was, more importantly a spiritual expression of their belief in the inherent dignity and worth of every human being, of the spiritual truth that we are all created in the image of God, in the image of Love.

And then this couple had an idea, an idea that would require them to do the unimaginable, an idea that would require them to build new pathways in their souls. In other words, an idea that would force them to cross the chasm between what they said they believed, to living those beliefs concretely.

They went to Africa and visited with the men on death row who had murdered their daughter. The men begged for their forgiveness which they gave. But that wasn't enough. In subsequent visits with the men the couple formed a bond, and plan, with these men. They petitioned the court to release the men to their custody and together the four of them would travel the continent, and indeed the world, speaking to the power

of, and global need of, forgiveness—of seeing each other as created in the image of Love, and then acting accordingly.

Imagine, if you will, the spiritual work it would take to form these new pathways in our souls in order to live as this couple learned to live, to love as this couple learned to love. Imagine, imagine being that spiritually mature. Imagine.

In my years of ministry and corporate training, I learned that imagination is a vitally important tool in conflict resolution and in forging new directions. This is particularly important because stress not only tries to drive us down known but unfruitful pathways, it also produces adrenaline in our systems, which results in a closing our vision toward a fight or flight mentality. The discipline of imagination meshes our creative energy with our stated values and expands our vision to see with new eyes and understand with new hearts and walk on a new path.

So here's the good news. You at Unity have already equipped yourselves, in advance of difficulties, to have a foundation upon which to build a way forward should a stressful situation arise. Under the leadership of not only your previous settled ministers, but also that of gifted lay leaders, you imagined yourselves as who you are striving to be. You did so in your Mission Statement. Mission. "As a fire is meant for burning . . . so the church exists for mission."¹ With words that sound so simple, yet are anything but simplistic, our mission is:

Unity Church-Unitarian fosters transformation through a free and inclusive religious community that encourages lives of integrity, service, and joy.

Building on those few simple words you envisioned Ends (goals) that would in fact demand of yourselves that through mission you in fact foster transformation, foster new ways, new roads, new pathways, new means of living—both individually and communally. Here are some of the pathways that you lay out in your Ends Statements

¹ From the hymn "As a Fire Is Meant for Burning" by Ruth Duck; 1983; GIA Publications, Inc.

Working within ourselves, among our church community, and beyond in the larger world, we the people of Unity Church-Unitarian:

- *Create a multicultural spiritual home built on authentic relationships.*
- *Ground ourselves in personal practice and communal worship that grows our capacity for wonder and spiritual deepening.*
- *Know each other in all our fullness and create an ever-widening circle of belonging for all people.*
- *Discover and pursue our individual and collective work to advance justice, wholeness, and equity for people, our Earth, and all life on it.*
- *Create brave space for racial healing and dismantling dominant culture.*

Think back to the couple whose daughter's life was taken. Think of the transformation it takes to live as that couple lived, to love as that couple loved—to create the pathways in our souls that bridge the chasm between stated beliefs and actual behavior. The Ends Statements that you as a congregation created challenge us to do just that. And we are going to be really challenged to live into them over the next 15 months leading up to our presidential and congressional elections. Corrosive white supremacy is growing rather than dying. Attacks on gender identity are being presented as pious and good rather than hateful and bigoted. Protections for our environment are being dismantled rather than strengthened. And on and on. We know all this.

These past two years have been difficult for us as a community. A year and a quarter ago we divided over whether to invite our search committee's candidate to be our next minister. It was a painful time for us. We have needed to create some new pathways internally to understand each other better. We have needed to create some new pathways, as individuals and as a community to be who we say we are: spiritually mature enough to accept and embrace those who voted differently than ourselves.

In so doing we are learning something fundamental about what it means to be a church, a spiritual community. It is teaching that we are given each other, particularly those who

voted differently than us, to help expand our understanding of our remarkably diverse, yet healthy, community. It is teaching us that if we cannot negotiate our differences within these walls, with people who share our values and our dreams, then we don't have a hope in Hades of achieving our Ends outside these walls where the differences are massive and the values are not shared. We have each other to practice on and this is a blessing. And blessings, oddly enough, can be hard.

There is a good chance that by next spring we will have a new candidate to be our next senior minister. Let me tell you who this minister will NOT be. She/he/they will not be The Perfect Minister. Ain't gonna happen. They will not be the Best Person Ever to lead our ministries in addressing racial injustice, environmental concerns, LGBTQ+ rights, reducing gun violence, redressing sins against indigenous culture, providing affordable housing.

Our new minister won't need to be any of those things, because they will have us. The minister's job is not to be perfect in all those areas. The minister's job instead is to equip us spiritually, to strengthen us spiritually, to expand us spiritually so that we can forge the pathways within ourselves in order to forge the pathways outside these walls to accomplish our Ends and to keep at that work until it is done. The minister's job is to equip the saints for the work of God, and get out of the way so we can forge the new pathways, so that we can be the hands and the heart and the face of Love in this world. To paraphrase St. Theresa of Avila, Love has no hands in the world but our hands, no eyes, no heart, no feet, no ears but ours.

We were never promised it would be easy. It's not . . . and it won't be. But we have each other. And we'll have our new minister. And we are going to make a difference within these walls, and we are going to build a better community outside these walls. Our future lies beautiful before us, and we will build the pathways to get there. And let all the people say, 'Amen.'