

LEAP Year: Love, Engagement And Possibility
Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo
Sunday, February 26, 2012
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We modern humans think of time as an objective linear process – the seconds, minutes and hours tick away as the hands move around the clock in an orderly progression, or the numbers in the digital display follow one another with precise predictability . . . we may vary in our compliance with the ordained schedule, we may be chronically or occasionally late or early, but time itself is invariable, inexorably moving forward.

Then every once in a while we encounter something irregular like a Leap Year, reminding us that the units of forward motion that keep us organized are not somehow preordained and eternal. We need a little human trick to make up for lost time, to keep us synchronized with the universe, in that interdependent web of planetary motion of which we are an integral part.

The reason for Leap Year is that our tidy division of time into minutes, hours, days and years, does not exactly match the reality that it is dividing. You know the science, right? It takes the earth slightly less than 365¼ days to complete its orbit around the sun. So while our common year has 365 days, every fourth year we add a day to make up that lost quarter-day, to synchronize the calendar year with the solar year. That make-up day, the Leap Day, is rather arbitrarily designated as February 29.

But even that does not take care of it completely – remember I said “slightly less than 365¼ days?” The length of the solar year is shorter than 365¼ days, by about 11 minutes. To compensate for this discrepancy, the Leap Year is omitted three times every four hundred years. In other words, a century year cannot be a leap year unless it is divisible by 400. Thus 1700, 1800, and 1900 were not leap years, but 1600, 2000, and 2400 are leap years. Don’t worry, this won’t be on the test – but is great trivia, if you are at a loss for interesting things to talk about in a social gathering.

What most impresses me most about all this planetary science is that our human conventions, like the division of time, do not exactly match the larger reality of the universe we live in. We use the concepts of time to bring existence under human control: to measure and define it, to bring our own sense of order and predictability to the cycles of light and dark, of months and seasons, years and lifetimes. And sometimes we notice that in the larger scheme of things, this control is an illusion.

What is time, really; why does it sometimes seem to creep, and sometimes to fly, what do we make of it, how do we anchor ourselves within it? Mary Oliver in the poem I read earlier (*The Summer Day*) posed the question: what will you do with your one, wild and precious life? What will you do with the time you have? What will you make of one more day every four years (except for those three years out of every 400, of course) – how do we live in time, how are our lives anchored in time? What does it mean to be in connection with the earth and its rhythms, with the meanings of our own lives, and at the same time to leap, like the grasshopper, finding our place within the infinity of time and space?

Today is what we might call “leap Sunday,” the Sunday before our quadrennial observance of Leap Year later this week, so it provides a great opportunity to think about how we use time, how we are connected in time, and how we take leaps in time, and in our lives.

Last week we began to interact with the time line of this church, starting with its historical events, and adding in the members of this congregation by when they joined this journey through time, noting the pattern of connection to this ongoing process we call a church. And I hope that anyone who was not

here last week has been offered a post-it note to add themselves to the cluster of names in their joining periods. So today I want to take the process of connecting ourselves on the time line of the church one step farther.

You might say that joining a Unitarian Universalist church is a leap of faith. It is not the same as being or becoming a Unitarian Universalist – that is a larger process, participating in a faith tradition, a religious movement that stretches far beyond any specific church or congregation. There are currently about 650,000 people in this country who think of themselves as Unitarian Universalists, but only about a fourth as many, 160,000, who are reported as active adult members of UU churches.

Although this church counts only about 400 active members on our rolls, I suspect there are at least twice or perhaps three or four times as many in this community who think of themselves as part of the church, maybe even think of themselves as members, but have not actually joined and do not participate in the core systems and commitments of the institutional church.

Joining – that is an emotional as well as an institutional process that requires a leap of faith and commitment. I have recently heard the stories of two of the members here at this Buffalo church illustrating that leap – one was a confirmed non-believer who thought that there did not exist any faith community that would reflect and support her intellectual and ethical commitments, until she saw a Unitarian Universalist minister on the news, speaking in support of marriage as a right for all people. Even then, she thought it must be some sort of anomaly, a mistake or perhaps a hoax, until she finally found the courage to sneak into a Unitarian Universalist church to check it out. Thanks to some assertive friendly outreach by their membership committee, she got involved and eventually became a member there. When that person moved to Buffalo, she got involved in this congregation, but did not join the church until we demonstrated that we took membership seriously as a commitment to be honored and celebrated. Then she joined, making that leap of faith and commitment to become a member here.

Another of our members mentioned recently that their spouse is a lifelong Unitarian Universalist – what we call a “birthright UU” - who immediately joined a church everywhere they moved, but this person was more cautious, taking time to observe and judge whether this was a community they wanted to be a part of before making the commitment to sign the book and take on the responsibilities of membership. As this church demonstrated its value, he also made the leap of faith and commitment, and now he also is a very involved and committed member here.

Each of those was a leap of faith. Each of those stories articulates by the way I think about “leap” as an acronym: L-E-A-P, Love, Engagement And Possibility. Joining a church is an act of love, becoming a partner with others in common connection of heart and mind. Joining a church is an act of engagement, fully understanding the spiritual and institutional commitments that come with membership, engaging to participate and support, to be a real part of the congregation. Joining a church is an act of possibility. Each day of each year through time, including that extra day we get this year, a church is a co-creative act of possibility, creating and transmitting the power of our values in the world.

It is our nature as human beings, the way our brains are wired, that time and the events that occur in time are measured for us not in units, but in images, impressions and connections. The images tend to stand out in our memory – people and their actions and interactions; the surroundings, the light and sounds – for that is how we remember our lives, in image and story. It is amazing how clear those images can be, if they were something important to us, and even if we have forgotten the day, month or even the year in which they occurred.

Prior to the formal joining, the dates of which are reflected on the time line you see before you, there is a deeper process in which we come to know a church as our own – a time in which the church has proven itself worthy of our commitment, a time in which we recognize that it transmits our values in the world, a time in which we feel a connection to others that draws us into the heart of the congregation.

My own moment of emotional connection, the moment I recognized that a UU church was my own community, occurred many years ago in an after-church discussion session led by the minister for newcomers to the church I had started attending with my family. Our five-year-old son was getting fussy and bored by all the adult talking, and I was about ready to give up and leave, when another newcomer in the session turned to me with a big smile and pulled out crayons and paper from her purse, so my son could settle down next to hers with something to keep him happily occupied. For me, it was not the minister or the music that brought me into a sense of belonging, but rather that simple act of kindness from one parent to another, making me feel welcome and cherished in community.

If this Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo is your church, I think it is pretty likely you have experienced that moment of emotional belonging – something crystallizes for you, some sense of coming home, of coming into community, of finding a place to belong. It happens in different ways for each of us – we make a friend, we have a comforting encounter, we are inspired by words or music, we recognize that our values are not only accepted but empowered here, we are invited into the choir or onto a committee, we are made welcome in some way that recognizes who we are, and that somehow touches what we were seeking when we ventured through the doors of a church.

Since our time line already includes your notes on when you joined the church, today's question for reflection, writing and posting, is, tell about that event or moment when you recognized this was "your" church. You will find a 4x4 post-it note in your order of service. We got super-sticky notes this time, so they should do a better job of sticking to the time line. Once again, the ushers have pens to lend. So now, I invite you to remember when you got that feeling that this was where you might belong, or that you had in some way come home – or if you are new and have not had that feeling yet, what would you be looking for to know that feeling of coming into community here? Write a few words or a few short lines – just enough that if someone were to read it, they would have a sense of what you mean. I have asked Barbara to play some music to carry us through this time of reflection and writing.

As you complete recording that memory, you may come up and place it on the time line below the names, in the approximate era at which you joined the church. And if you are reflecting more slowly, there will be time after the service to place your note on your way out.

We are beginning now to fill out the picture of this church as it has developed through time, as you have been part of that experience, and as the church has been part of your own experience. As I mentioned last week, that experience of joining the church -- the presence of the minister, the feelings of congregational life, the way you were welcomed and brought into church activities, the sermons and music, the groups and committees and gatherings, the way things were done or the way decisions were made – whatever was in place when you joined is likely the way you just think church is, the way it was meant to be.

That experience set the tone for your experience in the church from that moment on. And at the same time, we know that everything, including a church, is part of an ongoing evolutionary process into the future we create together as we live it, a process of constant change in which we are both creators and participants. Just as you can never step in the same river twice, the church you are a member of is

never the church you joined – in fact, simply by joining it you have changed it, and it will never be the same.

The ongoing future of the church unfolds out of the confluence of all the joinings that create the congregation, the ways in which each of you and all of you have stepped into the flow, whether you arrived fifty years ago, or this is your first time to come through these doors and take a seat in one of these historic pews. Last week we closed the service by singing *Forward Through the Ages* as a way to represent that evolutionary flow, the way we build on the heritage of those who have come before, and respond to a divine call to create the evolutionary church that carries us into the future.

Today our closing hymn is an invitation to co-create and enter the future of this church as it evolves, co-creating and entering a land of freedom and justice, a land of singing, that we build together as a congregation and a community. So now I invite you to rise in body or in spirit and join in singing our closing hymn, #1018 in your teal hymnal, *Come and Go With Me to That Land*.

Sources:

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Peter Morales, *Congregations and Beyond*, retrieved 2-25-12 from
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