

Turning

Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo

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We are all turning, all the time. We live on a planet that rotates at the speed of about 1,000 miles per hour, and of course at the same time we revolve around the Sun at 67,000 miles per hour. If you stand and simply look up, looking through the layers of atmosphere, you will find you are looking at a different part of the universe literally every second. You may say you do not like change, cannot handle change – but the reality is that we are all turning, all managing constantly changing views, constantly changing perspectives, a constantly changing planet, all the time.

I remember the joy of turning as a young child – standing in a clear space and whirling until when I stopped, the room whirled around me – or rolling down a long green slope of grass, watching the world turn over and over, around and around, as I rolled. Perhaps as we get older, we lose our love of the whirling, we come to crave the reliability of the straight line, the stable place to put our feet. Or perhaps we forget that we are turning all the time, and create a story to pretend that we are not, that the earth is flat and still and predictable. It can be comforting to pretend that the earth is flat and still and predictable.

And then there comes a turn in our lives, and we are reminded that it is not – the earth is not flat and still, life is not flat, not still, not predictable – but curved and moving and slippery and changeable. That is how life is. The turning happens sometimes outside our control – a diagnosis changes how our future will look, an injury changes how we function in the world, a beloved relationship suddenly disappears and we are left wondering what happened, a carefully designed plan goes awry, a carefully built business fails, an apparently secure job disappears – the earth turns, events unfold, and there we are, simply standing, looking out into a different universe than we were seeing only moments before. Turning happens around us, life moves us, and we face a different future in each breath.

There is a cute little book called “Who Moved My Cheese?” which became beloved of organizational consultants several years ago – as the story goes, two mice named Sniff and Scurry, and two mouse-sized littlepeople named Hem and Haw, put on their running shoes each morning and head out into the maze in search of cheese. The mice have their cheese place, and the littlepeople have theirs – and all is well, until changes start to happen and the cheese disappears. The mice, being mice and not easily lulled into complacency, notice that things are starting to change, and when their cheese gets moved, they jump immediately into action – they sniff and scurry out into the maze, take their chances exploring until they figure out where the new cheese is, and go back to being well fed.

Hem and Haw, on the other hand, being human, have gotten used to having things the way they liked them, sort of flat and still and predictable, so they do not notice their cheese was changing, and when it disappears altogether, they stay right where they were, trying to find the missing cheese in the old place, refusing for a long time to venture out into the maze. Haw finally figures out that he needs to move on, he takes some risk and eventually finds the bigger, better, tastier new cheeses. We never do find out what happened to Hem, who was still stuck in the old place expecting things to return to being as they were.

My favorite passage in this little fable is this one: “Haw looked down the dark passageway and was aware of his fear. What lay ahead? Was it empty? Or worse, were there dangers lurking? He began to imagine all kinds of frightening things that could happen to him. He was scaring himself to death.

Then he laughed at himself. He realized his fears were making things worse. So he did what he would do if he wasn't afraid. He moved in a new direction. As he started running down the dark corridor he began to smile. Haw didn't realize it yet, but he was discovering what nourished his soul. He was letting go and trusting what lay ahead for him, even though he did not know exactly what it was."

Haw left the old, safe place, he turned into the maze, he took many turns as he searched, not knowing what he would find, even turning into the dark corridors and facing his fears when that was necessary – and in the turnings, he was discovering what nourished his soul.

In the turnings, we can discover what nourishes our soul.

Yesterday was the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur, which ends the Ten Days of Repentance or 'Aseret Yemei Teshuva.' These first ten days of the Jewish month of Tishrei, beginning on the Jewish holiday of Rosh Hashanah and ending on Yom Kippur are a time in which Jews practice 'Teshuvah,' or repentance. It is the time to examine one's ways, engage in Repentance and the improvement of the spirit. It is a time of turning, forgiving and seeking to be forgiven where we have fallen short, letting go one direction and choosing another, finding what nourishes our soul.

We so often fall short of our own expectations and standards, it is so easy to hurt the other people around us, or to fail to live up to our own best selves in our everyday activities . . . and so it is good to have a time set aside for the turning – turning to look within, turning our steps into the complex and unknown maze that is before us, turning to one another to ask and receive forgiveness for the hurts, and re-turning to our lives with fresh commitment, renewed enthusiasm for the life we are living. And sometimes when life provides us with a turn we do not expect, and for which we are not prepared – if something in our life changes beyond our control, or if someone moves our cheese, we need to learn to manage the turn with some grace, adjust our speed and steer into it and negotiate the curve, so it becomes a turning that is at least in some ways of our choosing, so that we ride through it on our own terms, making the turn our own.

I think the road signs of direction and re-direction on the cover of today's Order of Service reflects how universal that experience of turning is in all our lives. Sometimes our road turns right or left, sometimes we end up in a turn lane making a turn we did not intend, and sometimes we need to make a complete U-turn to get where we are going. The U-turn teaches us, if I keep driving in this direction, if I keep doing things the way I have been doing them, if I do not admit that where I am headed is in some sense "wrong," I will not get to my destination. Or perhaps we need to recognize that the road has curved under us, that there is a turn in the making, and that we need to steer into it to get where we want to go. And if I want to arrive where I want to end up, it is necessary to pluck up the courage to decide to turn, to manage the turning, and go the in a new direction – get into the necessary lane, see where the road is going, watch for my opportunity, and then take the risk to make the turnaround happen.

Because it does take a risk to make a turnaround happen. I guess it starts with knowing where we want to go. There can be a momentum in our lives that carries us forward on our plans and expectations, so it comes as a shock when a turn appears in the path, a life change happens, or a new discovery that makes us realize that our original direction is not working. Sometimes, like the exit from a parking lot onto a busy street, life has only permitted us to turn one way, and later we have the opportunity to make a turn in order to get ourselves re-directed. Sometimes a whole new career appears before us, sending us back to school or into a new job market quite unexpectedly –

that certainly happened to me a few years ago, turning me into this new direction of interim ministry. Or a new passion calls us forward, a gift for painting or sculpture or writing. Or sometimes it is the gift of a new relationship, a new love that emerges when we least expect it. There are many turns that may appear as we travel through our lives.

Drifting along an established, apparently straight and smooth, path is certainly easiest. But even when we think we have it all set, turning can intrude. Suddenly we realize that where we thought we were headed is no longer where we can go, or where we wish to arrive -- not the direction and destination that nourishes our soul. Our life may change, our destination may have moved, our cheese may be in a different place, and so we need to be paying attention, evaluating our circumstance, and adjust our plans so they are a good fit with reality. And in the turning, we may discover or re-discover what nourishes our soul.

I gather up stories of the turnings – the person in middle years who has decided to go back to school and pursue a new career in social work; another whose concept of family has been challenged by the end of a cherished relationship; one who retires from a beloved job, and yet another who has finally taken the step to sell the suburban home they love to move into the city, accepting that part of their identity is re-defined as their life flows onward. These are all turnings. These all involve loss and gain, some level of emotional risk, some traveling down dark corridors seeking what truly nourishes the soul.

There is a chart in Gil Rendle's book, *Leading Change In The Congregation*, that I think applies as well to our individual lives as to the life cycle of a congregation or any other organization. The diagram is an arc – you know, like the one in St. Louis, or like a rainbow. It begins down at the lower left foot of the arc with “the dream” – the idea that gets our lives started, that sets our direction and steers us on our path. After the dream, moving up the arc to the right, we have our beliefs about what will take us in the right direction, then our goals about how to get there, the structure we put in place, and finally our ministry, the life we live in the world. At that point, once we achieve our ministry, is the peak of the arc; we have arrived at the top, we are where we want to go, we are living our passion, nourishing our soul.

But since life is all about movement, the turning continues, and at that point, as we continue along the arc, we have a choice. Without new energy coming into our life, we begin a decline along the other side of the arc – first into nostalgia, reflecting on the good old days. Then into questioning, polarization, and eventually a point of dropout, when the energy has dissipated, we have lost sight of the dream, and we are not living the life we had hoped for.

That path of decline is not inevitable. There are two -- not just one but two -- positive options to avoid the slope of decline that follows achieving our ministry – one is to recognize when we have drifted into nostalgia, and to intentionally revitalize the ministry, re-examine and renew the structures of our life, re-engage with our purpose in life and not let it go stale. That is a turning at the top of the arc, turning a circle at the peak of the arc that reinvigorates our commitment, sustains our passion for life. The other direction of turning away the decline from nostalgia is to give birth to a new dream, choose a new turning upward into a new arc, building a new life on the base of the old.

The lesson here is that the turning is inevitable, but that we get a choice – we can allow the drift to carry us into the downward turn into decline, or we may choose a turn that reinvigorates our life, our ministry – or perhaps we may choose a turn into a new dream, building a new life, a new ministry. It

is all about the turning, the power of turning and re-turning into the power of our dreams, the power of our lives.

In the Jewish calendar, this is the time of new beginnings, the new year, and it is fitting that we start with the recognition of where we have fallen short, where our lives have changed, the places where there is a turning in the making. Perhaps something has fallen apart in our lives, and we are tasked to face the disappointment and turn into a new path. Perhaps our life's work has lost its vitality, and we have reached the point in that ministry that we need to refresh or re-create the dream, turn into a direction of resurging energy rather than decline.

As I minister to this congregation, I see many ways this turning manifests in our individual lives, and in the life we create together as a congregation, as a community. For even as a human life has turnings, so the life of a human community has turnings, points at which there is a choice whether to slide into nostalgia and decline, or to reinvigorate the ministry, recreate the dream, and reinvest in the possibility that creates and sustains a church in this world.

This is a time of powerful rediscovery just beginning in this church, triggered by a minister's unexpected departure, a turning you did not ask for. This is a time to let go old relationships and expectations, a time for new conversations and new commitments, conversations about our dreams, about the beliefs and goals, about who this church will become as it revitalizes its life, its ministry. This is a time of turning, a time for thought and intentionality, a time to discover and rediscover the dream, the purpose and intent of coming together as a congregation.

And of course, we are all turning, turning with the earth, constantly facing new perspectives, all the time. As our lives have many turns, and as we choose to steer our lives in their unfolding directions, I wish for each of us that we may live fully into the ministry of our lives, our true purpose; that we may venture down the dark corridors when we must, and that we bring the power of the turning as we contribute to the larger life of the world, discovering and creating purpose for ourselves, and discovering that which nourishes our soul. Amen, and blessed be.

And now, invite you to rise in body or spirit and join in our closing hymn, number 1008 When Our Heart Is In A Holy Place

Sources:

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