

Walking Together
Sunday, September 18, 2011
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Walking together. That is one of the most common things we do, and it can be one of the sweetest things we do in our lives. A small child walks holding the hand of her parent; lovers walk hand in hand, matching their strides in a rhythm that reflects the smooth pattern of their lives together. Some walk with wheels or assistive devices. We partner each other on walks for exercise or shopping or sight-seeing, we take garden walks to explore the floral beauty of this lovely town, a family takes a walk on a Sunday afternoon to work off the effects of a big dinner.

One way to learn a place is by walking its sidewalks and paths and roads – in my first weeks here, I have been learning to walk this town with the guidance of the good folks in this congregation. You have walked with me and directed me to Delaware Park, to Hoyt Lake and the Farmer's Market on Bidwell, to the neighborhoods and historic sites, and there is still so much more on my list to explore -- the cemetery and zoo, museums and galleries. I have ventured out (by car, of course) to North Tonawanda and Cheektowaga and East Aurora, and I have even learned to say Scajaquada, as long as I get it organized in my head before I open my mouth. I am learning the local rivers and creeks and canals, the local sidewalks and paths and roads, so that I can walk with you here as your minister and as your partner in shared ministry to this church.

We are a walking people, and as a faith tradition we come from a walking, wandering, exploring people. Our Unitarian Universalist congregations are descended from the Pilgrim and Puritan churches that were established on this continent in the 1600's, by people who were so intent on having the freedom to worship according to their conscience that they walked down to the docks and loaded themselves and their families onto sailing ships, journeyed across the Atlantic Ocean, and landed on the rocky shores of New England.

These settlers were creating new ways of living, working and worshipping together. The colonists who created the Plymouth Colony in 1620 drafted and subscribed to the Mayflower Compact in which they agreed to "covenant and combine [them]selves together into a civil body politic." That compact, that covenant, formed the foundation for the institutions they would set out to establish on this continent.

The freedom to practice their religion was central to their lives and to their reason for being here, so the colonists formed churches that were free of bishops and cardinals – independent, self-governing churches bound not by externally imposed rules or dogma, but bound instead by an agreement that the church members crafted among themselves. That agreement, or covenant, defined how they would worship, how they would call their ministers, support their churches, and serve their God and the world.

The pilgrims and puritans called it "walking together" – the covenants they created in their churches acknowledged that they might have their differences, and defined how they would relate to each other in this new sort of religion they were creating. We are the spiritual descendents of those people of the free church, the people of the church that is founded on and sustained by a covenant into which its members freely join, and to which they agree to bind themselves.

Following in that free church tradition as a Unitarian Universalist minister, I am not assigned to this church by any bishop or denominational office. This church and I have freely chosen each other, agreeing to walk together as we create our partnership in shared ministry. In the interim search process last spring, I had several churches to choose from, and your interim search committee had a list of several highly qualified interim ministers from which to choose -- and after looking over a lot of written material and

interviewing each other, we freely chose each other as partners to walk together in a time of transition, with an agreement that we will be intentional about the ministry we create together.

That is what our tradition of “free religion” means – we make the very intentional decision to join together. When a person signs the membership book to join the church, you join hands and step onto the path together, you become part of the life of the church, part of the agreements, the covenants, the connections of mutual support and shared responsibilities, by which the members of this church walk together. No one else takes care of the church for us – it is a team effort, created by the steps we take on the path together.

We carry this tradition of covenant-making throughout the church, as we freely agree to bind ourselves into a community of shared commitment that supports each of us to live faithfully in the world. We affirmed our covenant of mutual support among the teachers, the children and youth, the parents and the congregation in the teacher dedication this morning. And the children and youth are writing their own classroom covenants as they begin their religious education classes today.

The words we say every Sunday morning as part of the chalice lighting are a form of covenant that goes back to the first days in which this church was founded. The original words, written in the year 1832, are inscribed on the brass plaque just outside the Sanctuary door that faces Ferry Street: *In the Love of Truth and in the Spirit of Jesus Christ, we join for the Worship of God and the Service of Man.*

At some point the language got updated, so that in the chalice lighting we say, *In the freedom of truth and the spirit of love, we unite for the worship of the Holy and the service of humanity.* The change to the words reflects the dynamic nature of the path we walk together, as we move into new understandings of our faith commitments, and our relationships to each other, while staying true to the deep meaning of the covenant that is spoken there.

These words, in either version, affirm our commitment to seek and value the truth, and to be guided by the spirit of love that was taught by Jesus and other great teachers. We also covenant to worship, to honor and give shape in our lives to that which is holy, and we commit ourselves to serve humanity. Agreeing to walk together as the Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo, we join hands and step onto a challenging path, to create and sustain a faith community that lives its way into truth and love, honoring that which is holy, and serving humanity, serving the world.

You know, it is not so easy. Oh, it is simple enough to write or speak these words: truth, love, holiness and service – these are values to which most of us can readily agree. It is relatively simple to become part of this community of commitment, to attend a class and sign the membership book to become a Member, or let the church know you want to become a Friend, but what about the hard part? What about making that agreement come alive in the relationships among church members?

What about bringing that covenant into the ways we listen to and speak with one another, how we design our programs, the priorities we choose? How do we support each other in seeking truth, manifesting love, honoring that which is holy, and serving humanity? And since we are human and sometimes fall short of our own best intentions, how do we notice when we are out of covenant and call ourselves and each other back to it? How do we live in this covenantal relationship with each other, in all the choices we make in every moment?

Living in covenantal relationship, walking together in all our difference, is no easy task in today’s society, even with common values to center and hold us in our diversity. We live in a consumer society that drives us away from covenant, dividing and isolating us, as our primary focus becomes the satisfaction of our own desires.

In most of our relationships we are consumers, customers. We are constantly bombarded with messages that support our consumerism, we are told that the customer is always right, that whatever we want should be what we get, and we come to expect satisfaction as our right. Have it your way, we do it all for you.

As one of my colleagues has written, “Department stores and grocery stores are in the satisfaction business. Burger King is in the satisfaction business. Churches are not in the satisfaction business. Churches do not have customers. Churches have guests, churches have friends, churches have members and churches have congregants. They do not have customers. Therefore, churches cannot be in the customer-satisfaction business.”

So if we are not in the customer-satisfaction business, what business are we in? The fundamental purpose and work of a church is developmental, engaging the mind and heart of members and the larger society to become our best selves. We fall short of our core purpose if we simply respond to consumer desires, because in order to fulfill our purpose as a church we must constantly call people beyond where they are, into something larger and more whole.

Although we exist in a consumerist culture, the inherent function of the church is counter-cultural. Although as a loving community we offer comfort to the afflicted, it is perhaps even more important to our purpose, as the saying goes, that we afflict the comfortable. We are called to breathe life into a covenantal relationship in which we freely participate, a relationship founded on truth, love and service, which sometimes can be not very comfortable at all.

As an intentional interim minister, it is my commitment and my joy to walk with you and to call you in truth and love beyond where you are into something larger and more whole. My ministry is to support you in making the most of this time as you prepare to search for and call your next settled minister. My ministry is to make this a time of learning and transformation so that you are in the best possible place to make a great ministerial match. This is what the interim search committee told me they wanted when they invited me to come and serve this congregation.

I am a minister with a deep commitment to a quality of excellence in all dimensions of congregational life, and I approach the interim time as an opportunity to support excellence in the congregation, to call forth the power of excellence from the members’ deepest desires to be the best people and the best church they can be.

I will do my best to live into my own commitment, seeking out the best ways to support you and call you forth into being the best church you can be. This is a church with many shining stars, with members of such intelligence and commitment, a beautiful and historic building in a vibrant community, and I am so very pleased to be with you.

So what will we do together in this powerful time of potential, calling out the best within us, discovering how to walk together on the path of congregational excellence? There is no simple formula, and every church is different, but long experience in church transitions has shown that there are five areas that a congregation needs to pay attention to in order to take best advantage of this high-potential transitional time. Those five congregational tasks of the interim time can be named as history, identity, leadership, connections and vitality. As we engage them together, they are the paving stones for the path we walk in the interim time.

The first congregational task is history, coming to understand the patterns that can be seen as we look back on the long life of the church, celebrating its strengths and triumphs, coming to terms with its griefs

and conflicts. As we walk together, it is important to know where we have been, what influences have shaped us, what gains and losses, triumphs and failures have left their mark. How was the life of this church shaped by the early Unitarian and Universalist congregations from which it grew? How has it been influenced by the seventy-five Unitarian and Universalist ministers who have served this community since the mid 1800's?

This church still echoes with those 75 voices ringing from the pulpits, teaching in the classrooms, ministering to the people, each with a specific philosophy and theology and leadership perspective, from the thirty-year ministry of George Washington Hosmer, to the dozens who were here only a year or two. Each minister leaves his or her own indelible mark -- and then there are the thousands of members and leaders who have shaped these systems and processes, invested their time and money and commitment to create this beloved community of faith. And how has the church been shaped by the larger patterns of westward expansion, community growth and decline, war and peace, economic boom and bust, what scars do we carry, what healing remains to be done? When we understand where we come from, how and why we are as we are, then we can create a path forward on solid ground, shaping the future with knowledge and intention.

The second paving stone on the interim path is identity, for as we walk together, both our destination and the path itself are shaped by who we are, who we aspire to be, what we seek to accomplish, our vision for the church we create by being here together. I don't mean just having a nice-sounding mission statement in writing, but doing the deep work of voicing our love and commitment, our dreams and aspirations as we want to see them manifested in this church.

Knowing who we are, we can make clearer decisions about our priorities and commitments. When we are clear about our identity and purpose, we are in a better place to attract, engage and inspire those who wish to join us on the path, expanding this community of dedication to truth and love and service, offering the gift of free religion to all who wish to enter in.

The third task of the interim time is leadership, for to walk with a purpose a church must have strength and wisdom, courage and commitment in its leaders. A church needs leaders of all types and shapes and sizes: those who read the map, those who break trail, those who know how to mobilize others, those who carry the heavy load, and those who maintain the drumbeat and lead the songs that keep our feet dancing along the path. There is a place for all our varied gifts, there is room for many leaders in a church, and it is up to us to identify the gifts that each of us brings, and to make sure we draw forth, accept and celebrate the gifts that all bring to our covenantal community.

The fourth paving stone is connection, reaching out to partners on the path as we go. The Unitarian Universalist Association of which we are a member is our strong partner on the path, connecting this church to over one thousand other congregations across the nation, providing resources and wisdom, learning opportunities and guidance to move the church toward excellence. We also have partners in the community, other congregations and organizations with whom we join in our voices and hands in service and advocacy, expanding the potential for our service to humanity and our power to live our values in the world.

I use the shorthand term "vitality" to describe the fifth congregational task, the final paving stone of the interim path. This task brings our focus to preparing all aspects of the church for the new ministry of its emerging future, strengthening governance and stewardship, building resilience in the processes and resources of the church, generating vitality to take us prancing, dancing along the path we walk.

These paving stones are not sequential – we don't begin with history and end with vitality. In fact, important work on stewardship and governance is already beginning, as church leaders focus their attention to identify the strengths on which we can build, and the areas in which more energy and strength needs to emerge, to do the transformational work of preparing for the next called ministry here.

An image from my childhood has been with me as I think about walking together. I was probably about ten years old. My father, who was not exactly an exercise nut, was putting on his shoes preparing to go out for a walk. I asked if I could go with him, and at first he refused, saying he was walking for exercise, would be walking fast and a long way, and he didn't want me to slow him down. I begged and pleaded, promising not to hold him back, and he finally relented. I still remember the challenge and the pleasure of walking with my father on that crisp autumn afternoon, stretching my legs to keep up with his longer stride, stretching to walk in partnership with someone I loved and respected, trusting that I was up to the challenge, and finding within myself the strength and speed I needed to walk with ease and joy.

So may we walk together here, stretching with ease and joy to meet the challenges of this interim time, guided by love and commitment as we walk the path with confidence into the future we create for this strong and resilient congregation.

I invite you to rise in body or spirit to join our closing hymn today, number 131 in the gray hymnal, Love Will Guide Us.

Sources:

Mayflower Compact retrieved 9-11-11 from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mayflower_Compact

The Mayflower Compact retrieved 9-11-11 from <http://www.pilgrimhall.org/compact.htm>