

To Boldly Go Along the Path of Renewal

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I will never forget the time one of my English teachers, Mrs. Crawford, bemoaned her lot in life. Although I was not the only one to blame for this, it was more a collective exasperation with the class than any one particular student. She was trying to teach us about proper grammar and the correct usage of infinitives. Infinitives, you may recall, are a verb tense that begins with “to.” Things like “to ride a bike,” or “to behold eternity in an hour.” Mrs. Crawford was frustrated because we kept splitting our infinitives; sticking words in between the “to” and the verb. “All of you are from the Star Trek generation,” she complained. “Star Trek?” someone asked. Yes because of the opening lines. “‘To boldly go where no man has gone before.’ Ever since that show, people think it is acceptable to split their infinitives!” Funny how you remember your teacher’s outbursts far more than you do their daily lessons.

I certainly sympathize with her now, but in defense of William Shatner, the alternatives Mrs. Crawford would have suggested just don’t

cut it. “To go boldly where no man has gone before...” “Boldly to go where no man has gone before...” Granted these are correcter, I mean, more correct, but they lose something don’t they. Captain Kirk doesn’t care if he splits his infinitives; he has Klingons to worry about. Besides, there is in and of itself something “bold” about “to boldly go where no man has gone before...” By saying it wrong, he makes the point of boldness.

Paul Nixon urges us to choose to be bold over mild. The world values bold, yet so often it seems that we choose to be mild. Mild doesn’t upset anyone, but bold is far more interesting. Bold makes good TV, but mild is how we often live our own lives. And in case you think this is a function of the post-modern age, think again. Probably the first person to ever forcefully make this observation (there I did it again!) was Henry Thoreau. He noted the temptation to “live a life of quiet desperation.” So in order to ensure that when it came time for him to die he would know that he had lived, he chose one of the boldest moves in Unitarian history: he moved into a small shack on the banks of Walden Pond for three years. Sometimes you just have to choose bold over mild.

What is true of us as individuals can be true of us as a collective. Churches too can bump along in cruise control, living a mild life of quiet, or occasionally not so quiet, desperation. It is easy, it is knowable, it is what we have always done. Bold is scary. Bold is

unknown. But bold can make all of our dreams come true. Things can also go sideways when we choose to be bold. I make the distinction between feeling safe and feeling comfortable. Everyone should feel safe at church. No exceptions; from kids, to youth, to infants to seniors, church should be a place where we know we will be safe physically, emotionally, relationally and spiritually.

However church should not be a place where we are comfortable all of the time. Indeed, discomfort often is the prelude to some of the most creative programs and activities that have ever been put forth. As a church we have a vision of the world as it should be. It is our Unitarian Universalist vision of a world of interconnection in which all people are treated with inherent worth and dignity. It is a vision of the world where there is peace with justice, not at its expense. It is a vision of the world that cares for and nurtures our relationships with each other, with the earth and nature, and with the Holy center in us and around us, however you may conceive of it. We have this vision of the world, and we talk about it, learn about it, hopefully even nurture and nourish that spiritual perspective within our own life. But when we see the world as it is, the real world outside these doors, we see that it is a long, long way from conforming to our UU vision of the world as it should be. That is an uncomfortable place to be. One need look no further than the minister in Florida who threatened to burn Korans yesterday. It should give us discomfort to have one foot in this imperfect world, and our eyes and

hearts focused on our religious ideals. The tension between these, is a creative discomfort, and it is a powerful motivation for us to bring our liberal religious tradition to life in this place to try and heal a broken and wounded world full of broken and wounded people. We have a message of hope that can, and does, save people's lives. Therefore it behooves us to be bold about it.

Last June I celebrated my tenth year as a Unitarian Universalist minister. Many of you were here to celebrate that occasion with me, and I was touched by the many well wishes and gifts you shared with me last spring. I was talking to someone after the service who asked me a really good question; so good that I wished I had mentioned it in my sermon that day. They asked, "What is your biggest regret of the past ten years?" I thought about that for a while. Surely there were times when I wish I would have said something differently in a sermon, or in a Board meeting or a counseling session. We all have moments like that. But as the summer wore on, that question kept coming back to me. I realize that my biggest regret was not something I had done, but something I had left undone.

My previous church in Omaha was a small but growing congregation. After a few years the growth plateaued because we had filled that small church to capacity. I realized my biggest regret was not pushing them hard enough to move out of that place. I was not bold enough in my vision and in my leadership, at least on that issue. Yes it

would have been hard. It would not have pleased everyone there. Good friends of mine, overly attached to their building, would have been upset with me. But with hindsight I see that it was the way to go. Bold is the way to go.

Of course boldness takes different forms with different churches. The issues in Omaha are not the same as the ones here. But I suggest to you that that approach of daring to be bold in service to our religious vision is a universal challenge for every Unitarian Universalist church in the world. Our mission and vision should be at the core of everything we do as a church. Fortunately you have done a lot of good work over the past couple of years clarifying that mission and vision for yourselves. Last year the Board completed a Long Range Plan which had at the top of its list that we become a mission-centered congregation. As the year went on and I sat with that Long Range Plan, thinking about it and preaching about it, it occurred to me that actually you don't even need to go beyond the front cover of the brochure. The title page sums up the core of Unitarian Universalism in one word and applies it throughout our church. That one word is: Renew.

Renew. To renew means to go back to the source to our tradition and find something new, something we can use again. Renewal implies freshness. It is a word for a liberal faith because it builds on the past, but adds something new to it. It is a progressive word in fitting with our progressive faith. Renew is a bold word that honors the past, but is not

held captive by our past. It is the attempt to seek something unique and creative while shaping our bold vision. Renew asks us to live in that space of creative discomfort and reapply our liberal faith in a way never before conceived.

Let me be more specific. There are many ways to renew, many levels at which this is applicable. There is renewal within the individual. Religion must always begin and end with people. If religion has not transformed your life, then there is not much to it. We renew within by finding and cultivating a spiritual practice. Our habits speak more about who we are than our actions. Actions are one time things, but our habits shape our life. A spiritual practice is nothing more than a daily habit that reminds you of what you hold most dear in life. It may or may not use traditional symbols and actions like folding your legs into a lotus position or pressing your hands together while you kneel. The outward positions are not what are important. The inward movement of the heart is what you are looking for. Renewal within us is simply reminding ourselves, remembering, the ultimate things in life. It is a practice that teaches us again and again in subconscious ways that our own ego is not the only reality in the universe.

In the Ancient Reading this morning, the Buddha outlines one of the paradoxes of living such a life. On the one hand it is all about stillness, letting things be as they are. Let go and let life come to you. And yet, “Better than a hundred years of idleness and inactivity is a

single day of intense effort.” We have to try as hard as we can to get to that point where we can let go. It’s a little like the writer who once said, “I only write when I am inspired. And I make sure to be inspired every morning at 9 AM!”

When we commit ourselves to renew within, we are taking a bold step toward spiritual maturity. Spiritual maturity is not about what you believe, although that is an important first step. No renewal is more than getting your theology right in your head, it is about living it. “Deeds not creeds” as the old UU adage proclaimed. This is a process we see in our behavior; indeed renewal within is precisely making our beliefs match our everyday life.

It is not merely enough to renew as individuals, we need to do so as a collective, a congregation, as well. This is renewal among ourselves. When the staff and I are talking about a program or plans for a new church year, as we have these past couple of months, we often challenge each other by asking, “How can we be ten times as bold with our vision here?” So often it is easy to choose mild; “We’ll just do what we did last year. We didn’t hear TOO many complaints.” But a ten times as bold approach to our congregation is not afraid to take risks. That is not to say that we should take risks based on poor judgment or incomplete facts. That is just plain stupid. But what we should also avoid is not taking a risk because we are worried or don’t have all of the answers. Instead I say we not be afraid to try new things and fail

sometimes, as long as we learn something. We should never do anything that would be unsafe, but we should not be afraid to be made creatively uncomfortable.

Our good friends, the UU Church in Harrisburg Pennsylvania, took a bold step. They were growing like crazy, and they had completely maxed out their building capacity, but there was no land near them to build on. Their solution: they bought an old UCC church in the middle of downtown from a dying congregation that was looking to unload it. The new church is more traditional, much bigger, and has renewed that church's ministry within themselves and to their community. It was not without considerable controversy that they decided to have two campuses, and they did not wait for consensus. They would still be talking about it if they did. However they had a clear sense of their mission, the purpose for their church, and they allowed that mission to translate into action.

Now I am not recommending that we do the exactly same thing; that is not the point. My point is to commend to you that approach to our life together. To renew among means to seek a third way to old problems, to see them in a new light and a new context. It requires that we be innovative, imaginative, and more than a little creative. Sometimes we just can't keep doing things they way they always have been done. So let's get curious and learn about how we can be bold and renew this church that we love.

David Bumbaugh, now retired professor of ministry at Meadville Lombard, once wrote that the purpose of the church is nothing short of the salvation of the world. How is that from one of the most Humanist professors that I ever had in seminary? “The purpose of the church is the salvation of the world.” What he means is that the church should not exist for its own sake. Everything we do and are about here is a means to a greater end. To renew beyond ourselves is to have an outward focus to our church and to our lives. It is to be of service to the world in ways both great and small.

We have done very good social action projects in the past and are doing so now. The Allies for Racial Justice Team has helped our church form a new partnership with Canaan Baptist Church, a primarily African American congregation. Together we hope to do what we can to end racism in Delaware. What struck me about this new and exciting program is that it was not planned. No one had it as a staff goal or even in the Long Range Plan. It just bubbled up. We need to capture those good ideas that bubble up and translate those into outward action. More often than not it means taking a bold step. Allies for Racial Justice is the largest single committee in our church right now. Clearly when we choose to be bold, we start to renew beyond ourselves.

Renewal beyond has another element to it. Radical Hospitality is a practice that we have been working on for a few years now, and I am pleased to report real progress. Our new members give testimony to

how warm their reception is. Friends of members who visit us describe how they have never been welcomed to a church like they were this past summer. Let's keep it up! To renew beyond means that we are not just about making sure those of us who have found this spiritual home are happy and comfortable. It means making room for those people we have never met, who have not walked through our doors yet. Radical Hospitality is about being focused on their happiness and comfort. We are not in the satisfaction business, but in the transformation business; or I should say the renewal business. And that is a good business to be about.

So how do we do all of this, how do we renew within, among, and beyond ourselves? For as I said, it is not enough to merely have the thought of renewal, we must put it into action at all three levels at once. Which brings me to Bold Act #1 for this church year. Many times following a service I have spoken to some of you who are assiduous note takers. I see your order of service filled to the margins with points I have made, or tried to make during the sermon. Well note takers, I am among you. I find taking notes helps me to focus and listen. One morning in the line after church I was joking with one of the note takers that since they have all of these notes written down, I should be assigning homework. Well, what started as a joke last spring turned into a concrete idea over the summer.

If you look in your order of service you will see an insert called “Spiritual Homework.” These are concrete practices you can take home and do. There is one for each level of renewal within, among, and beyond. Every month you will see a new set of “Homework” tied to the monthly theme. Tape these to the front of your refrigerator. Better yet, try them out. Talk to a close friend or your small group about what you are doing and how it is going for you. On the back you will see an area to share your experience with us. Fill that out at the end of the month and send it in to the church. We will also have a version of it on our website. Rev. Barbara and I want to hear about your experiences working with these practices. How were you renewed that month? You are not required to do your spiritual homework. I will not send out nuns with rulers to get you if you don’t do these things. But let me forewarn you: there will be a test. The test of how well you have done your spiritual homework is your life. And only you can give it a grade.

As we renew within, among, and beyond let us dare to be bold. Be ten times as bold with your faith than you think you can this year. For if you do, I have no doubt that you will live long and prosper. Amen
Blessed Be.