

The Year Ahead

Rev. Peggy Meeker, 9/17/17

Reading: from the Introduction to *Sources of Our Faith: Inspirational Readings* [ed. Kathleen Rolenz, Skinner House Books, 2012, p. ix]

For over two hundred years Unitarians, Universalists, and Unitarian Universalists have been dancing with the Holy. At times, it seems as if our rational minds take the lead, moving us gracefully around the floor to the finely metered rhythms of a Bach gavotte. At other times, mystery and wonder lead the dance, where the steps are being revealed to us even as we dance them. Throughout history, we have moved to the rhythms of mystery and wonder, prophecy, wisdom, teachings from ancient and modern sources, and nature herself.

The Year Ahead

Earlier this week I was feeling a little anxious. I'd spent Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday up in Guelph, Ontario, taking part in a training program for interim ministers, which was a really good experience, and on Thursday I was busy catching up with emails and phone calls and wondering when I'd find the time to start working on this sermon. Since it was the 2nd Thursday of the month, the local Unitarian Universalist clergy met for lunch that day, which is always a wonderful thing, but that took about two hours out of my day and I was fretting about time. (The experts say ministers should never talk about sermon-writing troubles—I hope this won't be the exception that proves the rule!) Anyway, I had used Google Maps on my phone to find the quickest way back to the church after our lunch meeting, and I pulled into the parking lot at about 2, thinking, "Okay, now I just have to do three quick emails, and then I'll start writing." Fingers crossed. And that was when my phone said the nicest thing to me, something I'd never noticed before at the end of navigating a route: it said "You're right on schedule."

It felt so reassuring that I thought I'd tell you all the same thing. You're right on schedule! There are lots of tasks that a congregation and an interim minister are supposed to be thinking about and doing during an interim year—and if we have any visitors here this morning who don't know, we are starting an interim year, which means we're in-between settled, or long-term, ministers, and in a time of transition. There are lots of tasks, *and* you're right on schedule! I'm not just saying that because it's nice to hear. Based on all the evidence I've seen, you truly are right on schedule.

That's partly because so many of those tasks are already underway, and it's partly because a lot of what needs to happen this year is somewhat nebulous, and for that there is no timetable.

One of the primary things that's underway is the work of the Ministerial Search Committee. You approved the members of that committee back in June, and we will commission them today to mark the significance of their work and to offer them our support. They will be listening to you and pulling together information about the church to share with ministers who are in search, and within a couple of months they'll be ready to begin evaluating applications. There's a lot that will be going on behind the scenes, which is why it's recommended that people on the Search Committee not be involved in other church responsibilities. Then there's your Board of Trustees—they are already dealing with extra responsibilities this year, including new demands on their leadership and their wisdom. Be good to them this year! And the Transition Team is up and running—they're the folks who work with me, giving me insight into the congregation and helping me decide what my focus should be and how to facilitate any special interim work we might choose to do. I'd like to introduce the Transition Team to you: [names deleted]. Thank you! And just in the last week or so the Negotiating Team was set up: [names deleted]. These folks will work out and later negotiate the agreement with the new minister on expectations and compensation. Thank you! So as you can see, a lot is already happening.

Then there's what I referred to as the more nebulous part: not just the change itself and the things that have to be done, but the transition that you all are going through. You lost a minister that you loved—and not long after having said goodbye to several other ministers—and you've been thrust into yet another interim period. I came on board knowing that you've got some good momentum going in a number of different areas, and I intend to support all that you're doing, but still, things have changed here, again; there are unknowns, there's uncertainty about just how this year will go.

And, of course, that's life. There is never a time—I hope!—when all change stops. At a meeting of the Communications Committee a couple of weeks ago, just after our office administrator announced her resignation, Nancy, our board president, was joking about the danger of thinking that things are going well, because things keep changing. "I've decided," she said, "we have to change the name of the church to "Don't get used to it." And I wrote that down, because there's a lot of truth in that statement, and it's not just about church.

One of the books I read about interim ministry is called *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*, and it's by a man whose name, interestingly, is Bridges. Bridges talks about three phases of transition. The first is the beginning, which is really an ending to some previous way that things were, so it's about letting go of the old ways, and often it involves some grief or anger or a variety of feelings. I've heard it said that people don't resist change so much as they resist loss. The beginning often involves loss. The second phase is what Bridges calls the neutral zone—that in-between time when the old is gone but the new isn't yet here. The third phase is the new beginning, which involves new energy, perhaps new identity, and new purpose. Ending, neutral zone, and new beginning. As you can imagine, the dividing lines between the three phases are fuzzy—you might be feeling a little bit of all three at once; and different people might be feeling the impact of these phases at different times. There might be folks here today, for

example, who are really eager to see what's next, while others are just hurting because our last minister is no longer in the pulpit. And by the way, if you're hurting, you are not alone, and many of us here are ready to listen, including me.

According to Bridges, all of that is necessary. You can't get to the new beginning without first *going through* the ending and the neutral zone. And the neutral zone—where we'll all be most of this year—is a very interesting place. Bridges calls it the limbo, a place that is neither the old nor the new. The writer Marilyn Ferguson said that this in-between place is “like being between trapezes. It's Linus when the blanket is in the dryer. There's nothing to hold on to” [Bridges, p. 45]. It's a place where you might feel disoriented and struggle to know who you are or what to do, a place where you might feel anxious and want to escape—but to abandon the situation is to abort the transition, and the transition is necessary. And the neutral zone is also a place where innovation and creativity are most possible, where sometimes questions can be asked more easily than usual and dreams dreamed, where repatterning takes place, growth happens. Bridges likens it to a seedbed, and to “the night [time] during which we are disengaged from yesterday's concerns and preparing [mostly unconsciously] for tomorrow's”—a time of restoration. And he likens it to “the chaos into which the old form dissolves and from which the new form emerges” [p. 10].

So here we are, starting a new church year in the chaos. Right on schedule. There may be times this year when it feels like too many things are in flux. There may be something that doesn't get done, or some information that doesn't get communicated. You may feel disoriented or discouraged or overloaded. Let's acknowledge right now that church work can sometimes feel like too much. Let me know if that's happening to you, or let a member of the Transition Team know. Let's do everything we can to keep things as easy and light as possible this year. And let's remember that the chaos is also the seedbed and that we're disturbing the soil in preparation for new growth. Let's make it a creative chaos. The time when we *know* not to get used to it. There's a Buddhist saying that I love: “The bad news is that you're falling through the air, nothing to hang on to, no parachute. The good news is, *there's no ground*” [Chögyam Trungpa]. We are free-falling, and we are safe, and we are together, and we are moving into the dawning future.

To that end, let us covenant together.

Covenant

These are my promises to you: I will walk with you for this short time, work with you as your partner in ministry, listen to you, love you, encourage you to be curious and to dream, and help lead you where you're going. I learned a new quote recently: Alexander Ledru-Rollin, a French politician, said “There go my people! I must find out where they are going so that I can lead them.” I will listen to you and lead you where you are going. And for a covenant, it seemed to me that we could do no better than to use part of the covenant we say every Sunday, our

Affirmation of Faith, printed in your order of service. Think of the words “humanity” and “all souls” as beginning with us here, and of the final word “all” as having as large a meaning as each of us recognizes. So would you rise in body or imagination and say these words with me, beginning with “To dwell together”: To dwell together in peace; to seek knowledge in freedom; to serve humanity in fellowship; to the end that all souls shall grow into harmony with the source and meaning of life: thus do we covenant with each other and with all. Amen.

And now we will commission our Ministerial Search Committee, both to affirm their sense of calling to their roles in this work, and to grant them our blessings and support.

Commissioning of Search Committee

I would like to invite the Vice President of the Board of Trustees and the members of the Search Committee, as I call their names, to come forward and stand up here with me: [names deleted]. Will the congregation please rise?

VP [to the MSC]: The members of this congregation charge you with the important work for which you have been called out from among us—the work of knowing our congregation and searching for a candidate to be our next settled minister. We charge you to be guided by our principles, to hold in your hearts both our community here and the wider community in which we live, and to guide us toward our future. Are you ready and willing to accept this charge? If so, please say “We are.”

VP [to the congregation]: Do you, the members and friends of First Universalist, affirm the work of these committee members and pledge to them your support, your participation when requested, your protection of their time, and your appreciation? If so, please say “We do.”

Minister: In the name of the First Universalist Society of Rochester, NY, I commission you as our Ministerial Search Committee. As a sign of this affirmation, I will anoint your hands with oil blessed by our words and our intentions. May your hands and your spirits absorb these blessings. [Anoint with the words “Blessings on you and your work.”]

Thank you.