

Reading

In sharing some poetry this morning from Ada Limon, the richness of the images is such that we wanted to share the poem in two voices, so I will read it through once and Janet will read it a second time.

Instructions on Not Giving Up

More than the fuschia funnels breaking out of the crabapple tree,
More than the neighbor's almost obscene display of cherry limbs
shoving their cotton candy-colored blossoms to the slate sky of
Spring rains,

It's the greening of the trees that really gets to me.

When all the shock of white and taffy, the world's baubles and
trinkets,

Leave the pavement strewn with the confetti aftermath,

The leaves come.

Patient, plodding, a green skin growing over whatever winter did to
us,

A return to the strange idea of continuous living despite the mess
of us, the hurt, the empty.

Fine then, I'll take it, the trees seem to say, a new slick leaf unfurling
like a fist to an open palm,

I'll take it all.

Sermon

Heeding the Call

This week has been full of a lot of listening to one another. I have sat in quite a few rooms over the course of the last 6 days or so, participating in conversations where I have learned so much about this place- about its rich history, about the ways folks show up for one another, about what you all see for yourselves in the future with First Universalist.

As the world around us is coming alive this Springtime, I am reminded of the ways I have seen this place come alive. The flowers are opening and bursting forth with colorful blooms. And I have seen many of you burst forth with enthusiasm about what First Universalist has done for you and for your families. Patient, plodding the green of a new season is growing here, following a long winter that no one could have foreseen. It may be the weather or it may just be what I have seen on your faces, but Springtime really suits you in this moment.

What I have learned in the listening is about the deep relationships that have been patiently growing here over time. Starting with a warm welcome and developing in the different ways many of you are of service to this church community. People drift away for a time, taking a break here and there, but something about this place creates an open invitation. A hand reaching out to say that First Universalist will always be here. You could write the manual of instructions on not giving up.

You have a beautiful and rich history that extends back far beyond when this building was first erected and that history lives in the stories you tell, in the writings of those that have come before, in the walls and the banners that surround us. This congregation has a long line of ancestors, stretching back almost 175-200 years, depending on who you ask. Those who have gone before have made this church a reality. They could never have dreamed us up (and certainly not dreamed me up, as a young, queer woman minister), but here we are. Living out the vision and the legacy of the thousands of people who have worshipped here and come back here Sunday after Sunday to hear an inspiring word and to be part of a community that cares.

I have heard a rich and deep desire for spiritual grounding and seeking in this place. You are searching to find meaning in your lives, to connect with a larger narrative of humanity, to connect with the natural world, to connect with something larger than just yourselves. This is a spiritually seeking community, where exploration is encouraged and dialogue goes deep.

I have listened as you describe a deeper call towards justice in this beautiful city of Rochester, NY. You are the folks who show up. You continually show up and show up. You are consistent. You see your justice work as an expression of your faith. You find some of that meaning you seek from life in doing, in serving the community, in digging deep into the soil of oppression and injustice upon which our country has been built, but rarely which is rarely acknowledged.

You inspire me, First Universalist. You inspire me in the ways you show up for one another. You inspire me in the ways you show up for this community. I was here with you yesterday during a church workday that was filled with folks caring for this building and also building or deepening relationships through being of service to this community. You inspire me to want to be a part of it all, just as you inspire others to join in to become a part of this amazing and dynamic congregation.

To heed a calling, to hear where our life is calling us, to allow our lives to speak, we all must begin with listening. The listening takes practice and intention to cultivate, it is something we learn to do. We listen to that still, small voice within us in moments of quiet, in meditation. We listen to the voices of others, which help to broaden our perspectives beyond what any of us can conceive of in isolation. That is why we need communities like First Universalist, to be challenged, to be inspired, to hear a perspective different from our own that we may be transformed in both miniscule and frame-bending ways. In listening, we are fed.

In discerning a call we begin to grow. And my friends, I see some discernment along the path towards the future of this community. Who will we be? What is our deepest purpose? Where do we want to be in the next 100 years? Or even just the next 10 years? First, we listen. Then we think through a direction with all the information we can take in. This is how a calling is formed. And realizing a call is not linear. It is not one step and onto the next and onto the next. You know this. Sometimes, we must go back to the listening before discerning. Sometimes, we take action after

discerning and things do not work out the way we had hoped, so we listen or discern again. Like our story this morning, where Amanda thought she knew what was best for feeding a community. It turns out she needed to go back to listening again, discerning what she had heard, and taking different action. Heeding a call takes a willingness to try things on, a willingness to make mistakes, a willingness to take risks, to hurt or be hurt and to come back around the table again in covenant, in relationship.

Today, we are heeding a call together. We have listened to each other telling our life stories, telling of our experiences, sharing hopes and dreams. A calling is something that speaks to us and often invites us to live into a dream or a hope or a wish or an aspiration. Howard Thurman reminds us, “Don’t ask yourself what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is more people who have come alive.” To realize a calling is to find what makes us come alive and to say yes to it.

After a good bit of listening and discerning this week, I want to share with you all some of my hopes and dreams for this ministry relationship. It may not surprise you that my ever-evolving call to ministry has led me to this place. And I am delighted to be here. I have found among you a community I have been hoping for. So here is what I dream of:

A church community that sees its ministry as deeply contextual. A group of folks who are grounded in the city of Rochester and know your ministry extends beyond the walls of this building into this urban community. A people who draw strength

from their urban location, who are ready to explore their relationship to this downtown and to answer the call of the community in a way that is rooted in spirit and rooted in relationship.

I dream of a congregation that knows its call towards justice. That accepts that this is a strong avenue for expressing our beliefs in the world. Folks who hold a larger love for people and the Earth at the center of their faith- a love so large it leaves no one out who is suffering and in need of our care, advocacy, and attention. A people who see their role as a faith community to bring spiritual sustenance to fortify the justice movements we are a part of. Knowing that wherever justice is present, the spirit of humanity and a larger love must fuel the work.

I hope for a community that is willing to get messy, to make mistakes, and to keep the ministry alive through it all. I dream of a people that offer forgiveness to one another and that seek forgiveness when we have offended.

I recognize that some of you here hope to grow. I too share your hope and want to do what I can to make it happen. What I can also promise you is that any growth strategy that solely relies on a hip, young minister is bound to fail. You have all you need here to grow- a warm welcome, a willingness to follow-up with people, a desire to be in relationship, and an invitational community. For so many of you, this church has called you back again and again and again. So, growth may come, but I know it will never happen on my merits alone, just like nothing could happen here on solely my

merits. It must be owned and embraced by you. As far as I can tell, that's the only way anything gets done around here.

And finally, I wish for a Unitarian Universalism that is large enough to embrace both/and. I dream of a people that can come together as both gay and straight, as theist and atheist, as religious and secular, as spiritually-grounded and justice-seeking. I want for faith communities that desire both growth in numbers to share this beautiful and precious faith we have found AND to grow in spiritual depth. We can no longer afford to be an either/or people. There are worldviews that would tell us that this is the only way to see things. It has been a way of life for me. Have you been there too? So I wonder, can a vision that we create together in collaboration be big enough to embrace both/and? Can we challenge each other enough to dream big? I believe in my heart of hearts that we can.

You have everything you need right here. You share the ministry of this church. You have been keeping this place alive and vibrant for so very long. Your dreams have kept this place alive, your hopes have fueled the vision of a future, and your stewardship of this community has brought us to this point right here and right now. Where are you being called? What action will you take to ensure that this place is vibrant and available to all who would seek it?

Without action, a call remains unrealized. Action is where we learn what is working and what is not. To take action is to make a discernment about a calling a reality. Eventually, we must choose to allow ourselves to act on our dreams or to remain closed up, safe, like a bud that never blooms. Without the blooming or the

bursting forth, buds often die on the vine. Without action, dreams and visions often do the same. We must act, we must risk, we must take a leap of faith to realize our callings.

And so I take a leap of faith this morning to let you know it has been an honor to serve as your candidate for ministry this week. And I want you all to know I have just fallen in love with this congregation. You are such a treasure. It would be an honor for any minister to serve here with all the gifts, talent, passion, depth, and enthusiasm you bring to this church.

My wish for you is to dream big, to stay rooted in this community, and to be as audacious in answering your life's calling as you possibly can be. Embrace the ways you have not given up and you continue to never give up. Find what makes you come alive. May you be like the tree, whose blooms and leaves unfurl year after year, saying "I'll take it. I'll take it all."

Amen. Blessed be. May it be so.