

**2007-10-28 Leadership
WF and MLB**

Opening Words

We are here

*as a warm October begins to cool,
and as the Autumn holidays approach,
to worship, to examine our lives with honesty,
to challenge our assumptions courageously,
and to weave a community of care together.*

And so we begin this way:

Mindful that a growing vision of a just world calls us together, that a community of commitment, courage and care sustains us, and that a life transformed by depth of spirit may illumine our way, we have kindled this light as the sign of our circle of life and love.

Sequence:

A mask does not really make us into someone else.
A tree losing its leaves is still a tree.
A carved pumpkin with a scary face can still be perfectly suitable for a pie.
A graying sky is still the sky.
A browning garden is still a garden.
A hard lesson is still a lesson.
A mistake is not the apocalypse, just a mistake.
A span of silence is not an escape, but a moment's rest in the midst of it all.

silence

Naming those we love in silence or in a still, small voice does not whisk us away from this moment, but it does remind us that we have come to this day holding hands with many others, and that we are not now, nor have ever been, alone and outside the circle of communion. Let us remember.

naming

A song, even when it is over, still sings within.

Readings

The First Reading is called *This Is How We Are Called*. It's a poem by Kimberly Beyer-Nelson, the Director of Religious Education at our congregation in Lincoln, Nebraska.

In the hours before the birds
stream airborne
with chiming voice,
a silent breath rests in the pines,
and upholds the surface of the lake
as if it were a fragile bubble

in the very hand of God.

And I think,
this is how we are called:

To cup our hands and hold this peace,
even when the sirens begin,
even when sorrow cries out, old and gnarled,
even when words grow fangs and rend.

Cupped hands gently open,
supporting peace
like the golden hollow of a singing bowl,
like the towering rim of mountains
cradling this slumbering and mist-draped valley.

The Second Reading comes from a posthumous work by the great Edwin Friedman. It's called *A Failure of Nerve*, and it was put together from his surviving writings by both family & friends.

When any relationship system is imaginatively gridlocked, it cannot get free simply through more thinking about the problem. Stuck systems cannot become unstuck simply by “trying harder.” For a fundamental reorientation to occur, that spirit of adventure which optimizes serendipity, and which enables new perceptions beyond the control of our thinking processes, must happen first. This is equally true regarding families, institutions, whole nations, and entire civilizations.

But for that type of change to occur, the system in turn must produce leaders who can both take the first step and maintain the stamina to follow through in the face of predictable resistance and sabotage. Any renaissance, anywhere, whether in a marriage or a business, depends primarily not only on new data and techniques, but on the capacity of leaders to separate themselves from the surrounding emotional climate, so that they can break through the barriers that are keeping everyone from “going the other way.”

Sermon

Wendy

It's worth noticing that I'm not wearing a sparkly silver tiara as the character did in our story this morning. Nor is my colleague, Mark, sporting a crown, though I suppose the chairs we sit in each Sunday *would* make nice thrones somewhere.

We won't be talking about "tiara" kind of leadership, top down leadership, or waving-a- wand-and-making-great-things-happen kind of leadership. That's not our style. And it's certainly not the Unitarian Universalist way. So you can set aside any worry on that score.

No, our main message here today is that there are *lots* of ways to exhibit leadership. That the tiara-kind is the least exciting. And that we become more fully ourselves as we get to know, and *embrace*, our complete selves -- including the dormant, untried, rusty, awkward or well oiled leadership parts of our being. We're also saying that stepping up, stepping forward, or speaking out can be a form of what some people like to call “the spiritual life.” And just so you know what we mean by that slippery word this morning, we offer you a definition blended from the words of writers Patrick Love and Tom

Harpur. "Spirituality is the process of continually transcending our own egocentricity, with our purpose focused on our future, as we grow at the intersection of *what we do* with *what we are*."

Now some of you, like me, may have a whole section of your bookshelves set aside for books on leadership. There's certainly a lot written on this subject, good material for us to digest over time and make our own. One person that both Mark and I and most of our colleagues return to again and again in this field is Edwin Friedman. Friedman, who died in 1996, spent 35 years of his professional life as a rabbi offering consultations on leadership styles in religious communities, and the congregational conundrums sometimes found in those communities.

Friedman defines leadership this way: "Leadership can be thought of as a capacity to define oneself to others in a way that clarifies and expands a vision of the future."

What does it mean "to define one's self to others"? Well, certainly a first step for all of us is coming to know ourselves, so that we *can* present what we know to others. Who am I? What do I trust? Where can I find meaning? What matters to me? We don't answer such religious questions separate from our relationship to others; to be human, after all, is to be in relationship. So all of us, in some manner or another, go about the work of defining ourselves in relationship to others. And in doing so, we lay the groundwork for what Friedman calls "clarifying and expanding a vision of the future." And as we see it, that means we *all* have the capacity for leadership, in some form or another.

There may be some among us who are charismatic leaders, some who are inspiring leaders ("breathing spirit into others" is the literal meaning of leadership), or some who have a quiet, but persistent leadership style. There are as many styles of leadership as there are people in this room. And probably as many names by which to call those styles. Terminology isn't what matters here. *Self discovery and empowerment does.*

I want to use an example from our own church community. Many of you have heard the name Slowter. We speak of Slowter Lounge nearly every Sunday in the beginning of our Sunday service. Ed Slowter was a beloved member of this church community, and it is, in part, Ed whom we honor with the name of that room. (It was originally named for his first wife, Betty, who died some years before him. When Ed himself died, the room was dedicated to both of them, and you can see portraits of both in the room right now.) Ed earned the respect and trust of his fellow parishioners over the five plus decades he was a part of this community. He actually paced this land before we developed it as a home for our buildings. He crafted budgets, told the truth about risks he thought we should, and shouldn't, take, and he was a loyal, dedicated member of our Finance Committee for over twenty years. He knew and loved this institution with all his heart and mind. He left us a legacy, a reminder, of stewardship . . .

Mark

Ed used to say with quiet certainty, "You can't spend what you don't have," at Finance Committee meetings. He was not wearing a crown when he said this, nor was he speaking from a pulpit, or from behind a desk. He was sitting around a table with other members who had come to know him over the years...at potlucks, at worship, at coffee-hour, over lunch at the Faculty Club on the OSU campus. And, the Finance Committee didn't always respond the way he wished to his simple assertion. A good leader is not, after all, in the business of winning, but of leading. The competitive and egocentric ideas of winning and losing have no place in real leadership, which is spiritual, not self-serving. But, nevertheless, Ed, in his quiet way, was a leader par-excellence. Ed presented himself exactly as someone who was, in Friedman's definition, trying "to clarify and expand a vision" for the church's

future.

Ed was a member here back when 30 people met in a small house. The amount of sheer change Ed witnessed during his years was tremendous. New ministers, new buildings, new people, new approaches, new voices. But Ed remained steady, like leaders are. In Friedman's words from the reading, Ed had stamina. And he was not worried when there was resistance to changes. His faithfulness to a vision of the future remained patient and steady. Again, in Friedman's excellent words, he kept himself separate from the "surrounding emotional climate." If there were upheavals of some sort, or disappointments, or worries in the congregation, he never let that dissuade him from his vision and support for the congregation.

As Wendy said, leadership only has meaning within the context of a community where one gains respect over time. Through relationships. I think of Marge, in my former congregation. Marge was not one to run for office, although she did sit on the board once. But this does not mean she was not an excellent leader. When a student came to the board and requested to intern at the church, the board was hesitant. This student was in a wheelchair. Multiple Sclerosis kept her rolling, not walking. Now you should know that our simple, homespun buildings were *mostly* accessible, and far more so than other Unitarian Universalist churches in the Bay Area. But this student, an excellent leader herself, offered the easy suggestion that for our buildings to be *totally* accessible, the door of one of the bathrooms had to be re-hung to open in the other direction, and a small ramp had to be built to let her chair negotiate a single step into the office.

"We don't have that money in our budget," opined one board member. "I don't know," warned another, with that doubtful tone in his voice. But Marge, without a tiara on her head or even an elected position as board chair (or as we said, "president"), said, "It seems to me that if we meant it when we espoused our Unitarian Universalist principles of justice and fairness, then the simple solutions Jean just suggested might best have been put into place *twenty years ago*. I think the ramp and the door need to be in place by Friday at the latest."

And they were. And the student interned with us with great success. Note, Marge didn't hammer a single nail, or even organize the work party. She just spoke the truth, and let the truth do its work. Note that in this case, patience and stamina were *not* the way leadership looked. Urgency was part of the truth Marge expressed, and she was right.

Telling the truth, and attaching that truth to the religious principles by which we say we live our lives, is quite simply, a spiritual act. For leadership, in Kimberly Beyer Nelson's words, is the way "we cup our hands and hold the peace" we say we affirm, "even when the sirens begin," "and words rend." But whether expressed by one voice or many, leadership is the spiritual practice which makes a congregation thrive, and reach out to the world it serves with power.

wendy

"Cupped hands gently open," Kimberly Beyer-Nelson's image, is foundational in building a community. Communities do need to be held gently together. Yet to thrive, they need to encourage the new - both people and ideas - to enter. Otherwise, they stagnate, grow closed-minded and end up worshipping the familiar as the best, which can be a form of idolatry.

Now individuals, like Marge and Ed, breathe both integrity and patience into their communities. But in order to effect greater changes, you sometimes need more than an individual. You need a whole group acting as an agent of change through shared leadership.

Many of us received an email this week saying it was time to open the champagne! The County Commissioners passed a \$300 thousand dollar appropriation for a pilot truancy project that members of BREAD---our interfaith social justice organization--- have been working diligently on for about a year and a half. Bill Miller, a member of our congregation, has been active on the subcommittee which helped make this happen. They followed this proposal through winding governmental paths all the way to fruition. As a leadership group they have been the change agents, squeaking at times, building motivation, telling the truth with integrity, having a purpose, choosing hope. Like Marge holding the congregation accountable for how they embody their stated beliefs, this subcommittee has been holding the Franklin Commissioners accountable to fund action in the county, which Jobs and Family Services approved long ago. Truancy was selected by the BREAD organization as a focus because of the far-reaching possibility for systemic change. Reduced truancy would benefit the whole community. Again, the BREAD subcommittee was not acting from the top down, nor were they dramatically going to the barricades. Theirs was neither tiara-leadership nor romanticized leadership, but rather steady truth-telling, *parallel* to the power base, to set things on the right track. It's an example of one group leading another, both of which are part of the larger metropolitan community.

Other examples come to mind right here in our congregation: those who led us into a greater welcome by bringing American Sign Language interpreters into Sunday worship for example, or placing the power-assist door-opener in a prominent place, or having a rainbow symbol greet members of a community who rarely find a welcome in other religious communities. Groups can lead other groups. And the individuals who make up those groups can be seen as pioneers on the spiritual path we all travel together.

One other story we'll share today involves the work of another member of our congregation, Michael Greenman. Michael has stepped out, not only within our congregation and our Columbus community, but has brought a group from this church into continental leadership.

mark

And that's because individual leadership and group leadership, you see, often blend, deepening our spirit all the more. Michael, along with other members of this congregation, helped organize an international conference examining the need to move from a view of the world as empire, to a view of the world as community. Michael had already been reviewing the extent to which the corporations of the United States, through sly interpretations of law, have managed to find airtight ways to legally escape almost any ethical accountability for their actions in our world. The conference helped to underscore the work of CIRCA (Citizens Intent on Reforming Corporate Accountability), which is an organization Michael has been helping to lead for a few years already, and one which impacts several nations. No small feat that. This, all stemming from meetings held first in this building under the leadership of Michael Greenman, and local leaders he inspired.

But maybe you are saying to yourself: "But *I* am not that kind of leader. I don't have those kinds of skills." I understand. Because, believe me, that's exactly what I thought when I was first asked to be a leader in a larger context than the one familiar to me.

Twenty-one years ago, when Drusilla Cummins of the Unitarian Universalist Board of Trustees (our Associations governing board), called me up and asked me to chair the Hymnbook Commission, to lead its six-year process, I didn't have to think about it for a moment. I said, "No thanks. I don't have very good organizational skills at all, and I don't sight-read music. You have the wrong man. But anyway, thanks for asking." Then I hung up. Click.

Apparently (I found out later from other sources), you never say *No* to Drusilla Cummins. She called back in an hour and said, "Look, you assumed we want you for your musical skills. We do not. We are well aware that you are not musically educated. We think your verbal skills would benefit the committee, which right now consists mostly of musicians. Secondly, we are aware you don't tend to have organizational skills for paper and filing and things like that. But just because you are chair doesn't mean you have to do everything. You have a whole committee which you can trust to do some of that work. And, you can sit on the hiring committee to bring on a staff person here at the UUA who will do all the filing and computer work. Leaders trust others," she concluded, "and we trust you to do that. And to learn as you go, mistake by mistake. We think you're the one for this work."

So, deeply moved by what she said, I said "Yes." Drusilla knocked that tiara-idea of leadership right off my head, and introduced me to styles of leadership which are *not* impossible for anyone in this room: the leadership of trust, the leadership of cooperation, the leadership of speaking up and telling the truth, the leadership of steadiness, reliability, faithfulness. The leadership Drusilla herself demonstrated, by calling me back, and kicking my own negative self-assumptions out from under me. There's the kind of leadership which Ed exemplified: enfolding and protecting an inner peace even when there is upheaval all around. The leadership which Michael's conference exemplified: the reframing of the questions when the usual answers are just taking us around and around in circles forever. The leadership which has the faith, the trust, or "the sense of adventure," in Friedman's terms, to say "Yes." Leadership, as you can see, is a good example of spiritual practice. Like yoga, meditation, prayer or dance. Like journaling or worship. Like showing up at a BREAD meeting, or going on a retreat. Leadership is not bravado, supernatural talents, or magic. It's not a Halloween costume party with tiaras and scepters. It's a way of saying a whole lot of "Yes" in a world too often distorted by "No."

Offering

No walls without a foundation.
No earth without sky.
No thirst when there is water.
No defeat when there is hope.
No church without gifts from
those who agree to be a church.

Welcome of New Members