

Making A Joyful Noise

Rev Holly Baylies

March 29, 2009

Yes, you certainly have wintered enough! In my seven months with you as your Interim, I have faithfully followed the guidelines set out for me by the UUA, however my personal notes may have been a mite unorthodox! I have made some observations about your past, present and future and would like to share them with you this morning in a slightly different format than what my supervisors received! However I feel this hypothetical scenario is pertinent to where we have been and where we are going.

I have a theory that the evolution of any church from its inception, through its preliminary growth stage, into maturity, mimics, almost exactly, that of the human life cycle. We grow up in much the same way... Let me explain...

This church, as with each of our sister churches, was created and conceived from the like-minds of our ancestors. Initially as fledgling churches and fellowships, we were somewhat akin to toddlers, embarking upon an exciting adventure of seeing the world of religious liberalism for the first time. We explored a new phase of life as we processed our surroundings and developed our preferred use of language. We learned how to view the world through many eyes as a community. Our early mistakes became a critical part of our development, which we discovered could be excessively harsh or extremely enlightening and we began to adjust our views and actions accordingly.

As we grew and time passed, we stood upright and proud of who we were becoming and developed an identity. We ventured out, became visible and took our place among others like and unlike ourselves on the theological playground. As we revealed ourselves to others, we discovered who we could play with, who our friends were and we learned that everyone would not consider us allies and righteous bullies could wound unfairly.

In our emerging teenage years, we behaved at times with an element of arrogance, flaunting our faith, our individuality and proclaiming proudly that we had all the answers.

In our later teen years we began to understand that we do not have all the answers and looked toward a mentor, a leader (in real life a lover) for security and for solutions to our own happiness, totally trusting our identity to his or her hopes, promises, needs and demands.

In time as we grew toward adulthood, we realized that the wholesome development of ones identity is never the total responsibility of any one individual, no matter who they are, or what they mean to us; as what another might expect of us, may not be who we really are or what we need to thrive as a united congregation .

This type of relationship in our personal lives and in the life of a church is the most critical time in its growth, as the loss of our potential security can be devastating. It wounds us and disappoints us...we mourn and suffer and we either seek out another figurehead in a similar fashion to take control, repeating our mistake, or we give up and die out or we emerge stronger for what we have overcome and endured. We learned from that experience that we are all afraid of change as the unknown is always more frightening than the consistently familiar no matter how damaging that may be. We can choose to do nothing about it, in the hope that if we wait long enough things will improve without intervention. That is rarely the case as many of us know from personal experience. Or we can move forward with the wisdom befitting the lessons learned.

We begin to realize as we approach the wisdom of adulthood that a vibrant community, like that of the life of an individual, is not owned or held hostage by anyone, rather it is held in trust and safekeeping by those whom you retain to guide you toward discovering just who you are, what you need and want to flourish and to thrive.

This brings us to the present in our evolution as a beloved church community.

In my time with you I have seen a most remarkable and resilient congregation that has grown immensely in self-awareness, has survived great sadness and conflict, who understands where you have been and is anxious to design a future for yourselves, for the children and for our surrounding community that is positive and fulfilling.

No matter who fills this pulpit next year, be it me or your choice of another, my vision for you now is to consciously begin to create your future, by first, being able to say to any minister who may serve you, “This is who we are, these are the things we want you to do to help us achieve our goals and this is what we stand for...” without lapsing backwards and resorting to repeating the words, “ Let’s wait until our new minister comes and see what he or she wants to do...”

You have been through a proverbial emotional tornado of potential destruction, and come through it with a strong and committed core of members and friends who have cared enough to stay and weathered everything that has been thrown at you. That takes tremendous maturity of character and fortitude to say “this is my church” and I will do my part to make this a thriving and viable community once again.

As we have entered the adulthood of our own becoming, there are still some serious challenges to face head on. First and foremost, each of us has our own special interests that are somewhat exclusive of all else. For some it is community gatherings and socialization, for others it may be Worship, Religious Education, Choir, Concerts, Workshops, Youth Activities or Chalice Circles, to name a few. As we become immersed in our chosen interests, we cannot ever lose sight of the whole picture. To keep this church vibrant and healthy we all need to work hard at financially supporting all of the components of this church, resisting the temptation to focus our sole devotion and resources to only one interest or activity at the expense of the others.

There will be some tough choices to make as we squeeze our budget to accommodate these difficult times financially. (Jim can squeeze a buffalo nickel so tight that it poops!)

As we are forced to do this, please remember that your leaders have lost much sleep and served many hours trying to make ends meet. The dip in the economy has taken too much from many of you and our pledges have suffered immensely in turn. This is a time when we all need to share in that responsibility and be very supportive of the efforts of our leaders as we strive to find a way, to keep all our critical programs intact and under the circumstances, in reality it, may not be possible. Please understand that this is not a decision we want to make.

Secondly, the seriousness of the past 5 years and our impending financial limitations have taken its toll on many of you who have worked long and hard to keep our heads and our spirits above water. This means that you may be asking, “I spend so much time in meetings, what in it for me?” Excellent question and one I feel must be addressed as the answers are critical to our survival now and in the future. Maybe, just maybe, it is time to declare a celebration, to reunite and get to know one another again sharing inexpensive but meaningful, social, intellectual and physical activities as joyful community. When times get tough, it’s far too easy to lose sight of the reason why we are here in the first place.

You deserve a respite and I would like to propose the immediate creation of a “Fun-raising Committee” to field as many suggestions as we can implement for bringing back our beloved community to a place where joy and celebration is as much a part of lives as our meetings and planning sessions have been. Already there many suggestions, some are being revisited such as a pot luck supper and a game night, a bowling night, a spaghetti dinner and entertainment. A former church I served hosted their museum of BAD ART, where our non artists attempted to copy paintings from the great masters.

Elvis on velvet was a hit and The Mona Lisa never looked so blatantly human! Or a bowling night...A mid-winter Picnic complete with sand and ants, a non-talent show, karaoke night, poetry reading...

Maybe even the choir would be willing to entertain at a pot luck with a presentation of a spoofed out version of hymns from our hymnal called “Hymns for The Cerebration of Strife” by Rev. Peter Raible. I happen to have the music! How about an '80 dance for all of us...

There is a wonderful story that that reminds me of where we are as a church.

A mother and child were on a short flight from Boston to Miami. During the flight the plane hit a pocket of turbulence and dropped several thousand feet in a very short time. The cabin pressure lowered very quickly and the oxygen masks were released. The mother grabbed the mask and placed it over her child's face, before she could put on her own mask she passed out. Had she taken care of herself, first, then her child, they would both be conscious and she could continue to care for him.

We have been so busy fielding the seemingly endless functional and emotional needs of this church that we have neglected to tend to care for ourselves. It is time to create a theme for next year, by “making a joyful noise”, to regain the love we have for this community, for our faith and for one another. Only by nourishing our internal selves can we continue to care for our external needs. When we can, with confidence, turn to our next door neighbor or friend down the street and say, with no reservations, “come on down and join the fun...”Then, we can truly say we are back.”

Tim Kutzmark was right:

“ And that is how it can happen, how a day that seems so ordinary can somehow become a day of new beginning. Those moments do not come easily. We have to consciously claim them, create them. We have to dare them into being. In the end we have to cross over...”

So be it

Amen

