

AND A TIME TO DO NOTHING

November 6, 2011

As the story goes, there were two trapeze artists suspended high above the ground with no safety net underneath them. Each of them was precariously balanced on spindle-thin wooden bars. The first launched himself from the platform. Hanging upside down, the rope to his trapeze wrapped around his ankles, hands stretched out before him, he began to swing out in a large sweeping arc. As he swung back, the second performer grasped his bar and also began a sequence of precision motions pumping toward the first. In a split second the arcs came together... he let go and was skillfully caught.

When interviewed by a mesmerized reporter the trapeze artist was asked to explain exactly what he did do, to assure that he was caught and not dropped. He replied, "nothing." I do nothing. 'We prepare and practice. I have to trust my partner and when the time comes in that split second when I let go, I just reach out, close my eyes and do nothing.'

I thought back to those frustrating times when I believed there was nothing I could do to change or to fix what was happening. Particularly as a minister when words do fail me or when there is nothing to say of any real significance... at times of unexpected loss; a devastating illness, financial ruin, a job loss, divorce, losing a child to the temptations of drugs, alcohol or life on the streets, or when the life force is taken from one too young. There are times of crisis, that will in some way enter into the lives of every family and every person.. followed by that awful feeling that we have lost control and there is nothing we can say or do.

Years ago I will never forget the words of my mother's doctor as he blithely sat behind his desk and said, "at best you have six months to live. I'm sorry, there is nothing I can do. I'll see you next week." We rode home in silence. When we arrived home I turned to my mother and hugged her and said, " I fixed the porch, the light fixture, I built cabinets and even kid proofed the VCR, but I can't fix you." My mother smiled and said, no you can't, but I can. Every time I feel like I'm losing the fight or get discouraged, I do something normal, like brushing my teeth, or combing my hair, or fixing lunch. You can't fix what is, or was, but you can always do something,

even if it is the decision to do nothing. But now is not the time. ”

“You prepare all your life for this, and each time you find a way around what has caused you to stumble, it just makes the next obstacle a bit more do-able.

She put that twinkle back in her eye and continued, “raising you was my first challenge, you talked a blue streak, crawled backwards faster than I could run and made it your personal mission to remove every object from every surface as fast as it was replaced. I had a lot of practice and a lot of help especially from you .”

She was right, and with four more kids to go, she took each lesson, every failure and success as a learning experience, becoming quite adept at fielding life’s unwelcome surprises. But there is also a time, when to move forward, to grow, to find perspective and to conquer ones fears, anger, anxieties or sense of loss, as long as we are alive, we do need to put our trust in the expertise of others as well. Sometimes we just can’t do it all alone.

A number of years ago I agreed to go along on a rock climbing expedition with the Coming of Age Class at the Beverly MA Unitarian Universalist Church. I have a real fear of heights, and as their minister and merely a chaperone, who tagged along. I had no doubts about going. I would watch, hold a line or two and lend encouragement by shouting,... "Hang in there you can do it, I know you can..." Such hollow words from one who would not be caught dead dangling from a thread off a 100 foot cliff." But very quickly the tables were turned, and suddenly the roles changed. I found myself strapped into a body harness and being led, terrified to the edge of a vertical 100 foot cliff, which I was expected to step off, backward, and control my descent with a tangle of colored nylon ropes. Each line was used for a different purpose that another instructor down below controlled. The kids squealed with delight at the prospect of their minister dangling helplessly 100 feet in the air and I was determined not to show my paralyzing terror. " You can do it, hang in there" they echoed, as I had done, only out of harms way from the safety of my former vantage point." At that moment I completely understood the blessings and failings of totally trusting another literally, with my life. Once I stepped off that cliff all I could do was nothing.

I was helpless to change or to control what was to be. In no time I found myself safely at the bottom, intact and no worse for the wear. What I also discovered was how insidious and deceiving blind trust can be. I was at the total mercy of the skills and training of another. I didn't practice, I couldn't even strap on the harness myself. I had no knowledge of how the ropes worked and could no more have sorted them out, to get me down, without landing in one great heap at the bottom, than I could pilot a space shuttle to the moon! Nevertheless, it was exhilarating, but I was in no position to have taken control of the mechanics of manipulating the harness and ropes.

I had achieved something I never would have believed I could ever do. I was a hero to the kids but more importantly a hero to myself. And each and every one of them followed me over the edge. What I realized was, had I not been encouraged and urged to participate, I never would have undertaken that venture on my own. I would never have learned how strong I could be, or that I could come to terms with many more fears than just that one.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, I was practicing for that day when I would leave my lifelong home, all my friends, my comfort zone, all that was familiar and venture to a new place, a new church a new home, called Syracuse.

There are times like these when we do have to put our total trust in something greater than ourselves. I confess that as I dangled helplessly, I was chanting, "Please God, Don't let me fall, I'm too young to die." It may have nothing to do with God's will, or fate or the course of my life, but it sure made me feel better.

Trusting the skills, judgment and leadership of others can be both exhilarating and terrifying depending upon which side of the rope you are on; the kind of trust that enriches us, is the kind of trust that is shared. With, all the angles understood, the routine rehearsed, the outcome then is a mutual responsibility, not that of one who took it upon him or herself to blindly lead without the informing the followers of where they were going. Doing nothing can also mean that time when all the parts of a task have been completed and there is nothing left to do but wait to see what happens. Each person has contributed their piece of the whole idea and that is the kind of nothing, when everything that has to be planned, practiced and trusted to each and every participant, that brings us all together in unison,

to succeed, together, or to fail as a team.

I keep the photo, which is on the front of your Order of service, on my desk of me, terrified, strapped in a rock climber's harness, taken the very instant I stepped off the cliff. I brought it with me as a reminder of what doing nothing can mean, when all the preparation has been done by someone else and my fate is left to the actions of another. A reminder of how easy it is to allow others to carry the burden. It also reminds me of how invigorating it can be to risk doing something new and different, alien to my comfort zone and out of my control, but above all else, that photograph is a striking lesson in the supreme importance of teamwork. I learned that I would much rather be a part of the team rather than a willing or unwilling victim of its final irreversible outcome.

What an interesting combination of attitudes and events; to prepare and practice, to trust and then to do nothing at the critical time.

The more I thought about it the more I realized that this simple story has a lot to teach us as Unitarian Universalists about our lives, our faith and our relationships with others.

It is no secret that we are a fiercely independent lot, we are passionate entities unto ourselves, independent thinkers, solitary activists; so fearful, at times, of being swept up by dogmatic, philosophies; so much so that we often prefer to , "work alone" and keep our cards very close, maybe a bit to close!

Now, lets imagine for a moment that two Unitarian Universalists were to undertake the same aerial maneuver as the trapeze artists in the opening story. There would be much discussion as to the aerodynamic feasibility of its potential for success and failure. There would be charts and graphs and research. That's OK, knowledge is good! That's our strength!

Then, I suspect, knowing the way Unitarian Universalists treasure our own ideas and opinions, each performer would go off and practice alone, we are not known as exceptional team players.

Our trust often tends to lie solely in the works of our own making. As a good U.U. I must confess, that would describe me perfectly.

I would submit my graph and learn my part well, burn the midnight oil, take many a fall into the net. But, when the time came for the final performance, my piece of the act would be done correctly, but when it was finally put together with another independent performer... it is inevitable something was bound to go terribly wrong. So to succeed, we learn to Prepare, Practice and Trust, one another, put in our best effort...then we can do nothing...

To prepare to do anything with someone else, be it a single trapeze act with one, or to run the whole circus, begins with free and open communication. To talk, to plan, to laugh, sometimes to encourage, to argue and resolve, compromise or re-think, to be clear on the process, the direction and the route of the idea, problem or issue at hand. To prepare means everyone involved know what is happening. It also means making a strong commitment, from all parties, to giving the plan a real try.

Clarity and simplicity is the bottom line and the end result is the target, not focusing on all the minutia that can turn simple delays into major confrontations. To prepare and then to put it onto practice, to try it out, see if it works, explore what it needs to succeed, to make adjustments and then to try again.

If the preparation is too solitary, the sole responsibility of one person, or if it is too hasty and all issues haven't been addressed especially if they are painful or controversial then the end result will never be realized in the way it was intended. To fully prepare, is to risk the trust of others... practice and preparation are endeavors in futility, without that unified trust.

After this service the membership will convene to vote on whether or not we should embark on undertaking the Healthy Congregations program. Regardless of what you decide, this is not the time to simply do nothing. We have yet to earn that luxury. As we gather to meet and to make our plans, as we practice our ideas and, trust one another to speak his or her truth, to do his or her part, always keeping our eyes and thoughts on the end result, I eagerly await that moment of significant nothing- that glorious, frightening, thrilling time when all the pieces have come together- when we prepared and practiced and finally let go, when we are firmly settled on a plan to unite us, to move us forward, then we can close our eyes for a moment and do absolutely nothing but reap the rewards of our well deserved efforts...

I would like to close with these words:

To do nothing is to decide to do something, which is determined to be nothing and nothing will be the reward

To earn the right of doing nothing, one must do something

To do something takes planning, practice, and courage,

To have courage is to trust,

To trust is to risk

To risk is to believe

That what we have, what we are, what we can be

Is worth the effort to earn the right to do nothing!

so be it Amen

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