

The Deep Work of Waiting
Unitarian Universalist Church in Cherry Hill
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We all know about waiting. As a child, I remember waiting for Christmas; it seemed to take forever to arrive, and that was even in those years before the decorations started going up in October. Along with watching toy advertisements, making lists and checking them twice, there were the rituals of Advent -- a cardboard Advent calendar with a tiny door for each day of the waiting period; an Advent wreath with the ritual of lighting one, then two, then three and four candles to mark the time. Advent calendars have not changed much since my childhood, although my most recent one held treats for my dog -- same little cardboard doors to open, to mark the time of waiting for the arrival of the big day when all wishes will be fulfilled, or so we might hope.

The season of Advent in the Christian calendar is all about the coming of the Messiah, the one who will lead us to the perfection of the world. In Christian tradition, this season is a time to commemorate the First Coming of the Messiah in the person of Jesus, over two thousand years ago, and anticipation of the return of the Messiah in the Second Coming, which will mark the deliverance of humanity from evil, bringing peace and justice and righteousness to the world.

This time of year also brings the celebration of Chanukah, which began on Thursday. Chanukah originated in the time when Antiochus IV was emperor of the Syrian-Greek Empire, which included the land that is now Israel, and the Jews were severely oppressed, the practice of their religion prohibited, and their population assimilated into Greek culture. After centuries of oppression, a Jewish nationalist group, the Maccabees, and a religious traditionalist group, the Chasidim, joined forces in a successful revolt against the forces of the Empire, retook the city of Jerusalem and rededicated the Temple, the symbolic center of Jewish religious practice.

At the time of the Temple rededication, there was very little oil left that had not been defiled by the Greeks. Oil was needed for the menorah in the Temple, which was supposed to burn throughout the night every night. There was only enough oil to burn for one day, yet miraculously, it burned for eight days, lasting until a fresh supply of oil could be prepared. The eight-day festival of Chanukah commemorates this miracle of the oil, a divine intervention that pushed back the darkness in a time of struggle.

No matter what our theological perspective or faith tradition, this waiting time is deeply connected to the natural cycles of the earth, as we approach the winter solstice, the longest night, on the threshold of the winter season, with all its harsh beauty. Our midwinter celebrations speak to the innately human struggle to ward off a sense of despair in the darkness, despair at the violence and pain we see around us. We await the birth of hope, the miracle of light, the relief which has been promised, the fulfillment of all wishes, the expectation and preparation for the healing of the world.

I love this midwinter time of waiting, as the power of the sun fades, the days grow colder and the nights grow longer, though my personal theology is neither Christian nor Jewish. My theology is earth-centered, my sense of divinity is in the cellular structures of life, and my sacred spiritual practice is the cultivation of the earth, caring for her green and growing children – and deep work is integral to my practice. In the fall, I prepare the beds, mulch and trim and dig, burying daffodil and crocus bulbs in the damp, dark earth so they may emerge months later as bright harbingers of spring. I trim back old stems on the woody plants to clear the way so that new growth may flourish. My theology relies on my human agency to support the power of life, doing the necessary deep work in the dark season to prepare for the return of the light. The time of darkness is not about waiting passively for a miracle

from the heavens, but about the deep work of creation, of clearing, of preparing the seedbed, of germination and gestation, a time to create the conditions for the transformation of ourselves and our world.

To paraphrase the words of Mennonite writer Shannon W. Dycus, “We categorize experiences of waiting, unknowing, confusion as seasons of darkness. Anytime we cannot see and control our spheres, we name it dark and separate it from the reach of the divine. But the winter tree hangs naked for months. And pregnant bellies protrude gradually. And as the story goes, the magi traveled for months following the star to find the newborn child. That time was not wasted. Between daylights, Divine work endures. What if we’re free enough to do the same?”

What if we are free enough in this time between daylights to prepare for the future, to use the fertile resources of unknowing and confusion to release the fetters of the past and allow new seeds to germinate, and new life to grow until it is ready to be born? The time of waiting can reawaken our power of human agency, our conviction that if peace, justice and righteousness are to come to the world, if our communities of faith are to welcome all those who seek the experience of belonging, it is up to us to make it happen. Creating peace and justice and righteousness, mobilizing our human agency to create a powerful and welcoming community of faith, is an extraordinary thing to do.

Shared responsibility -- locally, nationally, worldwide -- shared responsibility is at the heart of human agency, at the heart of a proactive stance toward healing the world. Shared responsibility implies an active waiting, an investment in the future -- it implies the kind of deep change that business professor Robert Quinn talks about in his book *Building the Bridge As You Walk On It*. Quinn begins by describing what is for most people a “normal state” of being focused on ourselves, worried about how we look to others, and content to remain in our comfort zone. Focusing on ourselves is normal. The alternative to our normal state is what Quinn calls the “fundamental state of leadership.” He advises that

...To enter the fundamental state of leadership is to [make] deep change. When we are in [the fundamental state of leadership], we become more purpose-centered, internally driven, other-focused, and externally open. In the fundamental state of leadership, we become less comfort-centered and more purpose-centered. We stop asking, What do I want? Instead we ask, What result do I want to create?

An honest answer to this question ... creates an image or vision that may attract us ... into the uncertain journey that is the creative state. As we begin to pursue purpose in the face of uncertainty, we gain hope and energy. As we move toward purpose, we experience meaning and become filled with more positive emotions. [B]ecoming truly purpose-centered is an extraordinary thing to do.

. . . . We begin to [close] the gap between who we think we are and who we think we should be. In this process ... we feel more integrity, and we feel more whole. Our values and behavior [become] more congruent. Our internal and external realities [become] more aligned. [B]ecoming more internally directed is an extraordinary thing to do. . . .

As our sense of achievement and integrity increases, we feel more secure, less selfish, more willing to put the common good ahead of the preservation of self. As we feel better about ourselves, we are more capable of being genuinely concerned for others. We ...become more transparent and authentic. Our relationships increase in meaning, trust, and caring. [B]ecoming other-focused is an extraordinary thing to do.

. . . When we meet our needs for increased achievement, integrity, and affiliation, we increase in our confidence that we can learn our way forward in an uncertain and changing world. When we have such adaptive confidence, we become genuinely open to all forms of feedback. We are better able to embrace the truth of the dynamic world. When we do this, we learn and adapt. We then further grow in awareness, competence, and vision. [B]ecoming externally open is an extraordinary thing to do.

When we are in the fundamental state of leadership, we ... begin to attract new flows of energy. We overcome entropy and slow death. We become more fully alive. Furthermore, we begin to attract others to the fundamental state of leadership. . . . we become extraordinary. . .

In this state of increased integrity, courage, and energy, we are leading in the most powerful way possible. We have a purpose or message, and we are living symbols of the purpose.

In this time of darkness, as we await the light, we can choose to become living symbols of our purpose. This Unitarian Universalist congregation is moving through a complex transition in a time when the entire world is in transition, with a new generation coming of age in the midst of crucial challenges to human wellbeing and human rights, challenges to democratic governance, to the integrity of the climate; challenges to the ultimate viability of the lives we have created in the contemporary world.

A congregational transition has to do fundamentally with leadership – in this time you are not only preparing and searching for a minister who will lead you into the future, but also engaging and renewing congregational leadership in the midst of global and generational change. In this time, we may shift into the power of fundamental leadership as we are grounded in the principles and values of our liberal faith. This is a time to ask fundamental questions about fundamental leadership: What does it mean to be a Unitarian Universalist? What does it mean to be a member of a congregation? What does it mean to be part of this particular UU congregation – what is our shared vision for this institution of faith, and what is our purpose, our reason for being in the world? How do we become a living symbol of our purpose?

Now is the time to ask, “What result do we want to create?” as we are willing to move into the uncertain journey that is the creative state. To live a life of faithful commitment means being open to the possibility of deep change, open to moving into a state of fundamental leadership in which we become more purpose-centered, internally driven, other-focused, and externally open. I believe that our UU faith tradition challenges and calls us to move toward a state of fundamental leadership, toward sharing responsibility to heal the world, as a community of commitment, a community of faith, a community of transformation.

There is a new energy rising around us in this season of anticipation. I will name some of the new energies I am witnessing in this church – while you might be more or less aware of each of these, you might not have put them together as the energy of fundamental leadership.

First, I want to call out our newest justice initiative, the Pride Support Alliance. For a long time this was just an idea, that UUCCH could create a place of welcome for LGBTQIA+ folx in the community around us. After two years in the silent darkness of one person’s heart, this dream was ready to emerge into the light, and this fall the new Pride Support Alliance was launched. The energy in this group is remarkable, open both to UUCCH members and people from the wider community; they are creating trusting relationship with a strong covenant, and one of their first activities was being part of the Transgender Day of Remembrance and creating a bountiful reception after the vigil. What an extraordinary thing to do, a beautiful demonstration of fundamental leadership, creating a living symbol of our purpose!

And speaking of leadership, this past Thursday evening the leaders of all our social justice programs gathered to work on creating a Social Justice Council, to connect and support all the ways UUCCH serves the community and advocates for justice in the world. This initiative also has been quietly taking shape for quite a while now, and this week we saw a consensus that it is time to increase connection and collaboration, while our programs retain their individual purposes and identities. It is time to reach deeper into the church and out into the community to create alliances for justice, an extraordinary thing to do, bringing a powerful UU presence into the world.

The Social Justice Council mirrors the wider Leadership Council, which was created about 14 months ago as an initiative of your Leadership Development Nominating Committee. The Leadership Council brings representatives of our church activities together to connect and share, expanding the opportunities for collaboration and mutual support, breathing life into the mission of this church to learn, value and serve – an extraordinary thing to do.

When I arrived to serve UUCCH about four and a half years ago, I was told there were a lot of silos here, and that change was hard. So I looked around for the grain storage units, or perhaps for underground nuclear missile installations, which were the two types of silos I knew about from my years in the Midwest – but it soon became clear that we were talking about functional silos, in which programs competed with each other for recognition and for funding, rather than seeking common ground to join their strengths in collaboration. We have seen fundamental change in these four years, as everywhere in the church I now see bridges being created, new openness to sharing information and resources, joining your strength to reach higher and wider. These initiatives complement the ongoing work to strengthen relationships through covenant, governance, and boundaries – the deep work of this church is truly extraordinary.

On a Sunday afternoon last month, about 30 of us gathered to share a soup lunch and watch a video created by folx at the Community Church of New York, about a program they call Disrupt Church. In the video, the leaders from CCNY shared their learning that church is not about something that happens during one hour in a beautiful sanctuary on a Sunday, calling us to reimagine our ways of being together, how we live our shared purpose and vision to create a better world in all the days and hours of every week, not just on Sunday mornings. This is especially true for the emerging generations of young members and leaders in our churches who are searching for ways to engage in lives of meaning and purpose, ways to live into fundamental leadership and belonging, co-creating church as a living symbol of our vision for the world. That discussion continues this winter as your Board of Trustees will open discussions to gather ideas for engagement and innovation to meet the needs of all generations in this connected community of faith.

All of this and more, my friends, describes for me a Unitarian Universalist church that helps us all to cultivate that state of fundamental leadership in which we move toward being purpose-centered, internally driven, other-focused, and externally open. From this place of fundamental leadership, we can indeed transform the world for more peace and wholeness.

In this time of Advent and Chanukah, this time of waiting in the darkness, my wish is that we wait for the fulfillment of our dreams in an active and engaged way. May we all step up to the shared responsibility to ask, what result do I want to create? How might I, how might we, heal a hurting world, work for peace and justice, equity and compassion, joining body, heart and mind to fulfill the promise of human potential in the world?

How might I, how might we, do the extraordinary thing? As we open our hearts to create lives that express our deepest values, may we deepen and change, waiting and working for a world transformed by the power of our love. The time is here, the place is now, as we join in commitment and hope.

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