

Marching Forward

Rev. Deane Oliva ~ January 27, 2008

I wanted to start this talk with a quote by a famous person. Wikipedia informed me that his full name is: Pablo Diego José Francisco de Paula Juan Nepomuceno María de los Remedios Cipriano de la Santísima Trinidad Clito Ruiz y Picasso. Can't you just see this poor frustrated first grader as the teacher instructs her class. "All right now children to begin, write your full name on the top of your paper." What a feat! Just to remember the name and then to have to write it as well! I mean the rest of the class could be gone and back from recess before poor Pablo got the job done. And, heaven forbid, he should have a learning disability. The anguish of having to sequence all of those names. But I degress. Ah yes, to begin.

Twentieth century Spanish artist Pablo Picasso told us that "Every act of creation is first of all an act of destruction." This artistic insight applies to congregations as well as it does to art. It applies to personal change as well as communal change. Today I will discuss congregational change, but know that with very few grammatical changes and even less conceptual ones, we could be generalizing to our personal challenges and opportunities.

Unitarian Universalist minister Robert Latham¹ suggests that the instability that accompanies congregational transitions is the nexus of a creative shift from fear over the loss of comfort, stability and a perceived sense of control to a climate of excitement and anticipation, about the opportunity to shape a new future. We must destroy the old view of who we are in order to make room for a new perception.

Earlier this month I attended a clergy workshop entitled Sacred Shifts: The Reasons and Seasons of Ministry with Alban Institute consultant Larry Peers. Our first assignment was to consider a challenge that our congregation was facing and to visualize it. I immediately and clearly saw a merry-go-round, the big old fashioned kind that you push around and around, like the ones found in older playgrounds. I saw it filled with people, the people of this Fellowship, all with shiny eyes and happy faces, each comfortable sitting at their special place on the merry go round.

The merry go round was in motion, turning, slowly picking up speed as folks gave it pushes, some little, some bigger. Then, a figure joined the group, moving alongside the merry go round. Soon, keeping apace with the ride, the figure began to push. Hearing squeals of delight, the figure continued pushing and the ride went faster and faster. The squeals multiplied until, going very fast now, some folks became anxious, wishing the merry go round would go slower. They put their feet out, placing the brakes on. Others were pushing forward. For a few moments there was a felt tension. Some folks had put down their feet to slow the ride down, others to regain some speed. With the ensuing friction, the merry go round slowed. The pusher stepped aside, letting the ride spin down of its own accord until it got to its maintenance speed. A little disoriented or disenchanted, a few folks disembarked.

This was my vision of our congregational challenge and opportunity. It seemed not only apt, but also, universal. I began to reminisce about the past roles I had taken on this ride and knew that I had taken them all, from wary first time rider to enthusiastic pusher, putting my foot down to slow down the ride and squealing delight with new insights.

¹ Lathan, Robert *Moving on from Church Folly Lane: The Pastoral to Program Shift* Tucson: Wheatmark, 2006.

I remember my early encounters with Unitarian Universalism. At first, I actually didn't even get on the merry go round. I circled it, trying to figure it out from a distance, appreciating that it looked inviting but wary of its invisible traps. After my daughter was born, I tried to get on one, but it was too big and felt cold and metallic to me. It was not inviting. The next time, I spied a smaller merry go round that seemed attractive. I screwed up my courage and jumped on, sitting at the very edge so that I could jump off if I got too scared. And, at first, I did jump on and off, going for short rides and then getting off for awhile. But soon I decided that I really did like this merry go round and I climbed on board, moving toward the center, letting my ride mates know that I was there for the long haul but that I was too scared to partake of all of the pleasures of the ride. In the safety of the center, I could close my eyes, seeing only what I was ready for. I remember coming to the Sunday services and leaving immediately thereafter, not convinced that I knew enough or was smart enough to be included in the conversations, unsure whether or not I was allowed to disagree with statements of conscience, more sure that my lack of spiritual and intellectual depth would soon be rooted out. As I got more comfortable, I remember attending forums and arguing about the dogma I thought that I saw hidden in this liberal facade. Soon I loosened the grip of fear and opened to the pure joy of the ride. I slid forward out of the center safety zone, opened my eyes and ears in curiosity and began filling my senses with new awareness. Moving outward allowed me to experience more fully the thrill of the ride. I heard the deep sincerity of like minded folks. I felt the conviction of a lived faith. I joined in the joy of deliberate social action. My eyes feasted on the diverse views as we panned the landscape and my inherent need to live in the moment was awakened.

I became a receptive vessel. I joined the other content riders and moved from anxious newcomer to confident traveler. The ride was going at a nice steady speed, but soon there was a yearning for something more. One day I stuck out my foot and shouted, "Let's start a youth group." Others also put out their feet to push. No one got scared so off we went amidst great cries of glee. Then someone shouted let's get a permanent building and people put their feet out and started pushing. But others got scared and put their feet down to stop the acceleration. We rocked with the tension of two opposing forces. So one person who really wanted a building jumped off the merry go round in order to give it a big push, making a large donation to the building project. The ride spun faster and faster and as folks got acclimated to the new speed, others stepped off to give the ride a push. Soon many feet pushed and the ride picked up enough momentum to buy a building.

That was a great joy! But, it didn't always work that way. Once someone shouted "let's start a campus ministry" and put his foot out to make the merry go round spin, but it didn't go very fast, folks did not get excited and soon the merry go round fell back into its maintenance speed. An unknown visitor came by and gave the merry go round a big push, an anonymous \$10,000 donation for a campus ministry project. There were shrieks of delight as the merry go round once again picked up speed, but no one else joined in with that push so the ride slowed once again. Campus ministry did not raise a passion in the riders.

I remember one time I really wanted us to become more involved in social justice work. I got off the ride so that I could put all my energy into pushing. I pushed hard and we developed a holiday gift giving project, donating clothing and toys for 60 families in a nearby Head Start day care center. (This was great: we only had sixty members in the congregation – everyone got involved and the atmosphere was electric with enthusiasm, all giving the three Ts, time, talent and treasure.) Encouraged, I ran along side of the merry go round and pushed even harder for social action, but soon I tired of the effort and realized that, while folks enjoyed the one project, they had not joined in the push for the extended haul. The merry go round slowed, falling back into its more comfortable maintenance speed.

Ah, yes, I have been in all positions on the merry go round. Instinctively, I know that all merry go rounds have pretty much the same dynamics. This Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, I think, is no different. The ride is a good one and often there are pushers for new ideas, some of which spark sustainable enthusiasm, others of which die on the vine, never gaining any momentum.

The congregational issue for this fellowship which I focused on was its penchant for examining growth issues with little forward movement. As we heard in the opening words, in a quote from Robert Latham “it is typical of a pastoral congregation to arrive at a threshold of its capacity to function effectively and go into a holding pattern, that, like a bellows, sucks in members and blows them out in constant patterns that maintain its attendance at a desired level.”² Judging from the numbers, this congregation is a master at this gambit. This pastoral size fellowship, - one that has between 75 and 150 members – is stuck. The members are enjoying the ride but cannot move beyond its current landscape. Although the lure of a program size fellowship – one that is between 150 and 350 members beckons, and some folks push for change, others place on the brakes. Sometimes unconsciously, sometimes with full intent, application of just enough friction keeps systems in place to continue the status quo.

Next, Rev. Peers asked us to visualize what we wanted to be in the future. We were to grease the wheels of our creativity. I encourage you to do so as well: visualize what you wish this congregation to be in the year 2010, but visualize it as though you are there. See the changes that you want happen. Bask in it. Turn it around, viewing the result from as many dimensions as possible. Then, sated, ask the question, how did we get there? What were the challenges and what were the celebrations? How did we deal with them? In other words, we were to visualize some of the obstacles to a successful outcome, assume that we had surmounted them and visualize how we did it.

Rev. Peers approach utilizes the same conceptual premises of appreciative inquiry. Remember the 4 Ds of Appreciative Inquiry: DISCOVER, DREAM, DESIGN, and DELIVER. AI suggests that we identify the processes that work well now, dream the processes that would work well in the future, plan and prioritize the necessary processes and then implement them, always building upon the organization’s strengths and positive relationships. In Rev. Peers’ approach we modify the order but have the same basic premise. First, we dream the result. Then, we discover in our dream what worked well. We design a strategy that matches our idea of successful process and finally, we do it.

When the clergy in the room first heard the task, we let out a collective groan. Most of us had been ruminating about the challenge at hand for some time and some of us may have been thinking, “You know, if I knew the answer I wouldn’t be here now!” Yet, we were in for a delightful surprise.

Let’s go back to the visualization. My personal vision, perhaps not yours, perhaps a reflection of yours, is of a congregation that is 160 strong, offering many avenues to spiritual growth, boasting a solid RE program with at least three dozen youngsters as well as a well known, effective social justice outreach. We are known for deeds not creeds, for walking the talk, for being interesting, inspiring and exciting. In my scenario, it was Sunday, after an inspiring and motivating service. Folks were talking animatedly, as they do now, relaxing for a few moments to meet and greet both friends and visitors, before attending one of the three or four activities offered that afternoon. The Young Adult Group readied for their afternoon hiking trip. The teens were there, one small group in animated conversation, another, hovering, and a few mixed in with the adults, included in the conversation. Younger children, after reuniting with parents and adult friends for a short time, headed toward the playground for some physical fun while the adults attended their activities. Everyone paused to scan the opportunities and

² *Ibid*, p. 28.

information on the well used bulletin boards. Many stopped to sign petitions and fill out postcards to their congressional representatives or to volunteer for stewardship or hospitality activities.

My immediate visualization of obstacles and celebrations made me smile. I don't think that I ever would have thought of this approach had I been designing a program on change. First, we recognized that we were afraid of cultural change. Just like the autistic youngster who revels in familiar, concrete patterns of activity and relationships, who has a hard time conceptualizing in the abstract unknown, we were afraid of change. With that knowledge we brainstormed ways to turn change into something to be valued and sought after. The most fun idea we came up with was to organize, produce, direct and perform in a cabaret night devoted to the concept of change. Groups were formed to devise skits related to the topic. Sworn to small group secrecy each act was designed to tackle some aspect of our reactions to change and last from three to five minutes. It was a hoot, long remembered and referred to throughout our mission. We had dress up Sunday and dress down Sunday, encouraging everyone to embrace the exercise. Families and partnerships picked a Sunday and decorated the Fellowship Hall, each week transforming it into a new and exiting venue. Soon folks came to expect and look forward to change. A cultural shift from a congregation afraid of change to one which expected, anticipated and was energized by change was actualized.

But there was also hard work coupled with our celebration. For example, we had a gigantic party, complete with umbrellas and patio furniture out in the parking lot. The date was just two weeks after our huge work crew completed enlarging the parking lot, a project that cost money, muscle and (hu)man power. We made changes and we had fun.

Visualizing the dream, overcoming the obstacles in our mind, celebrating our victories, are all ways to inspire and motivate. To promote any change we need to catch fire. We need to see the person/community that we want to be. If we want it, really, really want it we will luxuriate in the sense of the new, squeal with delight and start pushing.

Latham states that one obstacle to transitioning from a pastoral to a program congregation is false debates that focus congregational energy awry for the real issues.

An examples of this obstacle is the growth versus non-growth debate over membership size. The attitude of this debate is: "We believe we have an option as to whether our congregation will grow or not grow." A subtle support of this belief comes from denominational leadership that offer congregations growth strategies or growth programs when they "choose" the growth option. Obviously, the belief is pervasive in our religious movement that growth is an option of choice.

But pervasive or not, is it true? Do we have the option? The answer is only yes if the question is divested of religious purpose. That is, we can only choose between growth and non growth if our congregations exist for the sake of themselves. However, if our congregations partake of the same mission as all other religious institutions, which is a purpose outside ourselves, then the answer is no.

While this distinction may seem subtle it is, in actuality, critical. It is critical because a congregation that is doing its religious mission cannot help but grow because this very doing will make it dynamically appealing and socially transforming in its ministry.

Moreover, a congregation that is doing its religious mission would never be having a debate over growth versus non-growth because fulfilling its mission is the focus of its energies. Its issues would revolve around how to accommodate all the people who are being attracted to its ministry. It would never occur to it to have a discussion about whether or not it ought to limit this attraction.

Here is our mission statement:

We, the members of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Santa Cruz County, join together to foster our spiritual growth and to promote social justice. Honoring religious diversity and affirming the inherent worth and dignity of all people, we commit our combined actions and personal resources to these goals.

Does this mission statement inspire us? Is it our core? Does it motivate us? From what I know of this group, I think it does. So we must ponder. What do we want to look like TODAY, not in a few years. In our deepest heart, what do we want now? There is so much good here, but everyone has their private wish list. What do we need to set in motion what we want right now? What resources do we lack and what can we do to increase our resources? Now many of you might readily think that I am talking about finances. So, I will pause here to speak briefly about financial resources. I believe that the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Santa Cruz County has a mission to carry out. We must view our programs as they relate to mission and we must view our budget as it relates to our mission. Ultimately, finances are about our mission and our commitment to that mission. Today we have a congregational meeting after this service. I urge you to engage your commitment to this Fellowship.

We are on this merry go round together. The ride is a good one, made more enjoyable when we are all pushing together. When I vision the future, though, the merry go round changes and becomes like the ride at amusement parks in which the ride turns and turns, faster and faster, and then shoots off into a deep dark tunnel, crashing and banging along, coupled with shrieks of delight as well as screams of fear, until the light can be seen at the other side and folks settle in to enjoy their surroundings, coming to the end with much delight and discussion. When they leave this ride, it is done. They may choose to get on the ride again, but they know that they would not be satisfied with only going round and round. After a while they will want to enter the deep dark hole of forward motion.