

## Leap of Faith

Sermon by Rev. Jackie Clement

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Last week I was in North Carolina driving along a rather busy road though, as sometimes happens, I was the only one there at that moment. Well, me and a rather portly groundhog. I don't know if you've ever seen a groundhog run, but it is roughly like seeing a basketball sprout feet and zip across your path. They are surprisingly round and fast, their feet impossibly dainty for their girth. The whole experience was sort of surprising and wondrous but it was the last moments of our encounter that were really astounding. Nearing the edge of the road, grassy bank in sight, the groundhog suddenly leapt into the air in full out Superman pose. Legs stretched fore and aft, it soared the remaining few feet. It was flat out the cutest thing—ever. It was one of those chance encounters with the non-human world that astound and amuse, but, more, that awaken me to currents in my own life.

Let me back up a bit and start from about a month ago when I attended the Ministry Days that precede our denomination's General Assembly. One of the features of Ministry Days is a Q&A with the President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, and at the session a colleague asked Peter Morales if we were a Church, a denomination, or an association of congregations. Peter replied that he liked to think of us by none of those labels but rather as a movement. A movement has purpose and direction. It is not static, but changes to meet the circumstances in which it exists. And its formal definition of "a group of people working together to advance shared ideas and values" fits us pretty well.

I like that answer. I have used the word "movement" to describe Unitarian Universalism, particularly when I am talking about theological heresy or social action, but I never thought of it quite so intentionally before. I like that answer. AND I acknowledge that to be a movement requires envisioning somewhere to move *to*. A movement has to be heading somewhere. It has to be defined by some cohesive ethic or value or vision. It has to have a mission.

That mission needs to be both vital and relevant. If our mission is neither alive nor needed, then neither are we. Yes, we already have a statement of our mission as a congregation, but as Susan Smith wrote in this morning's reading life is ever changing and we should not carve our centers of value and power in stone. We must check in every now and then to make sure that the values leading our movement, or our particular part of that movement, are the values that still lie at the center of our communal life, that they hold not only value for us but for the world as it is today.

The great preacher Howard Thurman offered this advice for discovering your mission. "Do not ask yourself what the world needs," he said. "Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and then go and do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." These words are as true for congregations as for individuals. We must find our deepest passion as a congregation, find what makes us come alive, and live from that, make *that* our mission.

There's an old story told about the great rabbi Hillel. One day a man came to Hillel with the idea of converting to Judaism. He challenged the rabbi saying he would convert if Hillel could explain the entirety of Torah while standing on one foot. Hillel took up the challenge saying, "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the Torah, all the rest is commentary. Go and study it."

We have a similar challenge, to go to the root of our faith, to find that which is of such essence that we can share it standing on one foot and which has enough depth that it will serve as the source of highest values and best intentions in our living. This will be not only our center of value and power but also the source of our hope. Not many have the pithy wit ascribed to that ancient sage, Hillel, to sum it all up so decisively and brilliantly. Still, we do have the ability to discern what is of ultimate meaning to us. Our values are accessible in our daily living. They can be seen in the work we do together and heard in the narratives of our history.

Love, peace, justice, freedom, appreciation, gratitude, faith, creative becoming. All of these are present here. Which are specifically the centers of value and power for this congregation? In this coming year, I invite you into a process to seek and voice our shared values, the ones that serve as the sources of power and hope for our movement, that will serve as our mission.

In this work, we will not be alone for it is work that all our congregations are called to do. The UU Ministers Association, like Unitarian Universalists everywhere, is in the midst of an exploration for what it will take for us to be vital and relevant force in today's world. With that in mind we invited Marshall Ganz to be the Ministry Days keynote speaker. Now a professor at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, Ganz was still an undergrad when he dropped out of Harvard to join the Civil Rights Movement, but his real training in community organizing came in the 16 years he worked with Cesar Chavez organizing and advocating for California's farm workers. Ganz told us that what those two movements shared with all successful movements are three things—head, heart and hands.

The head represents the intellectual part of the movement, what we know to be true and the strategy we will use. It is about how to turn the available resources, whatever they might be, into the power necessary to achieve the end.

The heart represents the emotional part of the movement, the narrative which shapes our vision, the relationship rooted in shared values. The heart of a movement is as absolutely vital as the heart of a person. Through relationship we can create an aggregation that is greater than the sum of the parts. Relationship provides the ongoing context, the commitment to ongoing interaction that gives a movement both history and future. The heart, the relationship and narrative of a movement, is where we find the hope that allows us to move toward a higher vision, that provides the ability to respond to challenges with agency rather than reacting with fear. It is by paying attention to the emotion of relationship that we can see what is really of value as opposed to what someone tells us is of value. It is also what allows us to express it to others in a way they can experience.

The third element necessary for a movement is represented by the hands—action. Socrates told us that to know the good is to love it. Rousseau demurred. Whichever view is right it is still

insufficient. To know what is good, even to love it, will not serve unless we also *do* what is good. We must act on what we know and what we love to bring about what is good. But the truth is that we cannot always be certain that acting on what we know and what we love will necessarily bring about the good. We hope it does, but it is something of a leap of faith. Perhaps based in experience, perhaps in moral imperative, we act, but we should also have reason and experience to know that in the acting we will learn more than we knew before. We necessarily incur risk in taking action since we do not have perfect knowledge of conditions or outcome. Conditions will never be absolutely perfect. We will never know absolutely everything. Neither of these can keep us from action or risk. At some point you are going to have to leap.

This American Life, the NPR show, recently did a story on people who did what they thought was the right thing only to have it turn out quite differently than they expected. There was a county clerk who helped an inmate file the paperwork for an appeal that ultimately proved he was innocent. The clerk, however, was fired for practicing law without a license. Another story was about a California sheriff who developed a program to license medical marijuana farms that initially raised over a million dollars in county revenue used to fight illegal drug trafficking. But since California law and federal law differ the program ended in small farmers being raided by federal agents. Not quite as everyone had hoped. But both county clerk and sheriff said they still think it was the right thing to do and would do it again.

I'm sure we all have examples that spring readily to mind where the phrase "well, it seemed like a good idea at the time" might be applied. Our congregational relationship with the New Life School in Uganda didn't turn out the way we hoped even though we acted both on our best knowledge and from love, with head and heart and hands. But in the acting we learned what we needed to be more effective. We broadened our view of the world. We lived our values and responded from love rather than reacting in fear. It was a leap of faith that resulted in great gifts *and* incurred disappointment. As Thomas Merton said, "You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith and hope."

Embrace them with courage, faith and hope. These are individual qualities, individual responses, but the trickiest, most difficult, part of all this, the part that holds the most risk, is the very thing that distinguishes a movement—relationship. A movement cannot exist without sustained relationship.

Our society is good at confusing interactions based in relationship with interactions based in exchange. We have eroded interactions that once required relationship into exchanges. Going to the doctor, to the bank, buying groceries, mobilizing for social change—these all were once grounded in relationship and have been reduced to exchange. Church, which is about nothing if not relationship, now comes in drive-in format where you never leave your car.

Look at the Arab spring and all the hope that engendered that large groups of people connected loosely through social media could stand for the good and overcome tyranny. But what was the long term outcome? That those with the organization, with sustained relationship, retook power. Twitter is great for mobilizing, but it does not a movement make. Movements prevail over

exchanges because of relationship, the commitment to ongoing interaction that gives a movement both history and future.

And movements are all the more difficult to sustain for the same reason. The commitment and trust necessary for continued relationship are difficult things. They are why our relationship with New Life School ended, because commitment and trust were eroded. We must have both, here in our church as in all the other relationships in our lives, if we are to continue to thrive.

- When we ask volunteers to take on jobs they must have our trust as well as our gratitude. We cannot second guess them at every turn, but support their work even when they make choices different from those we would have made, even when they make mistakes.
- When the vote goes against the position we held we can't pick up our marbles and go home. We have to stay and work through our differences.
- When someone does or says something we don't like we cannot lash out at them or stomp off in a huff. We have to trust in good intentions or understand they may have acted from pain we do not see. We have to gently return to covenant.

This is what it means to live in covenant, to stay in relationship even when things get tough, to exercise commitment and trust, to be in relationship, to be part of a movement.

If we are to be “people working together to advance shared ideas and values” we must have the commitment and trust of relationship and from that we will act. We will act on what we know to be right or on what calls to our hearts without any guarantee that things will go the way we intend. We will continue to hope and to act because the alternatives are unappealing—lives frozen in place, lives of suspicion and cynicism, lives that incur no risk but neither do they incur exhilaration and joy. Without the leaps of faith we lose the possibilities.

We have the option to choose inertia. Or we can leap. Like the groundhog we can just run for the edge and throw ourselves into the air with grace. I'm not sure that groundhog had any idea what was on the other side of that fringe of grass, but he knew that remaining where he stood was the lesser choice.

So, if we are indeed a movement, where are we going to move to? What is the center of value and power that will call us to a new mission and to what new mission will we be called? What is our creative becoming as a congregation? It's big stuff to contemplate. It's going to call us out of our areas of comfort. It will not be church as usual. But, oh, the possibilities awaiting us. Like Emily Dickinson we “dwell in possibility.”

Namaste.

Por lo tanto puede ser.

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