

Inspired Sight

Sermon by Rev. Jackie Clement

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If I had influence with the good fairy who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantment of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strength.

Rachel Carson wrote these words four decades ago and they are words I would like us to consider today. I would like that early sense of wonder Carson describes to call to our spirits today and in the weeks ahead.

It is true that the sense of wonder that comes with first encountering the world can be dented by the slings and arrows of an outrageous fortune, but also as Carson intimates by the lesser erosion of daily living. For the sake of convenience or expediency, to get along, or just get through we can find ourselves in what she terms a “sterile occupation with things artificial” that can blunt wonder.

This week, the leadership of our church is inviting all of us to engage in the process of renewing our vision for this community. I am going to ask you to connect with as much of the wonder you ever beheld in this community as we go through this process. I am going to ask you to invoke the greatest sense of wonder you have known in your spiritual life; to remember the time of greatest joy, and the time of greatest meaning you have lived. I am going to ask you to consider who we are at our very best. What are our most courageous dreams? What would we miss if this faith community did not exist?

To answer these questions, to bring forth our vision, is to invoke a sense of wonder that is ever new. And this requires a center for our vision that runs deep. A vision that finds its genesis in surface things is no more likely to flower than a tree without a root system or to sustain any longer than a well dug six inches deep. A congregation that does not set its vision in something greater than itself runs the risk of becoming shallow, self-serving, or little more than a social club. Moving in the opposite direction, it risks becoming delusional about its power to control lives. Without a deep center a congregation is in danger of becoming driven by the individual likes and desires of its members. The church is not here to make you happy, to meet your needs or to do your spiritual growth for you. The church is here to fulfill its mission, rooted in its vision. A congregation that comes together to fulfill a mission that serves only itself, that strives to make everyone happy, is a shallow well. To participate in the healing of the world takes a much deeper center.

So what is it that we find of sufficient depth to nurture our vision, of sufficient breadth to encompass all? This is one of the great quests of Unitarian Universalism. As a non-creedal denomination we do not seek to impose one idea of what is of ultimate worth on all people. And yet, we should not shy away from declaring that there are things of ultimate worth. We have

many names for ultimate reality and many descriptions of what that reality looks like—God, YHWH, Universe, Ground of All Being, Spirit of Life, the interconnected web of all existence.

United Methodist minister James Fowler offers us a way to visualize the center that must ground religious community. In his book *Stages of Faith*, Fowler describes a triangle. At one point of the base is the individual. At the other corner of the base is the community. What ties individual and community together is a lateral, covenantal relationship. Occupying the third point of the triangle is that which is of ultimate, transcendent meaning, what Fowler calls “the centers of value and power.” Both individual and community stand in direct relationship to that point, to the sacredness which it represents, and you know you are in the right religious community when you and the community honor the same ultimacy.

The center of value and power for a faith community can be a shared understanding of God or deity, but it can also be any transcendent value such as love, peace or justice. As Unitarian Universalists we are tasked with defining that center for ourselves. This starts as a very individual task in a tradition that upholds the right of conscience, the authority of individual experience and the use of reason. But ultimately, to define our shared centers of value and power, we must be in community. If we are not defined by creed, we *are* defined by community, by covenant. So what starts as an individual search for truth and meaning must, before it finishes, consider the whole. One of the great paradoxes I find in healthy, authentic religious community is that while it embraces you into the whole it calls on you to deepen your individual understanding, an understanding that must find balance between the personal and the communal, interconnected yet not amorphous.

Any work of vision starts with defining what that center is. If we develop a vision statement because we think it sounds good or because we think it makes us sound noble it will be of no use. Who we are, what we truly aspire to be, cannot be cribbed off someone else’s web site. We can write it down on a flip chart and put it on the back of the order of service each Sunday, but we will never be able to live it into existence if it does not come from our true center.

So that’s the first part of your homework for this week. Think about what constitutes your deepest, strongest center of value and power. Then consider whether it is a center for this faith community, as well. Whether you name that center love, God, justice or Mother Earth do not get hung up on the label, but consider the qualities that make it the ground of your being, and then consider the ways in which those qualities are shared in the transcendent values of others.

While I think I could name several transcendent values for UUs, I think our overarching center of value and power is our covenant of respect. Respect for each other’s inherent worth and dignity, respect for the diversity of views we hold, respect for the sacredness of the search each person undertakes, and respect for the variety and abundance of gifts each person brings into community. It is respect for our differences that allows us to move beyond tolerance to embrace a community of diverse beliefs. This, to me is our greatest value and the source of our greatest strength. It allows us to come into community with all the responsibility that that entails, to walk together in covenant, and yet not surrender what we understand to be unique in ourselves.

There’s a story told about Sir Thomas Beecham, the British impresario. Beecham, riding in a New York cab, was irritating his companion by repeated whistling a passage from Mozart.

Eventually the man snapped, “Must you do that?”

Beecham replied, “You may be able to hear only my whistling: I can hear the full orchestra.”

You may hear me preaching, but I am hearing Aretha Franklin singing R-E-S-P-E-C-T and the respect I’m talking about is not some anemic politeness but as wide and deeper and grand as the Queen of Soul’s voice. It is a valuing of each person as being wholly worthy and equally as worthy as ourselves. This is a center I can hang a vision on.

So as we move toward next weekend to begin the process of articulating our vision as a community, I invite you to consider what it is that acts as our center of value and power as a community. What is that center that coincides with your own that calls you to be here today? From that center of ultimate concern and value your dreams for this community will arise.

So I’ve talked about how to come to the work and what the work is, but maybe I ought to offer a few thoughts about *why* we should take on this work at all. After all, vision statements are the sorts of things that, admittedly, can admittedly engender a lot of eye rolling. As church consultants Gil Rendle and Alice Mann write:

Within your congregation you will find a small subgroup of members for whom planning work is inherently engaging—even fun. This is probably not the attitude of your average member or even your typical core leader. While a sense of duty may bring that person’s body to the planning table, it takes more than obligation to elicit energy for the conversation. What generates energy?

Their answer to that question is three things: pain, hope or vision. I can offer you the first if necessary, but I’d rather not. And hope is good, but in this context it is hope to get out of a bad situation, which does not apply here. The last option left is vision.

Let me put it another way: when you are wearing the wrong glasses it can be hard to get home. On Thursday evening as I was working on this sermon, I had to interrupt writing to go speak at the Pray for the Cure event at St. John’s. I hadn’t gotten too far, less than a mile from home, before I realized I was wearing my reading glasses rather than my distance glasses. Since it was 5:45 the sun was out, and the weather was clear so having the wrong glasses on wasn’t much of a problem. After all, what I needed to do at the event was read something, so for that they were the right glasses. The gotcha came on the ride home at 8:00 when all was dark and stormy. Reading lenses were just not going to cut it in helping make the many decisions necessary for driving safely home. So that’s the thing, isn’t it? When all is sunny and calm, we don’t worry too much about vision. What we have is enough. But when the clouds move in, it is a great deal easy to make the journey if you have your distance glasses on.

In the reading this morning, Jeff Gollhofer put it another way. He spoke about the call we receive as individuals following a spiritual path, but his words are true of congregations, as well. We have a collective call to be a community journeying together and “when we name the ongoing purpose in our lives that moves us forward and remains constant even when everything else changes, we come to know that we are on a sacred journey.” A vision statement is how we name the ongoing purpose in our communal life.

A clear articulation of our vision makes us stronger because it shifts our focus from ourselves to those things we deem of greatest importance. It centers us in what is ultimate rather than in the mundane. It moves us to live in and from our centers of value and power. It doesn't mean we will never falter, but it does mean that we have some assurance of acting from best intentions.

A second reason why developing a vision statement is important is because it will help our dreams become bigger than our memories. When our memories take over they hold us back to what was. Now, I'm a history geek so I do not discount the value of knowing what was, but I also know that to truly honor what our religious ancestors valued built and valued means to build according to a fresh vision centered in our purpose and context. Whether the past was wonderful and we want to hold on to what worked in a context that no longer exists, or whether the past was riddled with pitfalls we are trying so hard to avoid, there is a point where tradition become moribund. Taking refuge from a chaotic world in a place where things are always the same has a very real, soothing appeal to it, but it is possible to become so content that we become complacent. And it is not that far a jump from complacency to discontent. But when our dreams overtake our memories they move us to what can be. To be a vibrant, thriving community doing exciting work and attracting self-differentiated people who want to be a part of it requires a forward-seeking vision.

So a vision statement shifts our focus from ourselves to our deepest center, and it makes our dreams stronger than our memories. The third reason I offer for why we take on this work is because until we know where we want to go we can't know how we will get there. The mission statement and strategic plan for how we will fulfill that mission will come out of the vision. We will continue that work later in the year, but as the old adage says, "If you aim at nothing, you will hit it every time."

The final reason I would offer is that having a vibrant vision gets people in the game. I believe that people truly want to be of use. They want to be a part of something with a purpose. They want to make a difference in the world. But we all lead busy lives, and unless there is some common call to build the world we dream of there are other places to spend our energy.

Faithful life is about holding the tension between that which is and that which can be. I would submit that a vision of what can be is an important piece of that life. Journalist Herb Caen wrote that "a city is not gauged by its length and width, but by the broadness of its vision and the height of its dreams." I would add, so is a church.

So let us return to a sense of wonder at what we have found most meaningful, most enduring, most inspiring of awe. Let us be guided by our transcendent centers of value and power. And let these inspire our vision.

Namaste.

Por lo tanto puede ser.

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