

“Journeying Together”

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I started reading this book these last few weeks, probably more because I liked the look of the cover than anything, and it happened to be in my stack of “all the books I could read during study leave.” Landis’s analogy that telling people you’re a minister is like telling them you’re a blacksmith at Colonial Williamsburg was so on-point it was worth the price of the book alone.

And in truth, I haven’t read much farther, or much else in the last two weeks of study leave. Questions about how we’ll start the church year have been swirling too intensely in my mind. We hoped Covid would be over by now, but it’s not. So now what? In Westborough we started the summer with the assumption that we’d be going hybrid in the fall. We assumed that, by now, most of us would want to gather for services in person and we’d livestream through Zoom so more of us could stay connected. But that shift was always predicated on the conviction that no one should be making a choice about their Covid risk in order to come to church.

So, instead of reading, or I don’t know, meditating or writing sermons, I’ve been holding on to this idea of doing services in person and frantically trying to make it work in my mind. I wonder how many of you have found yourself in that hamster wheel lately. Trying to figure out how to proceed into the fall - how to follow through on your commitments when things are not as any of us had hoped.

I used to think of study leave, also known as August for UU ministers, as the week before final exams: Cram as much information into your brain as you can, read everything you didn’t have the time or capacity to read during the semester, take notes, and study them.

But that’s both inaccurate - the church year is not a test - and unhelpful - who ever feels like their best, most grounded and cheerful self after a marathon study cram session? This certainly doesn’t make for good ministry.

So I’ve been questioning what it means to actually prepare myself for another year of ministry, another year of profound uncertainty. I am one for to do lists and plans, schedules and timelines, but again, this isn’t final exams and my academic skills aren’t always applicable to ministry.

Study leave is starting to feel more like packing the car to go camping. More like making sure I have what I need to be able to nourish and shelter, to stay warm enough and dry enough, to be among others, present in the experience of being together, whatever that looks like. Because it is clear that the path is not clear. I need my flexibility more than I need the plan I crafted months ago. I wonder if you're feeling similarly.

Add in the horror of Afghanistan, last week's UN report on climate change, the situation in Lebanon, the earthquake in Haiti, preparing for a hurricane - all of it - and it's clear at least that this is not the way we hoped Summer would feel.

Amidst all of this heartbreak and concern, the chaos and ambiguity, how do we prepare to journey into a fall that almost certainly does not look the way we hoped?

Pack a mask, for one. That seems easy, though maybe awkward at first, just like it was in the beginning. I'm still one of the few people wearing a mask at my gym - I do feel like I look a little paranoid, but I also feel like I'm being honest. The pandemic isn't over, as hard as that truth is to hold.

But even more important than masks, I know that what I need for the journey is my integrity, my clarity about our covenants, those deepest values that will guide us like light and compass, no matter how the weeks and months unfold.

Curiosity, too, is a helpful tool for the journey. One that helps us to get off the hamster wheel of "should" and pay attention to what's really going on. What is it that you need really right now? As we hold all the ambiguity, all the disappointment that the pandemic isn't over, all the confusion of assessing risk now, what is it that your spirit longs for?

Because an impassable route, an unsafe route, or an inaccessible one, that's not the end of the journey. It just means it's time to check our compass, wonder what the journey is for, and find a new path.

The last year and a half has made us skilled at this task - reading the landscape for risk, doing a gut check and letting our deepest principles guide us down different paths. And I think we hoped that we wouldn't have to do that so much this year.

We hoped that vaccines would mean that we could return to our physical sanctuaries, maybe even share cookies and cheese cubes at coffee hour. And now there are an infinite number of memes about the Delta variant killing our fall plans.

And how many parents are scared for their children's health as they return to in person learning, while also desperately needing the support of communities caring for children together? How do kids feel about it all?

It's hard to pack for this journey, to know where we're going, when things might feel "normal" again, whatever that means now. And it's easier knowing we're not alone, that we're not the only ones who are concerned and disappointed. That this is a place where we journey together, no matter the weather.

And there are the things we live by no matter what, those deepest values that are not attached to outcomes or plans, that will guide us in all conditions.

I can tell you some of mine. I believe that all people are equally important stakeholders in our community. That inherent worth and dignity thing means that children's needs and well being are central in the same way that adults' are.

I am a Universalist. I believe that we must ground ourselves in hope and creativity and possibility, not fear or an unfeeling commitment to the plan. I believe that connection is a core human need and individual flourishing is tied to collective flourishing.

As it is with camping, at least with friends, we all pack what we can and share what we have. I can share my headlamp in the dark, you can share your blanket or a dry shirt. We do this together, because the together part is the point. That's the difference between individual spiritual seeking and religious community. We're on the journey together, wherever the path might lead us.

Amen.