

# Calibrating Our Compass

April 16, 2023

Rev. Erica Baron

## Story for All Ages

Tunisian Sufi Folktale, as retold by Linda Booth Sweeney

Once long ago, when streams and deserts and winds could talk, a trickling stream began its journey from a hidden place in the far-off mountains. It flowed on and on until it came to the desert. On its journey it crossed many barriers, but when the stream tried to cross the desert, it realized it could not. It just disappeared in the sand. *How can I get across the sands?* the stream wondered.

The stream was convinced that it was meant to cross this desert, yet there was no way. Just then, a hidden voice, coming from the desert itself, whispered: “The wind crosses the desert, and so can you, stream.”

“Of course the wind can cross. It can fly. But I only get absorbed when I try!”

“It is true that by hurtling in your own accustomed way, you will never get across. You will either disappear or become a marsh. You must allow the wind to carry you over to your destination.”

“But how could this happen?”

The desert whispered, “By allowing yourself to disappear in the wind.”

“Oh no. I cannot allow that to happen! I would be lost forever. Then, how could I become a stream again?”

“Don’t worry,” the voice replied. “Wind takes you up, carries you over the desert, and lets you fall again as rain. Then you will once again become a stream.”

“But how do I know this is true?”

The wind replied, “If you do not believe me, you cannot become more than a quagmire, and even that may take many, many years.”

The stream whispered, “But I want to remain the same stream that I am today.”

“What part of you is the essential one?” the whisper asked.

The stream thought it heard echoes, then, of other voices. They told of another time, long ago, when the stream had been held in the arms of another wind. “Your essential part is carried away and forms a stream again.”

So the stream raised his vapor into the welcoming arms of the wind, which gently and easily bore it upward and along, letting it fall softly as soon as they reached the roof of a mountain many, many miles away. And because the stream had its doubts, it was able to remember and record more strongly in its mind the details of the experience. It thought, *Yes, now I have learned my true identity.*

## **Reading**

*Excerpts from The Book of the Living*, by Octavia E. Butler

Our reading this morning is from Octavia Butler. She was one of the first African American women to be published as a science fiction writer. In her book *Parable of the Sower* and its sequel *Parable of the Talents*, the main character creates a new religion called Earthseed. Sprinkled throughout the novels are pieces of the scripture of this new religion, called *The Books of the Living*. Today’s reading is a few excerpts from that text.

All that you touch you Change.  
All that you Change Changes you.  
The only lasting truth Is Change.  
God Is Change.

To survive,  
Let the past Teach you—  
Past customs, Struggles, Leaders and thinkers.  
Let These Help you.  
Let them inspire you, Warn you, Give you strength.  
But beware: God is Change.  
Past is past. What was Cannot Come again.  
To survive, Know the past. Let it touch you.  
Then let The past Go.

God is Change,  
And in the end, God prevails.

But meanwhile...  
Kindness eases Change.  
Love quiets fear.  
And a sweet and powerful Positive obsession  
Blunts pain, Diverts rage,  
And engages each of us In the greatest, The most intense Of our chosen struggles.

Shape God. Act.  
Alter the speed Or the direction of Change.  
Vary the scope of Change.  
Recombine the seeds of Change.  
Transmute the impact of Change.  
Seize Change.  
Use it.  
Adapt and grow.

### **Sermon: “Calibrating Our Compass,” by Rev. Erica Baron**

Good morning. It is good to be with you! I serve as one of 5 UUA congregational consultants for congregations in New England. We consult with individual congregations when there are questions, conflicts, or transitions. We also think together about UU congregations in this time. How are we doing? What do we need? How do we find and follow our purpose? My regional colleagues and I have developed a way of understanding the purpose of congregational life and the practices that can help us lean into this purpose. We call this model Spiritual Leadership.

Spiritual Leadership is our term for a way of living that is rooted in your values, giving what is yours to give to the world, and joining with others to create communities of love and liberation for everyone. Spiritual Leadership is not only for identified “leaders.” Everyone can develop their own spiritual leadership. Since every person is unique, spiritual leadership looks different in each individual person. But we can recognize it through the commitment to living our values and offering what we can in community.

At the region, we believe that the purpose of congregational life, at its core, is to support everyone in the congregation to find and develop their spiritual leadership, while creating communities of love and liberation for all. We have identified 5 practices that congregations can do in order to fulfill this purpose: Centering in

Gifts, Doing Our Inner Work, Covenanting, Tending Our Tradition, and Faithful Risking.

When I was here in October, we looked at Centering in Gifts and Tending Our Tradition. Today, we're talking about Faithful Risking.

Friends, our world is changing. Have you noticed? It is changing in a thousand small and large ways. Here are some of the ones that directly impact congregations. The oldest Millennials are in our forties now. Compared with Baby Boomers in their forties, Millennials have massively more debt. The average number of paid vacation and holidays has been falling since the 1990s, and continues to. Meanwhile, the amount of time that parents spend directly interacting with their children has been trending up since at least the 1960s, and continues to. Millennials are working more, parenting more, earning less compared to the cost of living, and financing far more debt than Baby Boomers did at our age. And the emerging young adults of Gen Z are working even more for even less.

I was talking to a Baby Boomer friend of mine recently. Someone who is very active in the lives of people younger than them. And as we were talking about the specific conditions that Millennials are facing right now, I struggled to convey even to this person who spends lots of time with Millennials and Gen Zers the degree of economic pressure and hopelessness, as well as time and energy overwhelm that I hear from so many of my peers.

So, Millennials and Gen Zers, I know it feels impossible. It's not just you. We are all in this together. Baby Boomers, I invite you to consider that life for younger folks is harder than you may have thought. Maybe even harder than you can imagine. Gen X, I haven't forgotten you! You are in between all these stats, experiencing all the same trends to a less intense degree. I know you are often overlooked, but you might be in the best position to help those older than you and those younger than you understand each other. Finally, those of you older than the Baby Boomers, you have experienced times of hardship too. What helped you? What can you teach us?

Meanwhile while all this generational shifting is going on, as the Widening the Circle report from the UUA's Commission on Institutional Change points out, progressive movements and even many mainstream companies have adopted much deeper understandings and practices of anti-racism and other equity and inclusion work. Police abolition has gone from a very fringe idea to a thing people are trying to enact. More and more people are publicly embracing non-binary gender

identities and expressions.

All of this change is against the backdrop of the changes in climate that are obvious and growing.

Will we change too, as the world changes?

As we make decisions about what to do in congregations, it can be tempting to think of our choices as taking risks or not taking risks. We can take a risk to develop a new program, or we can decide not to take that risk. We can take a risk in changing how we do things or we can decide not to take a risk.

But really, it's not a choice not to take a risk. The choice is really what risk to take. Starting a new program, trying a new way of doing things, changing the order of service or the building or the staffing structure, it's easy to see the risks involved in any of these things, right?

If we start a new program, we risk it failing. We risk wasting money and time on something that didn't work. We risk feeling discouraged. If we try a new way of doing things, we risk not getting the thing done at all because the new way doesn't work. We risk making people mad. Depending on how fast and how dramatically we change things, we might even risk people leaving the congregation. If we change the order of service, we risk not getting our spiritual needs met, or missing the old way.

It's harder to see the risks of not doing these things, because instead of risking something we already have, we're risking the potential of something we don't have yet. If we do not create a new program, we risk not serving the needs of the people that program would be designed for. If we don't change the way we do things, we risk losing people who aren't members yet or who are very new members because that way doesn't work for them or because they don't feel like there's a place for their ideas. If we don't change the staffing structure, we risk not growing into our full potential.

A choice not to make some changes in our congregations as the world around us changes so dramatically is a choice to risk becoming ineffective or irrelevant. And that is a very risky choice indeed.

Octavia Butler tells us:  
To survive,

Let the past Teach you—  
Past customs, Struggles, Leaders and thinkers.  
Let These Help you.  
Let them inspire you, Warn you, Give you strength.  
But beware: God is Change.  
Past is past. What was Cannot Come again.  
To survive, Know the past. Let it touch you.  
Then let The past Go.

Beware: there is risk in not letting go of the past. To survive, we need to work with change.

I have heard that Octavia Butler said that the Earthseed spirituality that she invented for the parables books would not work as a real religion because there is not enough comfort in it. But there are people and even communities who have taken the teachings of Earthseed to heart and practice them. Maybe because Earthseed deals head on with the truth of constant change, and suggests actually helpful tools for living in a world that is changing.

Part of that is noticing change as it happens and responding meaningfully. adrienne maree brown is an author, organizer, and facilitator who has studied Octavia Butler's work deeply. She writes about how we can navigate through times of change as the principles of Emergent Strategy. One of these principles is intentional adaptation. When conditions within and around our communities shift, we adapt. We can adapt randomly, just reacting to whatever comes our way from moment to moment. Or we can choose to adapt intentionally, to keep our purpose in mind and work to adapt toward our purpose.

Faithful risking is what we call this practice. It is faithful because it is aligned with our purpose, our mission.

My favorite metaphor for faithful risking is sailing when there is no land in sight. Conditions are constantly changing, and the sailor has to adapt to the waves and the wind, any other weather, the other beings that live in the water. In order not to get totally lost, the sailor has to navigate somehow. Different cultures have different ways of doing this, but my culture relies on the fixed star in the north, Polaris, the North Star. With that stable point in the night sky, it becomes possible to use all the other celestial bodies to know which direction you are heading, and how to get back on course if you have drifted.

For congregations, that north star is your purpose, your reason for being, which we often call mission or vision. What are the unique gifts that you have to offer to this time and this place as a congregation? If you know what your gifts are, what your purpose is, you can navigate toward them even if everything around you is changing. For a congregation, the mission is the “sweet and positive obsession.”

Your mission is: This is our spiritual home where we embrace diversity, celebrate together, and practice our Unitarian Universalist principles.

So the question becomes, how do we keep moving toward that mission in ways that are also responsive to the world as it changes within and around us?

What does it mean to create a spiritual home when the ways people engage with communities are changing? How can we provide a spiritual home to people who are overwhelmed and burned out? How can we bring celebration to people who are overwhelmed and burned out? What does it mean to embrace diversity as our ways of understanding being human multiply? How do we continue to deepen our own practice of our Principles, and how do we share them in the larger community - as it is now?

From my vantage point working with leaders from a bunch of different congregations, it seems to me that we are in a time when the way we “do church” is about to go through a massive change. But what church will look and feel like on the other side is not at all clear. How will we engage spiritually? Will Sunday morning still be the heart of our practice together? Will we worship primarily by all gathering at the same time and place? Or will we gather in smaller groups? How will we organize decision-making, logistical leadership, and getting stuff done when people have way less time to give us?

Octavia Butler says:

Chaos is God’s most dangerous face—Amorphous, roiling, hungry.

Shape Chaos—Shape God. Act.

Alter the speed Or the direction of Change. Vary the scope of Change. Recombine the seeds of Change. Transmute the impact of Change.

Seize Change. Use it. Adapt and grow.

In other words, although the only lasting truth is change, that does not mean that we do not have any agency, that we cannot impact the change. We have all kinds of ways of shaping the change that we find ourselves in, even if the fact of change is not something we can stop.

So if the way we “do church” is changing, now is the time to help shape that change. How can you shape the change in your congregation to make sure you stay aligned with your mission as the waters under and around you shift and the wind comes from a different direction? The only way to be part of shaping change is to be willing to take a risk. But, whether we can perceive it or not, we’re taking a risk either way. So, now is the time to seize the moment.

As far as I can see, there’s really just one way to do that in this current moment, and that is to try stuff. We don’t know what new modes of worship, spiritual deepening programs, practical support, or reflection of our Principles will be the thing that strikes a chord and makes all the difference. The only way to find out is to experiment. And given how much we don’t know right now, that almost certainly means trying some things that don’t work very well along the way to finding something that does.

In order to try stuff, we need some ideas. Part of this is asking people in the congregation - but maybe more importantly people you wish were in the congregation - what they most need right now. What would be spiritually engaging for them? What would they find supportive? What would help them show up with all their being, beliefs, and opinions?

And another part is what adrienne maree brown calls “Collective Ideation” or what is more commonly known as brainstorming. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but UUs are an opinionated bunch! Many of us have some very clear ideas about what we like and don’t like, what we think will work and what we think will absolutely not work. This can sometimes make it hard for us to really approach collective ideation with the fully open-mindedness that it requires.

I mean, I fully embrace the theory of brainstorming. And still. Every time I facilitate or participate in this process, there are ideas that I hate. Sometimes I have a hard time writing them down on the newsprint. I’m a UU too, after all, and boy do I have opinions!

But I’ve experienced the magic of real collective ideation too many times to doubt it. If I can hold my critiques inside, and everyone else can too, it’s really quite remarkable what happens. We start throwing out ideas, and they are all over the place, but then one idea sparks another and that gets another person thinking in a new way, and then we get to ideas that absolutely none of us could have thought of alone, and that we could not get to together any other way. So, like, I know this



works, and that it only works if we don't critique the ideas along the way.

I don't know if I know of any boards or even committees of UU congregations who do a real brainstorm more than maybe once a year at the annual retreat. I think we could all stand to do this more. We might come up with something that makes all the difference. But first, we will probably come up with a lot of ideas to try.

Now, remember that we're going for intentional adaptation. We want to keep trying things that move closer to mission. And even things that don't work can give us helpful information - as long as we take the time to consider what worked and what didn't.

One practice for this is called the Action-Reflection-Adaptation cycle. So, we try something - we Act. Then we think and talk together about how it went. We Reflect. Did it work perfectly? Great! But that's almost never true. Does it need some tweaks? Or some bigger changes? Okay, what variation do we want to try next? Was that just a thing we should never try again? Okay, what was it about it that really didn't work? Then we make the tweaks or the bigger changes or try a very different idea. We Adapt. That becomes the next action which we can then reflect on and adapt. And so on.

In my experience, the part of this cycle that we tend to rush through is the Reflection part, just as we don't often take the time for collective ideation. But both things will make our efforts more intentional, and therefore increase our chances of being more effective.

When the stream got to the desert, there was no choice to stay a stream. The stream either had to become a quagmire there on the edge of the sands, or allow the wind to transform it into a new shape and carry it. Like the stream, we don't actually have the choice to avoid all risks. We have a choice about what form we embrace to carry us through a time of profound change.

Now is the time to seize the moment and try something. To shape the future of your congregation, and to contribute to shaping the future of what congregations can be. This is the practice of faithful risking - taking a chance that is aligned with mission even when we don't know exactly where it will take us. This is how we remain faithful as we move through a changing world.

Amen.