

Both our story for all ages and our reading today are about people coming to an edge and having to move through what could be a very scary transition. There's a reason for that. We are in a time of deep change. And by we I mean your congregation, and all UU congregations, and all congregations of all faiths, and also the social context outside religious communities.

There are many ways to tell the story of the changes we are seeing right now and what created those changes. I recently read the latest book by Bill McKibben who is a climate journalist and activist. The book is called *The Flag, the Cross, and the Station Wagon: A Graying American Looks Back at His Suburban Boyhood and Wonders What the Hell Happened*.

McKibben looks at some key moments and decisions in the 1970s and early 1980s that led to some of the stark realities of the present moment. He mentions the 1973 Supreme Court case *San Antonio Independent School District vs. Rodriguez*. By a 5-4 vote, the court ruled that it was okay for students in poor communities to have schools that were much worse than students in rich communities. He talks about the presidential election in 1980. Jimmy Carter was asking Americans to begin reckoning with the environmental cost of consumption - both of stuff and of fossil fuels. He lost the election to Ronald Reagan, of course, who scrapped Carter's plans for a major push for solar energy and promoted policies which made the rich richer and the poor poorer. McKibben also tells the story of a ballot initiative in his hometown of Lexington, MA in which voters rejected a proposal to build affordable housing, a choice that was made by many, many suburban towns across the country around the same time.

These are just a few of the decisions that added up to create 50 years of increasing economic inequality among US households, especially huge gaps in wealth between different races and between different generations. And which added up to the climate crisis whose effects we are feeling now and which we know will rapidly accelerate from here.

Amid all the little moments, McKibben points out an overarching cultural shift in the United States away from the commons, what is publicly shared, toward individualism and privatization. This is in fact the mindset that created suburbs as communities of separate, single family housing, every household with a car. And the mindset that led to people in those suburbs voting against creating housing that would be shared with more people - and poorer people. The same mindset that has shifted tax policy such that the very wealthiest of households pay far less in taxes than they did in the 1960s and 1970s.

And along with all the other ways this shift manifested, it also changed American churches. McKibben focuses on American Protestant Christianity, noticing things like the rise of the prosperity gospel, which has the basic message that God wants you to be rich and happy rather than the actual texts of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures which focus most of their attention on obligations to care for the poor and those in need as an expression of the community's relationship to God.

This is not the particular theological conversation that Unitarian Universalism has been having for the past 50 years, for which I am grateful. Our collective commitment to social justice has been central to Unitarian Universalism as I have experienced it throughout my life - which happens to coincide with most of the period McKibben describes. But we are not without our own challenges of individualism.

One manifestation of this individualism in some congregations is conversations that focus on each person advocating for what they like or what they want - or what they don't like or don't want - rather than on our purpose or mission. And while we absolutely do care about providing meaningful experiences to our current members, it's maybe not the *only* thing that is important. Maybe we also care about providing meaning to people who are not currently among us, including people who might find meaning very differently than any particular one of us does. We might care about being emotionally and practically supportive to people in the

congregation and in the larger community who have needs of various kinds.

Your mission, for example, includes embracing diversity, celebrating together, and practicing our Unitarian Universalist Principles.

During that same 50 years that McKibben describes in his book, participation in religious communities has plummeted in the United States. Part of that is because Sunday morning is no longer a time we protect from things like sports or music rehearsal - or work. Part of that is because of a series of high profile scandals that have undermined or even destroyed trust in religious communities and institutions for many people. Part of that is because people are both working more and also spending more time directly parenting than in previous generations, and church can feel like just one more thing on an already too-full to do list.

2020 and 2021, the most intense years of the pandemic took the last bit of energy or capacity for lots of people. And we got out of the habit of physically going to congregations for worship every week. As the restrictions loosened, the effects linger as burn out, overwhelm, anxiety, depression. I hate to say this but I don't think a presidential election year is going to help much with any of that. So people are a lot less engaged in congregations than they used to be, and the younger people are, the more this is true.

So we come to the edge of the gorge, the water rushing along far below us. Or we come to the moment when we have to let go of the trapeze. As UU congregations, we have come to a moment of transition. The old ways of doing things are not connecting with the current context - not in the way they used to in our previous context. So, now what? How do we catch the next trapeze? How do we build that bridge from grass?

Let me tell you a story.

Westminster Community Church in Seattle

- Started to decline in attendance and donations, by 14% per year for no obvious reason
- Leaders met every week to discern what was happening and what to do about it
- Discerned that their activities were not aligned with their mission and current conditions were unsustainable
- Decided to tell the members that the church was “going out of business” in November 2011

3 Choices:

- Dissolve the congregation
- Move to the suburbs
- Call a season of research and development and find a new future for ourselves with trial and error

Congregation chose research and development with 20 minutes of discussion.

Discerning a new way - lawn chair on the street:

- Where are the people?
- Who are the people?
- What do the people need?

Rules for experiments:

1. Could not be on Sunday morning
2. Could not be on the church campus

Some things were “successful” but not on mission

Trial and Error:

We utterly failed at several different approaches to restore our fruitfulness. ... Our congregation was extraordinarily peaceful during this season; their bold faith was sustaining them. It was common for one of our people to stop me in the lobby after a Sunday gathering and say, “So, pastor, what stupid idea bombed this week?” I would then recount our latest disaster and everyone within earshot would circle around to listen to my report from the front lines and laugh raucously at the details of our miserable failures.

This lobby drama occurred several times over those research and development months, but it always ended up with the encircling group patting me on the back and saying, “Now don't give up!”

What Worked:

- Free meal in a central location (not owned by the church)
- Tables set up with table cloths
- Generous offerings of quality food
- Band played music behind the conversation
- At some point, the pastor would tell a story and offer a prayer for the well-being of everyone present (less than 10 minutes total)
- Well attended by a variety of people for a variety of reasons
- This is their church now: they stopped doing worship on Sunday mornings and closed the building
- Still going strong in multiple locations throughout Seattle

Now, my point in telling you this story is not that you should sell your building and become exclusively a dinner church. Nor that you should adopt a radically different mission. Instead, I want to tell this story as a way of illustrating what a process of discernment and experimentation might look like.

As in this story, the first key is your mission, or your purpose, your reason for being as a congregation. Because every other question refers back to this. What do we do now if this is what our purpose is? What does it mean to embrace diversity right now? How do we celebrate together when there is so much anxiety and overwhelm among and around us? What does it mean to practice our UU Principles in the community of Westborough in the beginning of 2024?

You could think of the mission as the destination on the other side of the gorge - why do we want to get over there in the first place? It's going to be easier to build a bridge in a useful spot if you know where you're trying to go.

Another key piece of this story is the attention to the particular context of this congregation. Dinner church worked for them because it was the meeting place of their mission in their community. Dinner church might be a meeting place between your mission and the needs of your community. Or it might not. That's why the project of observation is so important. Now, I doubt that you are going to learn all of what you need to learn from sitting in a lawn chair in Westborough, though it might be an interesting activity. Still, though, I think you're going to need to talk to some people.

The Board and other leaders in the congregation are actually working on this right now. You can help in a few ways. First, although you do want to think about how your mission applies beyond your current membership, it's also important to know how it applies to *you*. And what your ideas and dreams are for the congregation. The Board wants to hear from you about this! You can join this conversation by staying after the service today to talk about these questions and ideas. You can also fill out a survey that the Board has prepared. There are paper copies available today, and you will get a link to take this survey online very soon.

The questions the board is asking are:

What could the congregation do to be helpful to you?

What do you love about your experiences in this congregation?

Do you have ideas that you think would be exciting to try in this congregation?

You can also help this process by talking to people you know who aren't members of the congregation.

Do you know what every study of the subject has said is the most effective form of outreach for congregations? Inviting your friends! It's way more effective than any sort of advertising - newspapers, social media, buses, mailings. A personal invitation from a friend is what people respond to most.

When I say this to UUs, pretty much everyone agrees that they already know this or it sounds true. But the idea of actually inviting your friends to church feels like an impossible task to many UUs. I know. It's awkward. We don't want to be pushy. We don't want to be associated with aggressive forms of proselytizing. I mean, we want our friends to stay our friends! I get it.

So, let me suggest a maybe easier alternative. Which is to get your friends' help with the discernment rather than directly inviting them to church. Here's how that might go. You're chatting after a pickle ball match or before a movie, over dinner, whatever. And you say to your friend, "Hey so we're doing this project at my church where we're trying to figure out how we can be more helpful to people in our community. I'm not asking you to join or have anything to do with church, but I'm curious. If a community of caring people could do something to make your life easier or to help you or your family in some way, what would that be?"

Maybe they have an answer, maybe they don't. If so, say thank you for their help. If not, say, "That's okay. But if you happen to think of something let me know." And then change the subject. Then be sure to pass along any ideas you get to a Board member!

Alright, so hopefully all these conversations and surveys will give you some good ideas to try. And now we come to the trial *and error* part. Remember how the members of Westminster Community Church in Seattle had a good laugh at the "miserable failures" each week? To me, this is actually the most important part of that story. The willingness to fail. And then to keep trying new things.

Maybe you'll hit upon the exact right expression of your mission in this time and place with the very first thing you try. That would be awesome! But unlikely. Probably one of two things will happen. Either it will be an obvious and immediate failure. But the most likely outcome is that your first experiment - or your first few experiments - will work, sort of. Maybe you do something that goes really well but you have very small attendance. Maybe

there's part of the plan that doesn't work but other parts that do. Maybe it's fantastic, but it took so much work that you can't do it every week or every month.

Any of these outcomes is good. Yes, not just okay, but actually good. Because all of them will help you with the task of finding the thing that *really* works. My team at the region recommends the process of Action-Reflection-Adaptation whenever you are doing experiments like this. (Actually we kind of think it would be great if we all did this all the time, but that's a sermon for another day.)

So, how this works is you take some action. Say, you have a sing along on the front steps on a Saturday afternoon. Then you do some reflection. This is the part we often either skip or rush through. But it's worth it to dedicate some time to this. Have a conversation. How did that go? What went really well? What went really badly? What could we do differently that might work better? Does this seem like something that's worth putting more time into?

Then you adapt. Adaptation can mean anything from, "Well that didn't work *at all*. Let's not do that *ever again*." And trying something else. All the way to, "Yeah, that was great. There are just a few minor tweaks and we're right on."

In our example, maybe it's, "Yeah, that was awesome, but I think we might get better participation if it was on Sunday instead." Or, "That was fantastic for the first half hour, but after that it lost steam really quickly." Whatever. I'm totally making up those ideas. But whatever you do find, you adapt. And then try it again, or try something else. That becomes the new action, after which you do some more reflection and adaptation, and then you try it again, and so on.

Doing this requires a degree of trust. That the trapeze will appear. But that doesn't mean that the experiments will work out right away. It means letting go and hanging in the air until the new handhold arrives. A willingness to "hang out" in that transition place for as long as is necessary.

Unlike swinging on a trapeze, this is not a process that can be done by one person, or even two or three. It's more like the grass bridge, which takes everyone. No one can make the whole bridge alone, which is okay because no one has to. Everyone works together, doing the part that is theirs and trusting others to do their parts.

You are standing at the edge of the gorge. So is every other congregation around you. The water is fast and the gorge is deep. But you can do this. You can build the bridge across this time of transition and transformation. By keeping your mission firmly in mind. By asking yourselves and others the questions that will help you live your mission now and into the future. By being willing to experiment. By reflecting and adapting as you go. By each doing your part. By giving each other lots of grace and encouragement along the way. You can do this!

I can't wait to see what is on the other side of the bridge you will build together.