



Children's Story

"Always" from Grasshopper on the Road by Arnold Lobel.

Reading

"Try Being Me" from A Guest of the World by Jeffrey Lockwood.

Music

"White Rabbit" lyrics found at <http://www.sing365.com/music/lyric.nsf/white-rabbit-lyrics-jefferson-airplane/7109ae560a05f54748256bf40008120a>.

Sermon

When I heard that our worship band leader, Kevin Horth, had chosen White Rabbit by Grace Slick to be one of the songs this morning, I thought to myself, "Oh dear God! A song about LSD is the musical centerpiece of the service! What am I possibly going to do with this!" Kevin must have read my mind, because before I even expressed a hint of concern, he reassured me. "Trust me Krista! It's perfect. Ignore the drug references and it's a great song!"

"White Rabbit" hit the charts in 1967, during a pivotal time in American history. Since World War II the United States had developed into a highly restrictive society. All those people who had experienced World War II, whether overseas or at home, just wanted things to go back to normal, and they did normal with a vengeance. They had lots of kids, built lots of churches and schools, many women returned to the home and men went off to work.

All their kids, the largest generation ever in the U.S., grew up in this hyper-normal controlling society and they entered adolescence, what do you think happened? At first it was kind of rumble here, a rumble there, but by 1967 the rumble had become a full roar. When the Vietnam War provided the focus for their restlessness and resentment, there was no stopping them. They questioned everything, and that meant rejecting the status quo of their parents' generation in every way possible. And, it often meant doing drugs, because nothing seemed to epitomize the rejection of conformity more than getting high.

Grace Slick's song, "White Rabbit" gave voice to a whole generation. You can take a pill and get bigger, you can take a pill and get smaller, but the pill your mother gives you does nothing at all. The men on the chessboard, the voice of authority and tradition, tells you where to go, but now we see that it's all a sham. They're talking backwards! Don't listen to them! Listen to the ones no one ever pays attention to, the little dormouse, who tells you, keep your head. Don't give in to the mindlessness. Break free and open your arms and your mind to the world.

What were they letting go of? Restrictions of all kinds. Sexual restrictions, social restrictions, gender restrictions, racial restrictions, assumptions of how you should walk, talk, dress, sing, write, or style your hair. It was all up for grabs.

So, what in the world does this have to do with small group ministry? Today is the day that we start signups for our covenant groups, which are small groups of ten or less people that commit to personal and spiritual growth by focusing on a particular theme. Every year we develop a new set of groups with new leaders and new

themes for you to explore. What does this have to do with a bunch of teenagers protesting the War in Vietnam, listening to rock and roll, and getting high?

More than you could ever imagine. Many women like Grace Slick became activists in the emerging Feminist Movement. They wanted choices their mothers never had. They wanted careers, and the right to a life outside of marriage and children. They wanted sex that wasn't about having children and they wanted the freedom to have that sex before they got married, if they got married at all. If they had children, they wanted a lot more support for the very demanding job of raising them. They wanted a sexual revolution that would break the patriarchal restrictions that defined their lives. They were Alice, and they were big and they were small, and they were ten feet tall!

The question was, how to do this? This was a huge undertaking, and it quickly became very apparent that the resistance wasn't going to come just from men. It was also going to come from women. When you have been raised with the assumption that there are certain things you can't do, you often internalize those assumptions, even if intellectually you know they're wrong. These women knew intellectually that they were equals with men, but realized that they had internalized the assumptions of female inferiority. If they were going to claim their equality, they had to undo their own internalized sexism, and the main way they did this was through something called conscientization groups. These were small groups of women who committed to build egalitarian relationships with each other so that in a framework of support they could undo the damage. They read the newest feminist books and discussed them. They listened to women's music. They talked about sex and sexuality and desire. They talked about what they wanted and what they were afraid of. They pushed each other to walk into very uncomfortable emotional places, with the goal of individual and collective emancipation.

I do need to say that most women in the movement were white middle class women. African American women didn't even have basic equality, so for them, the women's movement was a luxury that had little to do with the reality of their lives. Working class women also were largely absent from the movement. They didn't have the luxury of time to sit in a circle and talk about what they wanted. They were focused on getting by. It was primarily white middle class educated baby boomers who formed the early women's movement.

Who filled most of the pews in Unitarian Universalist churches? White middle class educated women. We've been trying to change that for 40 years and become more diverse, but it was true then and it's true now. Through these women, feminism crashed into Unitarian Universalism like a bull in a china shop. Even though Unitarian Universalism was far ahead of most religious organizations in terms of gender equality, it was still men on the board of trustees and women teaching Sunday School in the basement, and try finding a woman minister! UU women joined the feminist movement in droves and they created UU women's conscientization groups so that they could claim their equality in the churches they loved.

So what did small group ministry look like in the late 60s and 70s. Well, it was very unstructured. So much of the sexual revolution was about breaking free of conformity, and rules were seen as the bad guy. Because feminism was about breaking free of hierarchy, there were to be no leaders; to have a leader was to fall into the dangers of patriarchy. So, the groups were pretty unstructured and spontaneous and sometimes that was great. Sometimes it unleashed so much good stuff that it was intoxicating.

But sometimes, it backfired. Sometimes the commitment to a lack of conformity was abused, and people acted in pretty irresponsible and hurtful ways and called it freedom. Sometimes, the commitment to no hierarchy meant that the most dominant women used the group for their own needs, and because no one wanted to be accused of being patriarchal, no one stepped in to challenge their controlling behavior. It wasn't unheard of for groups to develop pretty rigid ideas of what it meant to be nonconformist, and you had to conform to their idea of nonconformity to fit in! I am reminded of our reading from Jeffrey Lockwood. They wanted to believe they could be anything they wanted, but they had internalized a powerful legacy of conformity from their parents,

and it wormed its way into their work even as they rebelled against it. Sometimes, the groups turned into stagnant airless cliques, not unlike the butterflies in our children's story, who sat on the same mushroom everyday and tried to make the grasshopper conform to what they already had.

When Janice Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, and Jim Morrison died of drug overdoses, it was, for many, a wake up call that the revolution that had gotten badly off track. One prison had been exchanged for another. In the women's movement, many began to understand that the enemy was not structure and rules, it was the kind of structure, the kind of rules, that mattered, and could set you free.

Something powerful had definitely been unleashed. In these groups many women built safe places to discover what they could be, what they couldn't be, and found freedom in claiming both. Just because the first try at these groups hadn't worked out so well, didn't mean wasn't worth trying again, and so they went back to the drawing board with the goal of holding up what was good and finding ways to manage the pitfalls that are inevitable whenever people come together in the hope of new life. Over time, many Unitarian Universalist congregations took the principle of conscientization, which is that people sharing their stories can change each other, and created their own groups.

The covenant groups we have at Emerson Chapel are the result of this proud legacy of risk and experimentation. They're no longer just for women, and there is a diversity of topics. What we've created is something that we believe has the potential to bring out the best in us, while helping us to engage in compassionate ways with the pieces of ourselves that we struggle with. Covenant groups embody our fundamental values, that each of us has worth and dignity, and that we have gathered deep wisdom simply by living. Covenant groups also embody our foundational theology, that the sacred is not something that exists outside of relationship. God, or the divine, or the spirit of life, is something that happens when we open to each other and make the commitment to journey together.

Covenant groups are successful when they are true covenants. There are a few things that are essential for them to work. The most important thing is that every member commits to making the covenant group a priority in their life. You don't go to meetings only when it feels good or when it's convenient, because you have made a promise to yourself and to the group. The level of personal commitment of every member is necessary for a group to work. Everyone commits to participate in the sessions to the best of their ability. Every group will ask its members to take responsibility for a session, and you are given a lot of guidance and support to help you do that. Finally, every facilitator is trained by me in providing the kind of leadership that these groups need.

How do we keep our groups from becoming cliques? They last one year and then they disband. You have to join from the beginning, so that your group has a chance to gel and develop the kind of trust that is the fuel for growth. This is why signups end mid-September. Finally, every group provides one act of service to the congregation or the community, because the higher purpose of personal growth is not just to feel better about ourselves, but to connect us to the most important covenant of all, the covenant we have with all of creation.

You don't have to be a member to join a covenant group, but our groups are an extension of this congregation and are intentionally Unitarian Universalist in their grounding.

No one realized when Grace Slick took the stage to sing White Rabbit what was being unleashed. They hoped it was big, and it was. I imagine that it will take many generations to really understand what was put in motion all those years ago. But it is now part of our legacy, part of what makes things possible for us and not possible for us. Let us choose to walk into power and possibility of that blessing.

May the spirit be with you all.