



Stewardship Moment – Lisa Parnell, Board of Trustees, and Rev. Krista Taves

Krista: In honor of Association Sunday, our stewardship moment this morning includes a message from Rev. Peter Morales, the President of the Unitarian Universalist Association:

“On this Association Sunday, congregations throughout America are celebrating our Unitarian Universalist movement, to build support for the connections that make us stronger. As I travel around the country, I see all the time the kinds of things that we can do together as an association that no congregation could dream of doing [alone].

Together we are so much stronger in public witness and reaching out and touching the lives of people. On this year’s Association Sunday we are emphasizing our professional ministries – our ordained ministers, our religious educators, our musicians, and we’re working hand in hand with their professional associations to develop programs that will enhance and build the capabilities of our professional leaders. These are people who have dedicated their lives to our movement and they need in these changing times to develop their skills. The funds collected on this Association Sunday will be used to support the professionals in your congregations.”

Lisa: I want to tell you why I support our Association. Unitarian Universalism changed my life. As a lesbian growing up in West County, I never dreamed there would be a church in my hometown that actually accepted me as I am. I came to this church when I really needed support, and I found it. In fact, my partner and I celebrated our wedding in this sanctuary this past summer! It was a party!

In the five years that I’ve been a member, I have learned that there are so many things that happen behind the scenes to create the community that changed my life. I’m learning that we aren’t doing this alone. There is a whole Association supporting us and I’m so grateful, because I want there to be a UU congregation for every person in this country who needs a community like I did. It’s our responsibility to make sure that happens.

Krista: From 1984, when this congregation was founded, until 2009, we were a full fair share congregation, which means that we paid annual dues for every member on our books. When the recession hit, we got hit too, and for the first time in 25 years, we pulled back from being a Fair Share Congregation. In August, the board of trustees made the decision that we want to put ourselves back into right relationship so that we are doing our part for the liberal religious movement that has changed our lives. For us to be a full fair share congregation, means paying \$79 in dues for every member of the congregation, and we have 118 members at this time. Our entire board of trustees has already committed to paying their fair share and many of our program leaders have made the same commitment.

Lisa: Now it’s your turn. You will find a small yellow envelop in your orders of service. If you would like to do your part for our movement, we would invite you to do that this morning. Please make the check-out to Emerson and write Fair Share in the memo line. All undesignated funds will also go towards our association. Finally, in case you need more time to think about it, the baskets will be passed back through the congregation during our last hymn. At this time we will most graciously accept this morning’s offering.

Children’s Story – *How Coyote Lost his Music, his Song and his Dance.*

<http://www.uua.org/religiouseducation/curricula/tapestryfaith/wonderfulwelcome/session6/sessionplan/stories/118305.shtml>

Reading

O. Eugene Picket, President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, 1979 - 1985

The longer I am a part of this movement, the more convinced I become that the values and ideals of liberal religion can be effective only if they have a solid institutional base, and that means strong congregations and a strong Association. I know that we as a religious movement have traditionally been suspicious of a strong Association. We have been fearful that strength would mean power, rigidity, and control. But I am convinced that our Association can be both strong and flexible, an institution of which we can be critical while still being committed to it.

We tend to be a contentious group of people. We are often harder on ourselves than on our fundamentalist critics. It is so easy to be cynical and mistrustful. But the UUA is what binds us together. It is a vehicle of our hope.

Those years as president made me deeply aware of how much we need one another. It is only as we recognize our mutuality, honor our diversity, and reconcile our differences with respectful honesty that we can build a strong and vital religious community. Being part of and nurturing such a religious community is what ministry is to me....

Sermon

This is a sermon about how we sing our songs, play our flute and drum and dance around the fires we have built.

In the last couple of weeks, I have been facing a challenging situation in my work here with you. This is not an unusual thing. That is the nature of ministry. It became pretty clear that the nature of this challenge was asking me to ask for help. I did what I often do in those kinds of situations. I retreat to give myself some space to think and reflect and decide how to move ahead. I spent many hours alone working through the situation in my mind, trying to figure out the best way for me to engage it, and I had figured out a general path, but I was stuck on next steps.

Luckily, I have many places to go for help. I contacted the Central Midwest Unitarian Universalist District and worked with both Dori Thexton and Ian Evison, who are its executive directors. They generously helped me get some perspective. I also shared my situation on the UU ministers' Facebook group and received an incredible amount of supportive affirmative advice that confirmed I was going in the right direction. I also touched base with the staff here and received their insight and wisdom. I have to tell you that we have some real treasures in Kelly Riney Feary and Randy Whitman. We are very lucky to have them and it is an honor for me to have them on my team. Then, just to be sure I covered all the bases; I tapped into the resources of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association and the Liberal Religious Educators Association.

Something pretty amazing happened along the way. I no longer felt confused. I no longer felt stuck, or like I was on my own. I didn't feel like I had to do this by myself.

One of the things they drill into us in seminary is never to be a lone ranger. The minister who gets in serious trouble is the one who tries to do it alone. The rule of thumb is to always stay in relationship with your colleagues and with the denomination. Always test your assumptions outside of the congregation you serve to make sure you are on track, because if you don't, you will become enmeshed in the culture of the congregation you serve and be unable to act as a change agent within it. This is what the best leaders do. Whether you are a CEO, or upper level management, or a small business owner, or a teacher, or a parent, you are a leader, and it is your responsibility and privilege to be inside and outside of the institutions you serve, whether that is a church, a business, a school, or your family. That is how you become a change agent for the health of those you care for.

Ministers are no different. As ministers, we are both inside and outside of the congregations that call us. Leadership theory calls that getting on and off the balcony. When something happens and you need to get perspective, you get on the balcony and look down to see what is happening below you. This is the time to consult with others, to tell them what you are seeing, and to get their perspective. Once you've gained your own perspective, you can go back into the fray and respond to it with the new understandings you've learned.

This process of being both inside and outside at the same time is why a minister can never be friends with the people they serve, otherwise we get caught in the dynamics we are trying to manage and change. It's the same for any staff person in a congregation, whether that is the Director of Religious Education or the Office Administrator or a Church Musician. If church staff become friends with those they serve, they lose perspective and balance, and over time, they will become ineffective and maybe even detrimental to the congregations they serve. This boundary often surprises a lot of people, and they think it means we can't care about them. This boundary doesn't mean we can't love you, it doesn't mean we don't care deeply. It's actually just the opposite. These boundaries reflect how much we love and care for the people we serve. We have to be sure that our own egos and our personal needs aren't driving our decisions.

I'm sure many of you have experienced this in your own lives. Boundaries aren't about keeping people away, they're about bringing them close in healthy ways. We need good boundaries with our life partners, our children, our parents, our friends, our co-workers, our neighbors. They help us stay in right relationship with each other. They make real love and care possible.

Another reason we keep this professional boundary is so that we never make our work about us. It's not about us. It's about supporting the congregations we serve in living their mission and vision. In our professional relationships with you, our needs always come second. Now some of you have asked me, is it lonely being in this inside/outside place? Sure it is. But you aren't responsible for taking care of my loneliness. I made that choice when I decided to become a religious professional. I am responsible for any loneliness that I may feel being your minister. In fact, part of seminary training and our testing involves preparing us for the loneliness that will come and equipping us to engage it in healthy ways. We should not be coming to you to help us fill our loneliness. There is a reason that I can pick up the phone and call Ian and Dori and know they will be there for me. There is a reason I am part of four clergy groups and three clergy list serves and go to every clergy gathering I can. Those are my friends, and we know all too well that even the most stoic of religious professionals can be tempted in a weak moment to break the boundaries, to find a reason why the rules don't apply to them. We human beings can fool ourselves in many ways. That is why there are so many checks and balances for religious professionals in our association.

I would encourage you sometime to read the UU Ministerial Professional Guidelines that I am required to follow. It's an eye opener for a lot of people and some of you will undoubtedly say, "Isn't this a bit much? Do we really need this? Can't we just trust each other?" My answer is that this is exactly about building trust. These are boundaries that promote trust. They help all of us, or like the coyote, we will lose our song, and our dance, and even the music of our flute and drum.

I'm not telling you this because I need your sympathy. In fact that would be inappropriate because I'd be using you to meet my personal needs. I'm telling you this so that when you experience me or Kelly or Randy or Todd setting boundaries, you will understand what we are doing and why. We are doing this out of love.

In this kind of deep boundaried love, I sincerely believe that our tradition can save lives. Lisa is not alone in her story. Her story is our story. In Unitarian Universalism, with its foundational theology of equality and interdependence and co-creatorship with the divine, we are saved from hopelessness. We are saved from selfishness and pride. We are saved from abusive religious doctrines that are steeped in fear and shame. We are saved from the kind of loneliness that comes from living in communities where we hide parts of ourselves from the parents at soccer practice so our kids can be accepted. We are saved from all the ways that our world tells us we

are worthless. We are saved as well from the illusion that we are the center of the universe. In this act of being saved we are freed to serve love and to serve this world that we care about so much. The heart of Unitarian Universalism is love, and so our work is sometimes to unlearn what we think love is, so that we can relearn its true depth and possibility. Love is about freedom, commitment, acceptance, taking risks, setting boundaries and taking down the barriers that separate us from one another.

Just this past Friday evening, our junior youth met for the first time with their OWL instructors. OWL stands for Our Whole Lives, and it's a comprehensive sexuality education program that helps our youth make responsible choices about their bodies. This program was developed by the Unitarian Universalist Association in partnership with the United Church of Christ, and it is incredible and life-changing. Most kids their age, if they get any sex education at all, will receive abstinence only education, which is filled with misinformation and has been proven not to work. Our kids learn about self-esteem, how to stand up to peer pressure, how to respect boundaries and establish their own boundaries. They learn about birth control and safer sex. They talk about sexual orientation and gender identity. They talk about how you might know if you're ready for sex, and how you can tell if you're not, and how to say yes or no in healthy affirming ways. Our youth wait longer than the kids of any other faith group to have sex, and when they do have sex, they are more likely to do it for the right reasons and to use birth control. Our young people have some of the lowest rates of sexually transmitted diseases and unplanned pregnancies in the country. They know more about birth control and STDs than most of the kids their age and they become ambassadors for responsible reproductive choices amongst their friends.

When we say that Unitarian Universalism saves lives, we mean business. We give our youth what they need to get on the balcony and keep perspective, to save themselves from painful mistakes that could limit their lives forever. Hopefully they can have a healthy experience of their sexuality untainted by the shame that many of us were taught to internalize about sex.

Have we been criticized for this program? You bet we have. You should see the hate mail I got when I submitted a letter to the editor challenging the value of abstinence only education. Apparently we hold orgies in our basement and force our youth to have sex on church property! But lo and behold, the Unitarian Universalist Association has resources to help congregations respond to public criticism for teaching OWL. They've got our back! They've helped us get on the balcony and not get sidetracked by such attacks.

More recently, Unitarian Universalists are in the forefront of working for immigration reform. As more states pass legislation that permits and even mandates human rights violations against undocumented workers, many Unitarian Universalists have stood up and said no. This is not what it means to live in a democracy. Several hundred Unitarian Universalists from around the country congregated in Phoenix in July 2010 to engage in intentional acts of nonviolent civil disobedience to raise awareness of the flagrant human rights violations against undocumented immigrants in Arizona's prisons. Twenty-nine Unitarian Universalists, including Rev. Peter Morales, were arrested and charged. This is what Rev. Morales said to the media upon his release from prison:

“As people of faith, we are called to oppose injustice and help protect the most vulnerable among us. We cannot turn a blind eye to the inhumane immigration enforcement practices of [Arizona], nor should we accept similar policies in other parts of our country. We Unitarian Universalists will continue to stand on the side of love against such legislation and the anti-immigrant sentiment it represents.”

Are we being criticized for this stance? Absolutely. Undocumented Latino and Hispanic workers are the next scapegoats, and it's not popular to stand with the marginalized. But we are forging ahead and next summer's General Assembly will take place in Phoenix and will be focused on getting on the balcony, we'll preparing ourselves to be true allies for those who need our support, and then there will be opportunities to come down from the balcony and walk into the fray and become change agents. It won't be easy. But it will absolutely be worth it!

What do staff boundaries, sex education, and immigration reform have in common? They are all about protecting

those more vulnerable than us. They are all about saving lives from hopelessness and despair and empowering them for justice and renewal. They are about singing our song, playing the flute and drum and dancing around the fire.

So I hope you will consider offering your Full Fair Share because together, we can do so much.

May the spirit be with you and yours. Amen and blessed be.