

Choose Your Own Adventure

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Caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar
Wanderer, there is no road. We make the road as we go.

We make the road as we go. We don't always make the worship service as we go, but we are nonetheless a living tradition. We have chosen to interpret the Bible, the religions of the world, our own experiences, our understandings of the holy through the lens of our principles.

There is an old story about James Luther Adams, a Unitarian theologian and professor at a seminary in Chicago. Many versions of this story exist but today we are exploring Jessica York's. She is a director of Congregational Life at the Unitarian Universalist Association.

In 1948, most congregations and houses of worship in the United States were segregated by race. Some were segregated by law; others by custom or by a lack of actively trying to welcome and include all people. The First Unitarian Society of Chicago was one of these congregations. Although their church was located in a neighborhood with many African Americans, only whites could join, according to the written by-laws of the church, and according to custom.

The day came that many members began to believe they needed to take action against racism, if they really wanted to live their values and principles. The minister, the Reverend Leslie Pennington, was ready for this day and ready to take action. So was James Luther Adams. James Luther Adams was a famous liberal theologian and social ethicist. Doctor Adams taught at the Meadville Lombard Theological School, right across the street from the First Unitarian Society of Chicago. And he was a member of the congregation's board of directors.

Along with some others, Reverend Pennington and James Luther Adams proposed a change in the church's by-laws to desegregate the church and welcome people whatever the color of their skin. They wanted to include, not exclude. They saw this as a way to put their love into action.

When the congregation's Board of Directors considered the desegregation proposal, most of them supported it. However, one member of the board objected. "Your new program is making desegregation into a creed," he said. "You are asking everyone in our church to say they believe desegregating, or inviting, even recruiting people of color to attend church here is a good way to tackle racism. What if some members don't believe this?"

Desegregation was a very controversial topic. In 1948, anything about skin color and racism was controversial. Some people, even some who supported African Americans in demanding their civil liberties, believed in separate but equal.

The debate went on in the Board of Directors' meeting until the early hours of the morning. Everyone was exhausted and frustrated. Finally, James Luther Adams remembered that we should be listening twice as much as talking. He asked the person who had voiced the strongest objection, "What do you say is the purpose of this church?"

Suddenly, everyone was listening. Everyone wanted to hear the answer to this crucial question.

Probably, the person who objected was listening especially hard to his own heart, as well as to the words he had heard from other Board members through the long discussion.

The Board member who opposed opening the church to people of color finally replied. "Okay, Jim. The purpose of this church is to get hold of people like me and change them."

The First Unitarian Society of Chicago successfully desegregated.

Now, I don't know that in 2019 the highest, truest purpose of the church is to attract racists and help them change. I don't know that that is our mission upon the earth. But it is still true, I think, that the purpose of the church is discovered together, and it has something to do with transformation.

People say they come to church looking for community. They say that all the time. And that's true. But it's not the full story. People come to church, I am convinced, seeking transformation - the kind that only happens when you are in community. Transformation - from isolation to connection, from aimlessness to purpose, from despair to hope, from numbness to full feeling, from the shackles of materialism and capitalism to spiritual freedom and new ways of living. And community - grounded in our faith and our principles - is the vehicle for this transformation. Community without shared convictions is a country club. We aren't only creating community in our mission - we are creating loving community, in accordance with our Unitarian Universalist values. We are seeking transformation, we are longing to be changed and to have the opportunity to share in the transformation of others.

You have sought it here, whether you knew it or not. And I know that because you have told me. You have said - that being here has made you more generous, financially and otherwise. You have said that here you have felt safe for the first time in your life. You have found here the opportunity to try again. Maybe you grew up here and you stay through it all. You have learned about privilege and how to use it for the good of the whole, you have learned how to seek the truth, you have encountered the holy over and over. You have raised your children here, you are raising your children here now, you have accepted yourself here, you have been humbled here, you have made changes in your life --some very scary--because here you found the courage and the strength. You have failed each other also, and yourselves, and you have made amends. Because somehow every Sunday, coming through those doors, is an opportunity to try again.

What is the purpose of the church? Se hace camino al andar. We make the road as we go.

My colleague, the Rev. Brandon Wrencher, is a community minister with the Good Neighbor Movement here in Greensboro. And I was sitting around in a coffee shop talking with him earlier this week - he has some beautiful and important ideas about church planting and mission and radical politics as an expression of a faithful life. And he said:

"The ordinary person deserves the opportunity to engage another person and watch them move to a different place, and to discover their own transformation in the process. And it breaks my heart

that most people don't get that opportunity."

To know yourself as an agent of change in someone else's life. To watch someone else grow and change and learn and be vulnerable. To be a teacher, to be a witness, to be a participant in real transformation. Not to hoard the good news of progressive religion for ourselves - that every person is beloved and that we are all interconnected - but to spread it throughout Guilford County, throughout our friend groups and our workplaces and our city government and our whole lives. Not to prosthelytize or correct people - but to live always with human dignity and our interdependence first and foremost in our hearts. To watch for where dignity asserts itself, offers itself, where the possibilities of the human spirit emerge from the dust or the ashes or the storm.

I said it 2 weeks ago and I'll say it again - the highest, truest purpose of the church is to equip the faithful to reckon spiritually, materially, and even politically with the challenges of our age. And we do that together, building the church together, witnessing each other's growth together.

You who have been participating in and you who have been teaching our 6 session Pathways to Membership class know this well. You who facilitate Chalice Circles, you who teach religious education, you who offer pastoral care to one another - you know about the power of shared experience, shared reflection, and the transformation that can emerge.

Yesterday, our board of trustees, our shared ministry task force and I met with the Rev. Thom Belote, minister at the UU church in Chapel Hill, for our 6-month leadership start-up retreat. We had a very long meeting. I will spare you the details of our agenda and tell you instead that Bill Haney baked us bread and Suzanne Andrews made us soup and Kay Bishop made us a salad. We had the budget to order lunch from somewhere, which I'm sure would have been fine. But to be fed in that way, cared for in that way, to have our leadership supported in that way - handmade - is truly moving to me. Bill has been a member of this church since 1968 and here he is, baking bread for the board and the shared ministry folks and the minister young enough to be his granddaughter. That's also the purpose of the church. To feed people as they work to chart the course of the future. To be a place where you who hunger can be fed.

Much of this church is handmade or hand-tended, I know. The Williams family, Lonnie Houck, Merritt Wayt, Thomas Clayton - you have built things and installed things and fixed things and fixed things and fixed things. Marty Bergman made these beautiful quilts - I am only just discovering how many of you have had your hands in the process of making our church warm and sound. Sometimes transformation sound emotional and spiritual and metaphorical and fantastical, even, but it's also physical. There is evidence. Sometimes we can hold it in our hands.

Which brings me to these two stoles.

We make the road as we go. My youth group advisors from 2007 made this stole out of duct tape for my ordination. They were the first people to see ministry in me - they created the space for us to truly wrestle with our faith and our principles and what our values called us to do in the world. And they also taught us to make a whole bunch of stuff out of duct tape. And a decade later on

the occasion of my ordination, a whole bunch of them - some of whom I'm still in touch with through Facebook and some of whom I am not - they presented me with this evidence. That we are making the tradition all the time, creating the conditions for people's lives to be changed and saved and filled up with purpose. A duct tape stole is, essentially, a riff on the garment that indicates that someone is clergy. It's playful and funny, it's a little odd, it's sort of silly. And it was made with love and devotion and commitment - when I wear it, it reminds me of all the people who saw ministry in me so many years ago. When I wear it, it reminds me not to take myself too seriously, though I take my vocation very seriously. When I wear it, I am surrounded by their love and playfulness.

From that place of love and fun and community - it is no accident that in my majority white church, the people who would later lead the charge on the Black Lives Matter vigil and public witness around race and racism were some of the youth advisors. It is because they chose to create a space for us to reflect and bond and wrestle with our commitments, and we in turn changed their lives.

My friend Brandon spoke about witnessing people, about helping them discover their agency and their power and their gifts, no matter their circumstance. Which brings me to this other stole.

Seasons - Pat Kay, cancer, her question to me - what colors do you like?

Quilted stole "cancer is boring." What colors do you like? I know where I belong, and it's where the plants look like this. I'm from right outside DC and the plant life is remarkably similar to here. Where the plants look like this.

Going through her illness and her sorrows, she offered me a gift that saw me right back to where I belong. This is what we can offer one another. The chance to give and create and serve, to make the road as we go, to teach and create, to witness and change and transform for people of all ages. Now is the time. And here is the church, here is the steeple, open the doors, and you are the people. May it be so, and amen.