

Growing a Culture of Hope  
by Rev. Diane Dowgiert, October 16, 2016

Hope is rising. It is the nature of hope to rise. It lifts our spirits. It buoys us up when despair threatens to drag us down. It gives us a boost when we feel we can't go on. Hope is the fuel and the energy that keeps the world moving forward. Hope doesn't exist on its own. Hope is like the leaven that causes a loaf of bread to rise. In bread baking, flour and sugar create the culture in which the yeast can do its work. A spiritual community is the culture where hope grows, where we create the leaven that makes our spirits rise.

We belong to a tradition of hope. We come from a lineage of people who saw the world not just as it was, but how it could be. We are rooted in an ancestry of possibility, people who, through the ages, worked tirelessly to overcome religious persecution and oppressive forces that keep people from fully living lives of worth and dignity. We come from religious ancestors who worked to create institutions that promote values of liberty, equity, compassion, and justice while working to tear down societal structures and systems that uphold tyranny and oppression. This is our heritage. Hope is in our spiritual DNA, or as the Czech playwright Vaclav Havel said, hope is "a dimension of the Spirit. It is not outside of us but within us."

When you make bread you have to feed the yeast if your bread is to rise. We would be wise to feed the hope that is in us if we are to rise into the promise of all we can be as a people of faith. We should pay attention to the culture that feeds our spirit.

In our broader American culture, participation in religious communities of all kinds is down, even here in the South. After two and a half months living here in Greensboro, not a single person I've met has asked me where I go to church. Not one.

I do get asked what brought me here. That's when I get to tell people about Unitarian Universalism. When I tell them about our principles and values, when I tell them about our covenant to walk together in the ways of love and service and to build a beloved community where all are welcome at the table, where no one is excluded because of who they are or who they love, where people of different religious perspectives can come together in a spirit of openness and curiosity, the people I tell this to are enthused. They wonder why they never heard of us.

According to census and survey data, as many as 629,000 people in the United States claim Unitarian Universalism as their religion. Yet, the number of people officially counted as members in UU congregations in 2016 is just under 200,000. Why is it that people have never heard of us, and those that have aren't populating our congregations?

I hold out to you that we need to grow a culture that feeds hope.

The Rev. Nancy Bowen, in her work as the Regional Lead for the Pacific Western Region of the Unitarian Universalist Association, identified three cultural shifts needed in our congregations if we are to fully live into the promise that Unitarian Universalism holds for our world today: from fear to faith, from no to yes, and from I to we.

The shift from fear to faith is not a move into blind faith or unquestioning acceptance of truth claims we have not tested for ourselves. It is not the means to overcome big fears like the fear of high places or the fear of flying. Those belong between you and your therapist.

We need to move away from the fears that keeps our lives small – fear of the unknown, of uncertainty, fear of rejection, of judgment, fear of failure, and yes, fear of success. Teacher of the Course in Miracles, Marianne Williamson says: “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. [Yet when] we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we're liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

There have been times when Unitarians and Universalists were persecuted and even martyred for their religious convictions. This fact can't help but place a heft of worry or fear on our hearts. In recent years, persecution has taken more subtle forms like ridicule. We've been called everything from devil worshipers to being a cult, to which I respond, “One has to first believe in the devil in order to worship the devil – just sayin' – and -- if anything, we are the anti-cult. We expect people to think for themselves and not to blindly follow the teachings of others.”

That being said, we have become practiced at hiding our light. Take the architecture of our church buildings, especially those built in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. They tend to have a refuge-like quality, set back a good distance from the road, hidden by trees. To understand what I'm talking about,

today when you leave here, drive by the Baptist Church just down the road and note how visible their building is.

During the McCarthy era of the 1950's Unitarians and Universalists were often denied government clearances for certain jobs because of their religious affiliation. FBI agents often attended services in our congregations, not to worship with us, but to keep an eye on us. It makes sense that UU churches were built with a fortress-like quality.

We have a habit of hiding our light. It is part of our culture. If we are to live into the promise that we hold for our world, it is time to move out of the shadows of fear and into the light of our faith as Unitarian Universalists.

Which brings me to the next cultural shift, from no to yes. Now, I understand how many demands there are on your time, attention, and resources these days. It is impossible to say yes to everything. Still, there are some realities to be considered. In our UU congregations there is what we refer to as the 80/20 rule. Twenty percent of the people do eighty percent of the work.

Survey after survey shows that Unitarian Universalists, when compared to other religious denominations, are the lowest in giving, both in giving to their church and in charitable giving in general. There's an exercise I have done with several UU congregations. I ask people to imagine winning the lottery and then ask where they would donate their winnings. Often, but not always, not a single person says they would donate to their church.

The shift from no to yes is not to say yes to everything. It is to say no to some things so that your yes will mean something, like saying yes to this faith, your chosen faith, making it a priority in your life. For too long, Unitarian Universalism has been defined by what we are not. It is not enough to say we are not Christian. Not only is it not entirely true – our roots are clearly Christian – it is not enough to help people understand who we are today.

Say yes by wearing your Unitarian Universalist identity proudly. Tell people about who we are, how we are together, and what we stand for in the world. I know you can do this. Speak simply and honestly and from your heart about what this faith means to you and how it has changed your life. We have a habit of being less than generous with our faith. The shift from no to yes can change this.

The third shift is from I to we. It is hard to deny that we live in an “I” culture, a consumer driven society. We are accustomed to shopping for our needs and our wants. If the products and services at one place aren’t to our liking, we take our business elsewhere. The Rev. Fred Muir, minister of the UU Church in Annapolis, Maryland calls for an end to what he calls the iChurch, a particular kind of trap for Unitarian Universalists.

We place emphasis on the individual. We say that each individual has inherent worth and dignity. We believe in the right of conscience and listening for that still, small voice within. We encourage everyone to find their own spiritual path. We believe that each person can have a direct, unmediated experience of the divine. We celebrate individuality, which is a good thing, but does have its shadow side, especially when combined with our overly individualistic and overly capitalistic society.

When we view church involvement through the lens of consumerism, personal preferences take center stage. We make decisions about participation based on what interests us or what affirms our particular beliefs or what rituals make us feel comfortable. When taken to its logical conclusion, this approach leads to one of two things, either a community of the like-minded that is so homogenous as to be antithetical to the diversity we say we value, or, it becomes a community of one, which is no community at all.

To shift from I to we is to understand that any one of us is not here for ourselves alone, but we are here for others. When something in the Sunday service or in church life in general doesn’t resonate with our personal preference, instead of being irritated, we can rejoice that someone else’s needs are being met; someone else is being fed. The shift from I to we is a shift from individualism to individuality, bringing our particular identities into a collective whole, drawing us out of isolation knowing that together we are stronger, together we more courageous, and together, we can make the world a better place. It means a change in our habits and a shift in our culture.

Directly after the service today, we will celebrate 65 years of this congregation’s history and heritage. There is a potluck lunch with plenty of food for everyone. Please stay even if you didn’t bring food to share. During lunch, you are being invited to be cultural anthropologists, exploring the culture of this congregation. Meanwhile, there is a scavenger hunt for the children. At the beginning of the potluck line, you will draw a number which tells your team assignment and which room to go to. Later, we will all convene back here in the

sanctuary to share our findings. In order to get the choir out of here on time to sing the National Anthem for the Crop Walk, we need to work quickly and efficiently.

Hope is our heritage. Hope is in us. The question we must answer is this:  
Will the culture we create help hope to rise?