

Leadership: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow
by Rev. Diane Dowgiert, October 9, 2016

These are days of awe .We watch as an awesome force of nature, named hurricane Matthew makes its way up the coast, disrupting lives, displacing people and leaving a path of destruction in its wake. Our hearts go out to those affected, especially the people of Haiti where hundreds of people died. Those who survived are left to rebuild after yet another natural disaster. We are all left to reckon with the reality of forces that are both larger than ourselves and beyond our control.

On the Jewish calendar, these are the days of awe between Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year and Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. These days of awe are a time for turning. Faithful Jews turn to look at the year just past, making an accounting of their actions in order to turn away from ways of being that caused hurt or harm and return again to right relations with the human family and with their God. These are holy days of turning and returning with intention to sources that give us life, sources that are sustaining of who and what we are.

Here at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Greensboro, these high holy days coincide with the congregation's 65th anniversary. All during the month of October we are turning to look at the past with an eye toward celebration of all that is worthy of praise and a heart toward all that is tender and in need of healing. The life of a congregation is not unlike the life of any given individual in that joy and woe are woven fine throughout their history. The past is an awesome force beyond our control. There is no way to change what happened before, and yet it is a force to be reckoned with. We can neither rest on the laurels of past success nor wallow in the misery of past troubles. What we can do is make an honest accounting and then begin the work of building our lives anew. We begin again in love.

The scriptures remind us that we drink from wells we did not dig, we live in cities we did not build, and we rest in the shade of trees we did not plant. We stand on the shoulders of those who came before. We live our lives in debt to someone else, all those who came before to give us what we have now.

On October 6, 1951, Roger Walke took out an ad in the Greensboro Daily News. The ad invited people to an organizational meeting at the public library, asking, "Are You a Unitarian Without Knowing It? With that act, the Unitarian Universalist Church of Greensboro that we know today was born. Those who gathered got to work organizing themselves to conduct Sunday services and religious education programs, affiliating with the American Unitarian Association

and raising money to rent their first meeting space. They dedicated that space with a simple milk communion, representing human kindness. In thinking about today's service, I had toyed with the idea of recreating that ritual. I began by considering what kind of milk to buy. Whole milk? Two percent? Homogenized? Non-homogenized? Goat milk? Organic? Hormone free? Soymilk for the vegans and the lactose intolerant? Almond milk for the soy intolerant? You see how complicated this ritual could be in today's world. Let's just say I decided to leave it to someone else at some future celebration. Short of an actual milk communion, what we can do today is hold that intention that the founders had, an intention of simple human kindness.

When Roger Walke took out that ad and convened that first organizational meeting, I wonder if he was thinking of himself as a leader, or if he was simply responding to an inner yearning for a liberal religious community to which he could belong. I wonder if those who came to that first meeting thought of themselves as leaders or if they were simply responding to an inner yearning to be part of something larger than themselves. I wonder if they were simply responding to an inner yearning for a liberal religious presence in their community to be a force for forwarding principles and values of human worth, of freedom of religious thought, of compassion, equity, and justice, of an earth made fair and all her people one.

Moses didn't think of himself as a leader. You remember the story of Moses, the Hebrew born child raised as an Egyptian prince who eventually led the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt into the wilderness and finally to the promised land. When the God of the Hebrew people first told Moses that he was to go to Pharaoh and demand that he let the people go, Moses said, "Not me Lord. You must mean someone else. You must mean my brother Aaron. He doesn't stutter like I do. Pharaoh will listen to Aaron. Not me, Lord."

Moses didn't think of himself as a leader. He did respond to the call of his God, a call for his people to live in a promised land where they could practice the religion and covenant of their ancestors, a covenant rooted in love and the great commandment to love their neighbors as themselves.

Moses and his people wandered in the wilderness for forty years before reaching the Promised Land, a land Moses himself would never enter. He died just as they reached its border.

Now, we could spend time debating the evidence or the lack of evidence to prove the Moses story's factual truth. But, the story need not be factually to reveal truth. In the symbolic language of the Hebrew Scriptures, 40 years is shorthand for "a very long time." On the face of it, Moses wasn't a very good leader. It took him a very long time to reach his goal. It turns out that the people needed a very long time – two generations – to unlearn the habits of slavery. They had to learn how to live in freedom and how to govern themselves.

When the Hebrew people finally reach the Promised Land, they find it isn't quite the land of milk and honey that they had envisioned. The land was already occupied by people who didn't exactly welcome them with open arms. They were faced with a whole new set of challenges and lessons to be learned.

Maybe the Promised Land isn't dependent on a specific geographic location but more a matter of how we occupy the place we are. Maybe the Promised Land is something we achieve when we live the covenant.

The turning we do at this time of year is first an inward motion, turning to look within. We look within to honestly ask if we are using our gifts to draw down the prison door, hoard bread, abandon the poor, or withhold love, to borrow the words of Rebecca Parker's poem, or have we been using our gifts to bless the world? Have we been waiting for someone else to respond to the call that is truly ours to fulfill?

Next we turn toward each other, drawn into community. A community is woven together of many relationships. Its patterns are rich and varied, formed of events and milestones, of child dedications, coming of age ceremonies, weddings, and memorials. Sometimes the tapestry is drawn close as a source of comfort and nurture. Sometimes it is stretched wide to reach into the world as a banner for justice. Inevitably there are places that are torn and frayed, places in need of mending. We turn to each other to restore right relationships – sometimes by making amends and by the giving and receiving of forgiveness.

I have now been here for two months as your interim minister. I have come to know that you are a warm, welcoming, caring people committed to the well-being of each other and your church community. Not only that, you are strong and courageous. My work during this interim time is to notice habits and ways of being together that keep you less than free to fulfill your promise and your call to grow a wider, more inclusive circle in order to bring more love, more justice, and more compassion into our world today.

Your work, right now, is to turn and take a collective look at your past – not as a refuge from the realities of today nor as a millstone upon which to grind axes of past hurt and disappointment, but as fertile ground in which to grow your spirit, to grow together in the ways of love and service.

All this month you are being invited to add to the history wall here in the sanctuary. Add or highlight the events that were important to you. Write about how they felt or still feel today. Before I leave church today, I'm going to add my feelings of gratitude for the founders of this congregation. Without their vision and their leadership, we would not be here today to rekindle the flame of their passion and their yearning for a community such as this. It's amazing what they accomplished – starting with nothing more than a vision, they gathered a community and built it a home, several different homes actually, before finally landing here. I'm wondering how many of you present today had a part in building this current home, either with your labor or your financial contributions. (Please stand if you are willing and able.) If any of you have photos of the groundbreaking or the construction of this building, please bring them and add them to the history wall. Please bring any photos you have of the life of the congregation.

I hope you will be here next Sunday to celebrate this milestone event of a 65 year anniversary. We'll celebrate with a pot-luck meal and do some fun activities together, learning more about the depth of this wonderful congregation. Your work as a congregation, based on who you are today as a people, is to cast a vision for the future and to nurture the leaders needed to fulfill the vision.

Everyone has gifts to offer to the future of this congregation. When the call comes to serve, the temptation may be to say, "Not Me Lord! Ask Someone Else," until you remember that within these walls everyone is Someone Else, including you. We are the ones we've been waiting for.

These are the days of awe when we reconcile ourselves with the past and pledge to begin again in love. Hurricane Matthew will turn again and return to the sea, leaving the land it touched and its people forever changed. Like hurricane Katrina did, this one again revealed how privilege plays out in our world. The most vulnerable were the most devastated. These are days of turning and returning to who and what we are, returning to our deepest values of love and service, not for ourselves alone, but so that we may better serve and bless the world.

Hashiveynu – translated, the words of the song mean “Turn thou us unto thee O Lord and we shall be turned. Renew our days as of old.”

May it be so.