

The Keys Are In Your Pocket: New Member Welcome –Rev. Lori Staubitz

It is a great privilege to journey with others on a religious quest. We come from many different experiences. We may come joyful, bearing gifts of creativity, talents, time and treasure; or we may be burdened by personal loss, limits, sorrows and fears. But we all come with our collective hope for a bright future and the promise of greater fulfillment.

Today we say welcome to our New Members. WELCOME to this “incredible journey!!!

Together we are following a path to freedom....but freedom is only one aspect of our living faith tradition.

Liberal Theologian James Luther Adams reminds us in his book

“On Being Human Religiously “That too many people the attraction of liberalism has been its openness, its tolerance, its freedom, but unchecked, these qualities can produce the mind that is simply open at both ends; they can spell the loss of character and serve as an invitation to confusion, sheer vanity and meaningless freedom-(resulting) in a diffused identity.”

Rev. Fredrick Hedge was a Unitarian Transcendentalist and one time president of the American Unitarian Association a century before the merging of Universalist Church and the Unitarian Association in the early 1960's. But his perspective on the purpose of the church rings true to our central vision and mission as a liberal congregation today

“The church must gather into one all the elements which are scattered. “ He urged the church to yearn for a public grace of which individuals become partakers through their social relationships and not by way of some private negotiations.” –An Examined Faith-JLA edited by George K. Beach

It is easy and a joy to get involved in the excitement of creating something new; a new relationship or marriage; new ways of being that can lead to a better life; and in our case here this year, the adventure of a new start progressive congregation here in Southern Maryland. However, it is equally easy to get discouraged.

When things get overwhelming...our tendency is look around frantically for ways to “correct” our problems rather than pacing ourselves for the long run. We face this struggle in our personal lives as we strive to balance competing needs for time and resources in our relationships and we tend to do this when we are faced with struggles as a religious community.

Well, I have to tell you that losing my keys is one sure sign that all is not right in my life. Everything can be going well, but when I lose my keys...I know I better pay closer attention. Perhaps you too have a similar “red flag” in your life...

Most often, We do not look within to find the solution to our problems... we tend to look everywhere else for possible solutions...with keys...we begin to look in the obvious places...and then frantically turn to the more obscure, remote possibilities...

When this does not turn up the desired results...the temptation is to turn our gaze to those around us..." What did YOU do with the keys?" can be heard from even the most peaceful of households.

It isn't until we take a moment to pause and reflect – a moment to free ourselves of our anxiety, worry, hurriedness and blaming of others that we can begin to remember....

We do this when we lose our keys and we do this when we lose our way as a religious people..

"Unitarian Universalism draws on our Jewish heritage as we aspire to be a religion of community, of ethical imperatives about the way a group of people should conduct their communal life, treat each other, and treat others who are not part of the community. So in every story that comes out of the Hebrew Scriptures, there is a communal/ethical piece, as well as a person/spiritual/experiential piece. So too, with the Exodus.

As the story is told, the ancient Hebrews fell on some truly hard times. Enslaved, they have lost not only their freedom but begin to lose their identity as a religious people. A charismatic leader rises up, inspiring trust and hope, leading the Israelites to seize their freedom. At first there is rejoicing.

But not for long. Freedom sounds good but the steps to win it are daunting.

The ancient Israelites follow Moses. In the dark of night, with nothing but what they could carry on their backs, they fled their Egyptian captors and walked off into the wilderness that lay between them and the promised land.

"I will give you dreams in the desert to guide you safely home to that place you have not yet seen . . . I am sending you into the wilderness to make a new way and to learn my ways more deeply . . . "Alla Renee Bozarth

The journey of the faithful requires a strong measure of trust, commitment and integrity of spirit.

The faithful in many religious traditions believe that we redeem our wilderness experiences by learning new ways of being. The story of the Israelites in the desert is a story of formation.

Almost immediately after fleeing Egypt, the whining and complaining started. Many of the Israelites longed for the security of the past." - used By Permission: Excerpts from Wandering in the Wilderness: A Passover Reflection, A sermon by Rev. Roberta Finkelstein

This ancient journey, as is ours, was a journey of letting go of the past to be transformed as a people who are bound together by a common vision and purpose who are moving together into the future.

"Sing songs as you go, and hold close together. You may at times grow confused and lose your way. Touch each other and keep telling the stories. Make maps as you go, remembering the way back from before you were born." - Alla Renee Bozarth

In those words we find the key to creating a religious identity – to being together as a people- to take time to celebrate, to create tools that help us remember who we are and what we are to do.

Wilderness Prayer by Rev. D. Herndon

"Teach us once again the ways of loving kindness, that we may spread loving kindness from within our souls, We can feel like strangers even to ourselves at times; help us, once again, to feel the steady patience at work within us, that we may learn to sustain one another on our journey together."

"Come, Come whoever you are, wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving, ours is no caravan of despair...come, yet again come....

Is one of our hymns which speaks of journey, welcome and hopefulness.. Yet there is a counter verse that speaks to the struggle of living in religious community....

Though you've broken your vows a thousand time....3x....

This round reminds us that struggle for integrity is at the heart of religious community...but so is grace and forgiveness and the will to begin again and again in love....

We will be fooling ourselves if we believe that we any one of us is immune to the trials and tribulations that come with living intentionally in religious community.

Conflict in and of itself is neutral...a sign that things are not static but moving...How we chose to address conflict makes all the difference between creative, dynamic interchange that can lead to greater things or destructive patterns that will destroy relationship and the bonds of community.

There is a lovely story from Zen Buddhism that I think brings home our need to slow down when the journey gets rough.....

One of the devotees in the temple was well known for his zealotry and effort. Day and night he would sit in meditation, not stopping to eat or sleep. As time passed he grew thinner and more exhausted. The master of the temple advised him to take more care of himself. But the devotee refused to heed his advice.

" Why are you rushing so, what is your hurry?" asked the master.

" I am after enlightenment," replied the devotee, "there is no time to waste."

" And how do you know," asked the master. "that enlightenment is running on before you, so that you have to rush after it? Perhaps it's behind you, and all you need to encounter it is to stand still – but you are rushing away from it." - - *Zen*

Earlier in our service I handed four keys to our new members...symbols of the freedoms, responsibilities and accountability that we share as members of this community.

The first key represents Our Unitarian Universalist Principals. For as members, we are called to open ourselves up to living by these values as well as keeping watch to ensure that these are held secure for all others.

The second and Third keys gives us free and open access to both our by-laws and our strategic plan....foundational documents that detail our structure, function and mission and remind of who we are and what we say we want to do.

Our last key provides us with direct access to one of the most important tools we have for living in right relationship. We usually need to dig down pretty deep for this one. When we find it, it is very important that we use it....this key opens us up to the heart of this community....It calls us to remember to live in Covenant with one another...and to uphold this promise in order to create a safe place for growth.

I believe one of the most important aspects of the Exodus story of Freedom and Religious Formation in the wilderness is the deeper, more subtle story of how the people are mistaken in the emphasis they place upon destination....that it does not matter how quickly we get anywhere if our journey itself is not a faithful and transformative experience. In fact, many contemporary Jews do not envision the Promised Land as a place, but as way of being in relationship.

trying to be good

may simply mean

you stop running

and take time

to be quiet, (to give thanks)

and discover who you are

where you have been , (and where you are going next) , , ,

adapted from *Sister Corita Kent, Carmelite –Nun*

Benediction: We close with these words by Brian Andreas

"In those days , we finally chose to walk like giants and hold the world in arms grown strong with love.

There may be many things we forget in the days to come,

But this will not be one of them.

So may it be, Shalom and amen.