

SLOW DANCING

GLOBAL CHALICE LIGHTING

Bless the work that we do,
And the silence that falls upon us,
And the joy that stirs within us.
And let praise rise to our lips
Naturally out of the fullness of our hearts.

—Sheila Crosskey, British General Assembly of Unitarian and Free
Christian Churches

OPENING WORDS—Wm Schulz, #429

Come into this place of peace
And let its silence heal your spirit;
Come into this place of memory
And let its history warm your soul;
Come into this place of prophecy and power
And let its vision change your heart.

MEDITATION AND PRAYER—Robert Weston, *Seasons of the Soul (adapted)*

Out of doors
The colors of bright autumn and the bright sun
Tell the beauty of that which dies
But always comes again.
They speak directly to the heart
Of the eternal which outlives all moments
And yet lives only in them,
Outlives all forms, yet comes again in them as in ourselves.
It is said that there is nothing new in the world,
No thoughts, even, which others have not thought
Yet every thought is new to those who for themselves
Think it for the first time.
Each miracle of life is also rebirth, life born again,
Though every individual be new,
Existing at birth for the first time.
Life in each one, as in the leaf and flower,
Accepts and yet cheats death.
There is a sadness in the autumn leaf
I feel a sorrow that its beauty dies
And feel its message for the lives of those,
As of myself, whom I have know and loved.
The leaf comes not again, though other leaves
And flowers will bloom, and other lives,
Richer that we have been, shall take our place.
Perhaps the autumn teaches us a wiser grace
Through which we live, by learning to let go.

SERMON

How does it feel to be in transition? Maybe you are changing jobs. Maybe you recently moved or are about to move. Maybe you started a new relationship or just got married. Maybe you adopted or gave birth to a child. Maybe your child is about to go off to college or leave home. Maybe someone in your family died and you are getting used to life without their immediate presence in your life?

Transitions are rarely easy or comfortable. They happen when something has ended and something new is beginning. Endings often involve pain. Finding a new path involves confusion, and beginnings often involve a few falls before one "finds one's footing."

Consider the transition we are involved in right now as a country. No matter what happens, we will have a new president on January 20, 2009. In the meantime, though, we are living in a time of uncertainty. And as if to exacerbate our anxiety, our financial system seems to be crashing and burning. Our current president tries to offer assurance without much success. What will the next few weeks bring? We just don't know.

This congregation is also in transition. Fortunately, however, you have a resource the country does not have. You have an interim minister. The essential goal of interim ministry is to provide a safe bridge between the past and the future. This bridge is unique, though, in that it is not just a way to get from here to there. The bridge of interim ministry is a process that encourages you to engage with the past, examine your present ways of doing things, and prepare yourselves to meet the future with a renewed sense of vision.

Obviously, this takes time. Any transition takes time. That's why a number of folks these days have been quoting the saying: "go slow to go fast." And that's why I chose "Slow Dancing" as a title for this sermon. I'll get to the dancing part later on. First let's look at why people are recommending going slow.

Transitions present both challenges and opportunities. Making use of the opportunities takes time, as do the challenges of dealing with past and present realities. Going slow makes it possible to proceed through the process in a deliberate way, as opposed to rushing and not fully experiencing or completing the steps involved. When we rush through things, we may actually end up taking longer, and we are likely to have poorer results than if we take the time to do the full process.

Management expert Kevin Eikenberry puts it this way: "In our zeal to finish, we start too soon and too quickly... I often find that people are so ready to start 'doing' that they won't plan... They spend their planning time trying to convince me to let them get started."

He goes on to talk about going slow as an investment:

One reason people move into action so quickly is that they think their time is so limited. We are all busy, and the timeline to complete a given task may seem short. Remind yourself that the time spent in thought, preparation and practice will be time invested in better outcomes. We don't like to lose or waste our time (or money), but we also know that investing our time and money is a wise choice. Going slow at the start is an investment, not a cost.

The wisdom of the interim ministry process has been developed over many years by leaders in different religious traditions: traditions that, like ours, have what's called congregational polity. This means that the congregations choose their ministers. They also chose what aspects of the interim ministry process they will participate in—and how fully they will engage in them.

Let me outline that process for you now and encourage your engagement with it. There are five steps in the process. These steps are called the developmental tasks of interim ministry. They are part of an interwoven process. Although each step has its own goals, they may occur somewhat at the same time.

The first step is to claim and honor the past and heal its griefs and conflicts. Coming to terms with your congregation's history is essential for moving on.

Have you ever lost a family member or close friend with whom you had unfinished business? Do you remember waking up at night having conversations with them in your head and wishing you could have told them how something they did made you feel? Unexpressed anger and frustration can keep us locked in the past and can lead us to repeat patterns that got set up perhaps unintentionally following a loss or painful separation.

You need to go back and clean out that past debris. It's like cleaning out the basement. Nobody really wants to do it, but when you finally get around to it, you may be amazed at what you find. There might be a few treasures. But probably there's also a lot of junk you just don't need anymore. And if there are painful memories buried there, when you unearth them and view them in the light of where you are today, you may finally be able to make peace with them and let them go.

In the process, you may find yourselves moving on to the second step of interim ministry: recognizing your unique identity—its strengths, needs, and challenges. Having let go of the past, you may even feel like you're discovering a new identity. Instead of being locked into self-limiting ideas about yourselves, you may find you are able to move forward in a new way.

As Unitarian Universalists we don't generally believe in being born again. And yet, when we come through a difficult time, we may experience a sense of release

and new energy. Some of us feel this way when the crocuses appear each year—like winter is finally over and spring is on the way.

Because it is a step in the process and you're not there yet, it's impossible to say what the new identity of this congregation may be. But the wisdom of the interim ministry process offers hope that coming to terms with past history will in fact lead to a new awareness of your unique identity as a group.

For this process to work, however, you need to trust it. And, you may ask, why should you trust this process?

As I understand it, last spring there was considerable discussion as to what sort of minister you wanted to have next. The consensus was to search for an interim minister, someone to guide you through a process that would potentially enhance the congregation's future health and progress. So I suppose the best reason to trust the process is that you chose it. But because this is a process, you won't know the result until you are through it.

Artist Matthew Isherwood reflected on what it means to trust the process, saying: "I learnt that sometimes you only realize the purpose of what you have been taught when you feel it coming together at the end."
(<http://www.flickr.com/photos/adviceposters/309557081/>)

I do hope it will come together for you at the end. In the meantime, let me go on to describe the other steps in the interim process.

A third important step involves allowing new leadership to emerge. This includes understanding appropriate leadership roles of minister, church staff, and lay leaders. It may include looking at how the church is organized, like what the committees are and whether or not they still serve the functions they were set up to fulfill. As changes are made, the bylaws may need to reflect new ways of doing things.

Already the board has created the new staff position of administrator. And the job of sexton is being looked at and clarified. A new committee has been created—the Caring Committee—to respond to the pastoral needs of the congregation. And the Worship Committee has established a new Worship Assistant program to provide consistency in worship leadership.

The fourth step involves renewing connections with the Unitarian Universalist Association and its resources, and especially with the Clara Barton District which is where your congregation is located. I am here as a result of my connection with the UUA, and I have already made considerable use of resources available through the district and UUA offices. Much of the process of interim ministry I am describing to you this morning comes from those resources.

Next weekend at least one church member and I will be participating in the New England Fall Conference—on the Future of Unitarian Universalism. I hope in time more of you will become involved in the wider UU community.

Last but not least, interim ministry is about renewing the church's vision, strengthening its stewardship, and preparing for new growth and professional leadership. If we are successful in this process, you will be ready to embrace the future with anticipation and zest.

It is my job as interim minister to guide you through this process, but I cannot do it alone. Ministry is a relationship, not unlike that between dancing partners.

This past spring I attended the annual conference of the Metro New York District. The Rev. Tracey Robinson-Harris, director of Congregational Services at the UUA, gave a marvelous presentation called "Shared Ministry: Lessons from the Dance Floor." She even brought her ballroom dancing instructor along and they demonstrated each of the following lessons in dance form. Think about these lessons the next time you watch "Dancing with the Stars."

The first lesson is to start as you mean to continue. This is why I am taking this time to talk to you about interim ministry. I hope that we can be partners in this dance.

The second lesson is about connection. Some people think one of the dancing partners leads and the other follows, when in actuality skilled dancing requires a mutual and active connection. A certain amount of tension is needed, and resistance is part of the game. What makes it work is the ability of both partners to recover from the inevitable mistakes.

Lesson three is that there is always more to learn. Throughout our time together I will actively seek learning opportunities and resources to improve my ability to engage with you in this interim process. I hope you will do the same.

Lesson four is interdependence. What goes around comes around. When each of us is actively engaged in the process, we will make progress. There will be healing, and at the end you will be ready for a successful relationship with your next minister.

Lesson five is about the importance of knowing how to navigate the terrain. The work we do together is our dance floor, our terrain. I will do my best to bring to you relevant information from the gathered wisdom of those who have extensive experience in interim ministry, and I encourage you to seek out additional knowledge as well.

Lesson six is to build your repertoire, making sure your tool kit is rich and varied. It would be extremely boring if we did the same dance over and over, so we will

try different things, different ways to accomplish the developmental tasks of interim ministry. I hope you will participate in whichever of the ways work for you.

The final lesson from the dance floor is that leadership comes in many styles. You may not think of yourself as a leader, but you undoubtedly have gifts to share that can be part of helping this congregation fulfill its true potential. Don't be shy. Don't be afraid to let your light shine. Your style of leadership may be just what is needed for some very important aspect of strengthening this congregation and preparing it for the future.

So, will you do this dance of interim ministry with me? Will you take the time to go through this process? I hope so.

You have many important elements of a successful congregation, one that can well represent the gifts and promise of Unitarian Universalism in this community. In time, I believe you will also be in a position to call a minister who will be your true partner in growing this faith here and beyond.

In conclusion, I'd like to share with you a poem called "SLOW DANCE," written by a young girl who was terminally ill.

Have you ever watched kids
On a merry-go-round?
Or listened to the rain
Slapping on the ground?
Ever followed a butterfly's erratic flight?
Or gazed at the sun into the fading night?

You better slow down.
Don't dance so fast.
Time is short.
The music won't last.

Do you run through each day
On the fly?
When you ask: How are you?
Do you hear the reply?

When the day is done
Do you lie in your bed
With the next hundred chores
Running through your head?

You'd better slow down
Don't dance so fast.

Time is short.
The music won't last.

Ever told your child,
We'll do it tomorrow?
And in your haste,
Not see his sorrow?

Ever lost touch,
Let a good friendship die
Cause you never had time
To call and say: "hi"

You'd better slow down.
Don't dance so fast.
Time is short.
The music won't last.

When you run so fast to get somewhere
You miss half the fun of getting there.
When you worry and hurry through your day,
It is like an unopened gift....
Thrown away.

Life is not a race.
Do take it slower
Hear the music
Before the song is over.

EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE—Martha Munson, Worship Web

We extinguish the chalice here that it might glow gently in our hearts. May it light your path as you leave this place. May it guide your way until we are together again.

BENEDICTION—V. Emil Gudmundson, #693

And now, may we have faith in life to do wise planting that the generations to come may reap even more abundantly than we. May we be bold in bringing to fruition the golden dreams of human kinship and justice. This we ask that the fields of promise become fields of reality.

Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, and our service to the world begins. Let us go in peace.