

Leaning Toward Community
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Woodinville Unitarian Universalist Church
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Hello Woodinville. And thank you. For entrusting your Search Committee to hold all of your hopes and dreams and to translate them in the process of selecting a minister to walk with you on the path of shared ministry. Thank you for responding to the call to commit to financing ministry in tough economic times. And for not only supporting your hopes and dreams but far exceeding your goal. And thank you, Stan Crow wherever you may be; I hope I do you proud. Hello Woodinville. Are you ready? Are you ready to walk uncharted territory leaning into ever deepening community? Are you ready to make this space, this place, this community, holy? Not only by naming and striving for what is best in you and what you long for but also by naming and bringing to it the things that rattle around in your mind on sleepless nights and bring you sorrow? Will you long for the comfort and presence and celebration of one another week after week, month after month, season after season, year after year knowing that here, in this place you can bring all of who you are? Are you ready to build upon what you have quite literally built with your loving hands and hearts? The connections, the care, the service, the seeking, and Spirit? Are you ready to do the work of blessing one another and our world? Will you allow me to accompany you in this work of blessing?

I have to tell you right off that I am a bit afraid that the Search Committee may have led you to believe that I walk on water. Let me tell you as clearly as I can that I do not walk on water. I float. A skill that has served me well personally and professionally. For one thing, I have a lot less far to fall as I am already prone. Plus I rather enjoy the view. I am so human with all of my own foibles, eccentricities, wounds, vulnerabilities and some times more, some times less, endearing quirks. Which makes me quite simply, just like all of you. Except that I am your minister, one who is literally “called out from among you.” One who has agreed with an open

heart and open arms and eyes and ears to be with present with you wherever you are.

It was while pondering all of this that I stumbled on an article on ministry written by John A. Bernstein in the Alban Institute's weekly e-mail. The Alban Institute is a church consulting organization. Bernstein says:

Not every good preacher is skilled at organization. Not every good pastoral caregiver is eloquent in the pulpit. Not every manager who is good at "minding the store" knows why we do what we do, except that it says so on the organizational flow chart. Our gifts differ, and so too do our liabilities and vulnerabilities. Part of the magical thinking that infects call committees and personnel committees is the expectation that the new hire or new call will include all of the strengths of the previous occupant of the position, plus those that were conspicuously absent. At some point, a reality check sobers everybody up. Then authentic and faithful ministry can begin.

So I am simultaneously torn between wanting to ride the excitement of my perceived perfection into the sunset as long as possible as well as wanting to commit the first major boo-boo so that we all can get down to the work of faithful and authentic ministry. And then the words of Mary Oliver echo:

You do not have to be good. You do not need to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting. You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.

I offer those words to you as well. You do not have to be good. Behaving would be nice. You do not have to be perfect. But you do not have to be good as in nicey nicey. Community is not about being good. It is about being authentic both individually and collectively. It is about honesty. It is about voluntarily entering into a covenant of right relations with one another. In authentic community we may not have to repent but we do need to acknowledge that covenant may be broken and work will

need to be done to restore it. Authentic community is made up of a cacophony of voices that at times create dissonance and at other times create harmony resulting in a larger sound and voice. It is not about the domination or tyranny of one voice or a set of voices, lay or clergy. It is about lifting each other up, renewing and restoring our faith in our selves and in life and the world, about providing bread for the journey of justice. In authentic religious community we invite each other to ask and explore questions of ultimate meaning. We listen deeply to draw out and to understand and to see one another. We hold the mirrors for one another without judgment but rather with wishes for healing and wholeness. In religious community we mark our days and life passages with ritual. Here is where we can lay it all down and lift it all up.

In her essay in the book *A People So Bold*, the Rev. Victoria Stafford says:

The church exists, in part, to remember- to rescue from a vast silence the stories that might not otherwise be heard, to ask questions that might not elsewhere be asked, to celebrate victories and mourn losses that might otherwise be forgotten, to bless what might go unblest.

This what we do for one another when we lean into and toward community: we bless one another. We do it in such simple ways that we are often unaware of them. In unselfconscious kindnesses. With follow ups to a joy or sorrow shared. By remembering anniversaries of deaths. By sending cards or e-mails or calling. By sharing silence. By sharing food. By refusing to see a person through the eyes of the world's stereotypes. By asking questions. By being hospitable and welcoming to the stranger. As a magnet that was in a gift shop in the Phoenix airport said, "Always assume that your guest is cold, tired, and hungry and act accordingly."

When folks come through the doors of this church, they may be cold to the bone from some storm they are weathering, tired in that specific way that pain creates, and hungry for something perhaps they cannot even name. And then there are those

who just saunter in ready for the party. There is a line from the Rumi poem that is missing from the song we so often sing. We sing, “Come, come, whoever you are, wanderer, worshipper, loving of leaving, ours is not caravan of despair, come yet again come.” The missing line? “Even though you’ve broken your vows a thousand times...” It is not just the newcomer or stranger that needs welcoming. Old timers do to. Because many of us struggle in a wide variety of ways silent and isolated. Because so many of us live with the shame of having broken our vows at least 1000 times. We need to know that even so, we, too, are welcome here. That we need not crawl though the desert on our knees parched and alone. That forgiveness is possible. That there is still somewhere in the Great Mystery of Life, hope for us. That there will be those inside these doors who will hold a faith in us even when we cannot. This is how we bless one another and our world. The holy ground upon which we stand has been mixed and poured with the salt of our tears, the levity of our laughter, the poignancy of our stories, the songs that we sing, the prayers uttered, the sounds of children, and the hopes that we dare to sow.

Victoria Stafford writes:

Religion holds the accumulated memories and hopes of community, rendered mythically, in stories people cherish, change, and pass on. In these stories, the people's mistakes are told, their losses laid out, and their dreams of reconciliation and redemption given form. In these stories, people map out the promised land, that place that must always, it turns out, be of their own making.

It is not something I do. It is not even something I lead you to, this promised land. It is something we co-create together.

This promised land is something we co-create together and with the Spirit of Life. We create it with words and actions, thought and intention. Over the coming months, I will be asking you all lots of questions and listening in and between the lines for tone and nuance. Rumor has it you all are an impatient congregation. I would prefer to reframe that and say that you are ready and willing. You have been waiting, leaning into and toward the next level of authentic community.

I want you to tell me what you are passionate about. Who you are when you are at your best, when you are most alive, when you are most engaged in this community called Woodinville Unitarian Universalist Church. I want to know what wild dreams you dream for the precious life of this community. I want to know what song it is that we will sing together on Sunday mornings. I will want to hear your stories, individual and collective. As Victoria Stafford wrote, "History is the record not of what happened but of what is recalled, what will be brought forward and redeemed." My friends, bring me your stories and then let them go if the time has come for that. Make room for new stories. For the stories we tell can imprison us, keep us stuck, keep us myopic or allow the inbreaking of light and liberation. Remember that ours is a liberating faith. I think you are wanting and have been waiting to do something new here.

Something you should know about me: I sign my emails with the word "Namaste." I used to use "Shalom" which to me means "wholeness," but others wondered why I wasn't saying "Shalom, Saalam." I worried about cultural misappropriation but it was a man in Nepal who offered me "Namaste" in a way that I truly got it.

"Namaste" can be translated many ways but the one I use is "the Divine in me blesses and honors the Divine in you." Several years ago when on staff at the Mountain Desert District Leadership School, I managed to scare the hell out of the participants with this word. When it was my time to introduce myself, I got up and put my hands together in the mudra I use for greeting folks with the spoken or unspoken "Namaste" and made my way around the circle of 30 + participants looking each of them in the eye and offering my hands to them. Not one of them knew what I was doing. By the end of the week, at the closing circle, when I went around the room, everyone greeted my hands with their hands and a slight bow.

When I was researching the origin and use of the word "Namaste" on the web, I was struck by an article that said when someone shakes hands in a crowd, they can only

greet folks individually and not very many of them. With “Namaste,” you can greet a huge crowd all at the same time. I loved that. So I say to you Woodinville Unitarian Universalist Church, Namaste.

Here are some of the “soft animal this body loves”: the words compassion, tender, gentle, fierce, sacred, holy, Mystery. The hooting of the great horned owl in the fir trees at dusk. The way sunlight paints silent dancing shadows of branches on the walls of my home. The rippling wave of wheat ready for harvest as the wind moves in it. The power and curl of whitecaps on the ocean in a winter storm. The fragrant scent of daphne after winter’s fallow and the yellow of forsythia. The cold and bite of autumn air and the fading yellow and warmth of its sun. I love the earth exploding in Spring. The garden times of summer. I will look here for the eagle, the falcon, the otter, the dragonfly, the hawk, the osprey, the heron, the orca, the loon, the song bird, all of the wild things that fill me with awe and wonder.

I can tell you that I am more interested in being authentic than authoritative. I value depth vs. deception and integrity vs. intrigue. I do not create in a vacuum for to do so creates a vacuum of thought and imagination. I am not afraid to apologize. I will not berate you from the pulpit though I may attempt to gently pull you along with me somewhere or ask you to humor me. I hope I not so much challenge you as invite you to look with new eyes. You need to know that I may remember the name of your dog or cat before the name or names of your children. I make my way through intuition. And though I am interested in how you think and what you think, ultimately, I want to know what moves you and renders you inarticulate before it. I want to know who and what you love, the questions you live with, the things that affect your soul, what makes you laugh, what makes you cry. I want to know your sacred language. I want to know what stories you hold as holy.

I want you to know that ministry is not something that I will do to you but that it is something that we will do together, side by side, hand in hand, accompanying one another. As the singer songwriter Amy Carol Webb wrote: “

I will stand with you

Will you stand with me

We can be the change that we want to see

In the name of love

In the name of peace

Will you stand, will you stand with me

Thank you Woodinville. Hello. Namaste.