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All of life is a journey; it's the journey not the destination; we are all sojourners on this earth. Lauren Bacall said "Standing still is the fastest way of moving backwards in a rapidly changing world." The Buddha observed "it's better to travel well than to arrive. To make sure you get it - the large sign over my home church door reads "One Church, Many Paths."

My favorite bumper sticker simply notes- "All who wander are not lost."

As humans, the metaphor of traveling as a way to describe our progress through life feels very true and reflective of our experience of life. We begin at one point and end at another. Things happen along the way and we look for guidance - maps if you will - on how to do it right.

But is there a right way? Here is gets fuzzy.

A few years back, Karen and I were planning a trip to Germany to visit my daughter, who was serving an internship there. For Christmas that year, Karen got me a stack of travelogue books on Germany, Paris, Ireland so we could spend some time planning that summer trip. We could look through all the pictures and descriptions and figure out what where we wanted to go and what we wanted to do.

This is one way to travel - investigating, planning, and trying to prepare for eventualities.

Another way of traveling is throwing a backpack in the back of a car and just start driving. Let the open road be your guide and discover things along the way.

Another journey - a totally different experience.

Is one better than another? It all depends on the traveler. The truth is there is no "right" way - there is only the right way for you.

Truth to tell, on the road I'm more the toss stuff in a backpack and see what happens kind of girl while Karen loves to plan to the most minute detail. But we've developed a good compromise. We look and plan and set up a schedule - and then we feel free to ditch any part of it and go with the flow of our trip. It works - she

gets the planning aspect that she really enjoys and I get the freedom of following instincts and opportunities as they arise. It's a great win-win. It helps our little family really enjoy our journeys.

Now it's taken us a few years to work out this compromise – many conversations and some real time trips. Now we trust that we will be able to negotiate differences and together, we'll have a great time.

Churches, like people, have trajectories through time. Churches take their own journeys and have different ways of working in the world. This community is no exception – and right now it is on the brink of a new chapter in its ongoing life.

It has been a liberal voice in the western suburbs for well over a century– a place willing to learn and to grow – to invite in voices from as far away as India; a place willing to see the world with a wider lens than those around it; a community willing to step outside the God-box that so many of its neighbors held tightly.

For the last thirty years you held a space for informative sermons and beautiful classical music.

You prided yourselves on not being swayed by the emotionalism of fear-based religious teaching. You created a community based on intelligent discourse and appreciation for the offerings of a wider world.

From my conversations and what I have been able to learn, Church was the place to hear about things that no one else was talking about and to discover insights and perspectives which couldn't be heard anywhere else.

It's been a place to learn and grow.

This map has served the community well and making it a welcome home for a few hundred people.

But – over those 30 years - the world has changed. Information is no longer held by the ivory towers of academia or the news outlets.

In fact, information is so available, so all-pervasive that learning something new isn't a challenge at all. Making sense of an avalanche of information might be much more the difficulty we face in today's society. I know that's true for me.

So what is needed today? Where does the church need to go on this next leg of its journey?

What do people come to church for when the old answers no longer fit the questions? The question in front of this community today is- Who are you now?

What does it mean to be church, liberal religious UU church, in this present day and age?

Where do you want to go in the future?

These are really important questions because if you don't answer them you can end up in places you just don't want to be.

You make plans with guidebooks and maps if you have certain destination that you're trying to reach. If you don't care what you find – then it doesn't matter.

But if you do care, then you have to plan.

You have to look at where you've been, take time to assess where you've come from and where you are – and then decide what your next goal might be.

Do you want to be a place of transformation and change?

Do you want to be a healthy and vibrant home to seekers?

Do you want to be a place of shelter against the storms of life?

Then you have to intentionally name that vision and plot a trajectory to get there.

We are talking about this today – at the beginning of a brand new year because we are beginning the work of visioning and planning now.

In the next few months we're going to begin identifying the core reason that people gather here in Hinsdale Illinois and call themselves church.

Now is the time to put some real hard thought and discussion into what the right path forward is for this community – for this church. What does church mean to you today?

And you go into it knowing that there will not be one unified answer. There will be spectrum of interests – from folks who only want a good Sunday morning service, to others who want a church deeply involved in working for justice. The goal is to hear all the voices and then find the path which works for this particular confluence of people.

It sounds hard – but it is not only possible but richly rewarding.

One of my favorite phrases is one I borrowed from the Rev Jim Wallis who's the leader of the evangelical Sojourners organization. He urged religious communities from the right and the left to find common ground by moving to higher ground.

He recognizes that while we may not be able to agree on how to get there– we can begin by identifying a common goal.

So let's start with the bedrock theology of Unitarian Universalism. We all know that Unitarian Universalists covenant to affirm and promote our seven principles. These are broad humanist values which we list on the back of every order of service and which are found in the front of our hymnals.

They are good principles – but as much as we claim them – they are not unique to UU's. They would be agreed to – with slightly different emphasis – by many mainline religious traditions.

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion;
- spiritual growth;
- search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process
- peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

They are good – but they are not what makes us Unitarian Universalists.

So what is it? What is the deep undergirding of our faith?

One could argue that is our commitment to justice. It lives most fully in the way we interpret the First and Seventh principles and it's mentioned in the 2nd & the 5th. The first is our recognition of the worth and dignity of every person, and the seventh is our understanding of ourselves as deeply connected to the earth and each other in the interdependent web of creation.

Because of this understanding of our relationships in the world, we end up being on the liberal end of the political spectrum most of the time. We relate to one another and the world as covenantal beings, people who promise to remain respectful and mindful of the right of all beings to live and breathe and have their being with dignity, hope, and happiness.

It's why so many UU Churches are on the front lines of protesting recent events in Ferguson MO & New York. It's why folks in our church provide escorts for frightened women approaching abortion clinics. It's why our friends in Evanston are sponsoring an Economic Justice Workshop next month. It's why we have a huge number of ministers who actually marched at the original Selma marches 50 years ago and are sponsoring a celebration there in March.

We understand that our worth and dignity is intrinsically tied up in the worth and dignity of the people we share the planet with.

We do not place the rights of the individual high above the common good because we recognize that our actions matter. What we do affects others and affects our environment. Our comfort cannot be rated higher than others' survival.

We get that wonderful chant – No Justice, No Peace; Know Justice Know Peace.

We understand that it's impossible to elevate some of humanity to the detriment of others without throwing the entire balance of the interdependent web out of whack – that damaging some of us damages all of us eventually.

For me, this is the underlying bedrock of my Unitarian Universalist Faith.

We can understand and interpret this reality in which we live and breathe in a number of ways – but justice – justice for all beings – is higher ground.

We trust that a just planet is a safe planet – for everyone.

So what does all this mean in the coming conversation about where this church is going in the future?

All around the country vibrant, growing, exciting UU churches – no vibrant, growing, exciting churches of any denomination – are the one who have a vision of making the world a more just place.

They're the ones imaginatively finding ways to right wrongs in their communities, playfully finding ways to step beyond old ways of thinking, creatively asking how they can make a real difference in the world around them.

They are the churches where people recognize the power of community and where they use that power to change things. They live the change they want to see in the world.

But here's the sad truth. They are the tiny minority in the sea of churches in our country.

It's only a tiny percentage of the churches in our own denomination – despite the catchy slogans and flashy marketing schemes.

Church in the world is in a steady state of decline – across all denominational lines. Why?

One thought is it's because most churches are not gathering their resources to make the world more just. Most churches – even a lot of UU churches with great banners and impressive mission statements – are simply places to feel safe and to hang out with people who are comfortable and familiar.

There's even a term for it – country club churches. Places where the implicit purpose is to create a safe comfortable place where you DON'T have to change.

And please hear that churches do need to provide a place of sanctuary and safety for people in distress and deep need. That's a given. It only becomes a problem when that is the overarching function of the entire community

It is a path. It's one that many, many churches of all stripes and flavors are sticking to. Because it's so much easier than changing. Because the world is uncomfortable enough already thank you very much – because one needs a place of respite and regeneration.

It is possible to simply provide a safe haven for liberals in Hinsdale – you can do that.

A lot of other churches have gone that route and are going that route. It's understandable, but it's not ultimately sustainable or satisfying.

There's a documentary out called “Happy” produced by Roko Belic & Tom Shadyac which explores the true source of human happiness. We'll be offering it sometime in the spring but you can find it on Netflix if you want to look it up.

In an article by Roko Belic, title “The Search for Happiness” he talks with Ed Diener, one of the leading researchers of happiness in the world right here in our backyard at the University of Illinois. Diener explained that “a person's values are among the best predictors of their happiness. People who value money, power,

fame and good looks are less likely to be happy than people who value compassion, cooperation and a willingness to make the world a better place.”ⁱ

What makes us happy ultimately is caring about someone else.

The question before us in the coming months is – who do we want to be in the world?

What excited me most in my conversations with your search committee was the sense that Hinsdale wants to engage with the world. There is a palpable excitement around connecting with the larger denomination; around finding places of connection with other churches in this area.

There is justifiable pride in being a welcoming congregation that welcome queer & questioning folks, LGBTQ folks; in being a Green congregation – one using its resources to support a sustainable life for everyone, a reverence for life congregation which honors all living beings. People here care about making the world a better place.

They care about valuing each and every being and of acting from a deep awareness and commitment to our interconnectedness.

That element is definitely here – and it’s very exciting. But is it the identity of the church?

Is this the mission of the entire church?

This is the work ahead of us. A group is forming to help navigate through the creation of a mission statement for the Unitarian Church of Hinsdale. Contact me or Pam Fodor or a member of the board if you’d like to be part of that process.

But everyone will be taking part. Next week we will start with a special service where space is made to listen to one another. Other events and opportunities for sharing will be planned and held in the coming months.

Everyone will get to explore and share their vision of the future for this community of faith. And then we will do the hard work of chipping that wider vision down to an essential core – to narrowing down a destination into a simple statement of the mission of this church.

Pay attention. Stay involved. Bring your heart, your hands, and your voice to the table. Help make this church stronger and better, to make the world stronger and better, and find yourself transformed in the process.

This is an exciting and transformative time – make sure your voice is part of the conversation as the future maps are drawn.

Amen & blessed be.

¹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/roko-belic/happy-documentary_b_1220111.html - collected 1-2-14