

TRAVELIN' THRU

Rev. Dr. Michael Tino

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Northern Westchester – January 6, 2007

© 2008 MICHAEL JAMES TINO

Each of us is on a journey—a life-long journey from birth to death that never fails to present us with new challenges along the way.

Sometimes, those challenges have led to profound transformation—physical, mental, or spiritual.

For many of us, our journeys have taken us down long roads of isolation and despair, in which our challenges have come from within. Some of us have faced intense periods of self-doubt, others fear of failure, many of us have faced the realization that we have become isolated, blocked from accessing our sources of strength and resolve.

For some, the obstacles we've had to overcome have been ones handed to us by an unjust society—poverty, racism, homophobia, sexism.

Others of us have had to face unhealthy relationships in our lives—abuse, disrespect, mistreatment, codependence, or any of a long list of other behaviors that we might have been forced to endure along the way have presented us with the need to take a new path in our life journey.

And sometimes, those challenges, though they are hard, are just a normal part of life: trying to learn something new, to stretch our brain in ways it has not gone before; figuring out what we are called to do in life; dealing with loss and grief.

Wherever the challenges come from, they lead us into the hardest parts of our personal journeys —the “dark nights of the soul” from which we must find a way to emerge, hopefully with a new way of looking at the world, possibly with a new understanding of ourselves, perhaps with new-found strength.

Whatever their nature, meeting the challenges in our life requires making some meaning from them.

And meaning-making, whatever we write in our mission statement, is what calls religious communities together. One of the reasons we gather in community together is to help one another make sense of the challenges in our life—to help us put life into context. The context of our relationships with one another as much as the context of our relationship with that which is greater than we are.

And so being on that life-long spiritual journey—and supporting each other on that journey is one of the very reasons we come together as a community.

When asked to define our faith, we Unitarian Universalists like to point to our principles. Not meant to be a creed for individuals, the seven principles that Unitarian Universalist congregations covenant to affirm and

promote are unfortunately often read like a prioritized list, beginning, of course, with our commitment to the inherent worth and dignity of every person up there at top.

And since we get to the ideas of justice and equity second—big concepts that are important to us, to be sure—we’re usually out of breath by the time we get to the third principle, acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations, much less the fourth of the seven, the free and responsible search for truth and meaning,

And so today I want us to think about what it means for our congregation to covenant to affirm and promote those things. What does it mean that we encourage one another to spiritual growth? What does it mean that together we are searching for truth and meaning?

This should mean something to us as a community, and it should mean something to us as individuals.

As a community, we have the power to be with one another. We have the responsibility to listen to one another. These are awesome things.

Gary Gunderson, Director of the Interfaith Health Program at the Carter Center in Atlanta, writes:

“Much of what a congregation does on any particular day is tell stories that help people understand the connection between events and relationships. A congregation not only tells stories, but acts them out and offers roles for its members and others in the community to play out. The congregation puts things into context by telling and reinforcing stories that explain who we are and how we should act. It does this not only for individuals, but for families, communities and social movements.”(Gary Gunderson, *Deeply Woven Roots*, pp. 68-69)

Thus, my invitation earlier in this service for to you to tell your story. As a community, we can and must be able to hear each others’ stories. We must make room for those stories to be heard. And as a faith movement without a single story that we claim to be the one true answer, Unitarian Universalists are left with the many stories that each of us bring.

As individuals, we must understand that the commitment to be part of a community of faith is, in part, a commitment to paying some attention to our own spiritual journey.

The Rev. Barbara Wells tenHove, in an essay entitled “Responsibility and Commitment: Why ‘Signing the Book’ Is Never Enough” (pp. 241-248 in Scott Alexander, ed, *Salted With Fire*, from which the following discussion is paraphrased and/or quoted) asks Unitarian Universalist congregations to make membership in their congregation mean something. In doing so, she outlines six commitments that she expects from people who join the congregation she serves:

1. Attend worship services regularly. Wells believes that the communal worship that we create on Sunday mornings is the best way for people of all ages to feel connected to the community that is our Fellowship.
2. Work on your own spiritual growth and development.
3. Serve on a task group. We need to understand, in the words of Suzi Novak’s membership brochure available at our Greeter table, that the Fellowship is us.

4. Pledge at a stewardship level. The financial support of our religious community is an important part of the commitment we make to one another when we become members. If we believe that our Fellowship has something to offer the community outside our doors, we take this financial commitment seriously.
5. Be involved in service to others. Wells writes that “we are called as a liberal religious people to show through our works what we say with our mouths.” This means involvement in some sort of social action that benefits others.
6. Connect to the wider Unitarian Universalist movement. Believe it or not, we’re part of an Association of Congregations that stretches across our continent, and participation in that wider movement—through district work, attendance at General Assembly, or, as we’ll learn next week, a Unitarian Universalist camp or conference, is energizing and powerful.

While all six are important, today I’d like to focus on the second: the responsibility of each of us to be engaged with our own spiritual growth, to be taking the next steps on our spiritual journey with intention. Wells writes:

“The second responsibility on our path to membership is that each of us will work on our own spiritual development. Unitarian Universalists have no creed or dogma. We believe that each of us is capable of discovering religious truth as it is revealed to us in our lives and within our... [congregational] community. It is imperative that we take responsibility for our own spiritual well-being with the support of [our Fellowship]....”

She continues: “From worship services to teaching Sunday school, the [congregation]... should be providing places of religious connection and nurture. But even if it isn’t, as religious liberals we cannot just wait for spiritual growth to happen. If we call ourselves Unitarian Universalists, we are called forth to seek truth and spiritual connections in all we do and all we are.”

If we call ourselves Unitarian Universalists and mean it, we must be active participants in our own spiritual journey.

So in these first days of a new year, when we’re tempted to make our to-do lists, our long lists of resolutions, I want to invite you to commit to spending some time thinking about your own spiritual journey.

Think about the journey thus far. What have been the highlights? What have been the challenges? What have you learned about yourself and the world that shapes the way you act every day? What have you learned about compassion, about calling, about what is really of value in this world?

Think about those things, and consider sharing your story. You might not jump right up to be first in line to give a reflection in our Sunday worship, but you might share your story with a small group—perhaps a small group ministry group, one of our womens’ groups, our men’s group, our midweek mid-day class. Maybe you want to share your story with a smaller group of people—with me, as your minister, or with a friend or two you know here.

In any case, this community will be here to listen.

And then think about where you want your journey to go next—or where you fear it is leading you. I invite you, as you think about those things, to share your thoughts with me—after all, that’s what I’m here for as your minister.

This year, I invite you to be intentional about where you’re going on your spiritual journey, and to make that one of the commitments you make to the other people in this community.

In the song that inspired this sermon’s title, Dolly Parton sings:

*“Well I can't tell you where I'm going, I'm not sure of where I've been
But I know I must keep traveling till my road comes to an end
I'm out here on my journey, trying to make the most of it
I'm a puzzle, I must figure out where all my pieces fit.”*

and then later:

*“Oh sometimes the road is rugged, and it's hard to travel on
But holding to each other, we don't have to walk alone
When everything is broken, we can mend it if we try
We can make a world of difference, if we want to we can fly.”* (excerpts from “Travelin’ Thru, by Dolly Parton)

Holding to each other, none of us needs to be alone on this journey. You might not know where you’re going, but that’s what we’re here for. In 2008, none of us needs to go down this road alone. May it be so.