

Catch the Wave

*Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship
September 27, 2015
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Nothing is lost; be still; the universe is honest.
Time, like the sea, gives all back in the end,
But only in its own way, on its own conditions:
Empires as grains of sand, forests as coal,
Mountains as pebbles. Be still I say;
You were never the water, only a wave;
Not substance, but a form substance assumed.

—Elder Olson

PRELUDE

Imagine, by John Lennon

WELCOME

It's said, "if you want to make god laugh, tell her your plans."

Is this the case? That the universe has no respect for human plans? Or are we more likely to get what we're after in life if we ask for it, visualize it, plan for it?

Today let's consider the prospects and the pitfalls of making plans: for ourselves, for our families, and for our congregation. And even for our world—is there any point in visualizing world peace? Or is it better to just take what comes along?

As we begin, let's rekindle the flame of this chalice with the words of our *covenant*

GATHERING SONG

The Ceaseless Flow of Endless Time #350

RE MINUTE / CHILDREN'S FOCUS *The Old Woman & the Wave*, by Shelley Jackson

Summary: An old woman lives under a wave for years, begrudging its periodic drips of "hello" and even its gifts of fish. A wandering stranger looking for work stops and is asked to go up on the roof and fix the many umbrellas. She muses, "That wave could take someone a long way, if someone were willing to go." The old woman offers, "Take it with you when you go." But the traveler knows that it isn't her wave.

Later the old woman can't find her dog...then discovers he's playing high up on the wave. She goes to rescue him in a wash bucket. Looking down on her umbrella-covered roof, she realizes how silly she has been. She breathes, "OK wave...but gently now." And the wave lays down and takes her and her dog away into the mountainous horizon.

CHILDREN'S BLESSING

We hold you in our love as you go...

BUF WOMEN'S ENSEMBLE

Kinder, by Copper Wimmen

I've decided to be happy.
I've decided to be glad.
I've decided to be grateful for all I ever had.
I've decided to let go of all this pain tonight.
I've decided to let go of all this shame inside.

I know I am blessed.
I know all I ever wanted was this.
I know I don't need more.
I've found what I came for.

I've decided to be open to that little voice inside,
Telling me I'm beautiful, it's good to be alive.
I've decided to be kinder to myself when I feel sad.
I've decided to be grateful to all I ever had.

I know I am blessed.
I know all I ever wanted was this.
I know I don't need more.
I found what I came for.
I've decided to be grateful.

SILENCE (3:00)

MESSAGE

I'm going to begin today with a reading from my colleague Jane Rzepka. It's called, "Along for the ride."

Summary: Getting onto a whitewater raft I was willing to wear awkward protective gear; I was willing to paddle hard and get hit by cold water. But I drew the line at navigation. Sometimes (even though I'm a Unitarian and like to chart my own course), sometimes it's necessary to just go along for the ride."

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I think the author makes a valid point. Sometimes *it is* good enough to allow someone else to catch the right wave, and then for us to just ride along.

But there are risks either way. Riding along puts us at the mercy of the ability of others. Choosing our own path through the rapids puts us at the mercy of our own ability and judgment. And in either case we're subject to the whims of nature and its rogue waves.

Still, as the author notes at the beginning of the reading: Unitarian Universalists have a tendency not to want anyone else to pick out their theological rafts, or ethical routes, through the rapids.

So we make our own plans: choosing one approach and giving up the others.

Economists, who turn abstract ideas into useful predictions have a principle called “opportunity cost.” They remind us that the true cost of anything will also include the value of what we give up in order to get that thing. A simple example is that the true cost of college is not only what is paid for room and board and books, but the missed opportunity of earning wages all those years. This doesn’t mean that going to college is a good or a bad decision, but simply that all costs (including four or more years of lost wages) need to be factored into our decision-making process.

Opportunity cost also applies to how we choose to spend our time. On a Sunday morning, the true cost of coming to church is not just an hour or two of our time. No we also have to consider *what we gave up* to be here. For example to be here today you may have missed enjoying a Seahawks pre-game show ... while sitting with your sister who has only a few months to live.

Our choices are often complex. And there’s no point in feeling guilty about past choices. But hopefully we learn from the past to be fully aware as we make future decisions—as individuals, as a nation, as a congregation. Because some opportunities come once in a lifetime. Still, many other opportunities come like waves, again and again, just waiting for us to embrace them.

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This afternoon your BUF Board of Trustees and staff will be gathering for a time of team building and looking ahead. In addition to talking about our congregational strengths and weaknesses, we’ll be identifying and considering—in light of our congregational mission—what are the opportunities and risks we face together?

How *dare* we entertain such questions in this world of uncertainty? And why should we? I mean, I like this place. It’s a congregation of wonderful people. Why make plans and projections to change a good thing? Especially at a time when we all could use a little stability?

If we change, we will lose some of what we have. On the other hand, if we don’t plan to change, we give up what we might have become. So how do we decide which to do?

All I can say is let’s be fully aware as we face these choices. Let’s pay attention, do our homework, work together.... And let’s celebrate and mourn together - whatever we gain or lose.

And let’s let go of fear. Because it’s hard to make good decisions when we’re afraid.

Let’s stop for a moment to churn things up with a little song. No, to smooth things over. No things are already churned up, and probably cannot be smoothed over, but a song perhaps will enable us to ride lightly over any turmoil and change in our lives.

Close your eyes, if you wish. I’ll sing the first line and you can repeat. It goes: “I do not seek to stop, to stop this wheel of change, I do not seek to stop this wheel of change.”

The second line is this: “But to dance, yes to dance, only to dance within its turning.”

SINGING TOGETHER

Some other time I will preach about “living in the moment.” Today I’m preaching about planning for the future. Are these contrary principles? Or is it a little easier to live in the moment when we have a plan for the future?

It’s hard to live in the moment when we are worried about the future. Worry is not preparation. Planning won’t eliminate all of our worries, but it can help.

Now that I’m settling in to Bellingham, I haven’t thought much about plans for the future. But getting to this point has involved years of planning and follow-thru for me and Jane. During that time, we had some setbacks. But I think our vision for where we eventually wanted to be helped us to stay unified and stay in the flow.

A few years ago, we knew next to nothing about Bellingham and the Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship. Still, having even a fuzzy vision has reduced the anxiety and helped us to deal with unexpected changes along the way. Having a list of the steps required to get here didn’t cause us to become rigid in following that list. On the contrary, it helped us to be flexible... It allowed us to deal with crises along the way, knowing that we could eventually get back into the flow.

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Still, sometimes the wheel of change turns faster than we think we can bear. So for these times it is good to have a place to sit back, and rest. Our reading today suggests that it is possible to get a semblance of rest...by going along for the ride...in a raft, thru churning white water, preferably with good companions. I like to imagine that BUF can be like that.

But our children’s story contains equally vivid imagery, and lessons. The Old Woman and the Wave story suggests that our waves will take us when we lighten up and let them take us. In one sense, the old woman didn’t have much to work with. Just random umbrellas to keep the rain out of her house; a washtub as rescue vehicle. And yet, she also had the wave sending her fish day after day. Sometimes she ate them (I can’t tell if she enjoyed them) and sometimes she threw them back, scolding the wave for being “wasteful.”

I love the metaphors at play here, and the questions they raise: If I’m getting by with the way things are now, is it best to pour myself into *maintaining* things as they are, or to prepare for what might come, or to do neither, but to simply embrace life as it comes?

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A few years back I had the wonderful fortune to spend a week on a beach in North Carolina. For hours at a time and day after day I breathed and studied the dynamics of sand and sea. And I came to understand a few things.

This understanding was intuitive... emotional... mental... and even bodily. I got into the water every day, and spent hours on the sandy beach. And for the first couple of days I could feel the push and pull of the waves even hours after getting out of the water. The feeling was at first a

little dizzying, then eerie, then kind of wonderful. The lesson: the waves can grab you at every level of your being.

Each day I would dig major new sand configurations—some taking hours of time. Some of these I watched collapse as the tide rose. Others I walked away from, and forgot ... only to come back later to find them gone.

I enjoyed watching the creatures who jumped and flew in and out of the waves. Creatures beautiful and bizarre, mostly unconcerned about my presence, though some hostile.

When we humans jumped into the waves it was hard to time a jump just right. We could jump too early. We could jump too late. We could slip and get sucked below by the undertow.

We could sit on the beach too long, thinking: oh the waves are good for a swim, but they'll last forever. Or we could spend so much time jumping about in the water that we'd miss observing, from land, the power with which each wave re-shaped the beach.

We lost things. The waves took my sunglasses. And one child's swimsuit. Through a little foresight we could have prevented both losses.

This summer we got to visit the Oregon coast and to see firsthand that these same dynamics play out on beaches and bays all over the world.

The waves and the tides sustain the life of our coastlines, estuaries, and even inland rivers, from which many of our beaches have acquired their pebbles and sand over thousands of years from millions of square miles this side of the continental divide. It reminds us that we are all connected.

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Tonight we'll have a supermoon, and an eclipse to boot. Even under normal circumstances, the gravitational pull of the moon and all the combined cosmic forces will create about an 18 inch bulge of water on both sides of the earth...creating a big wave twice a day called the tide. The in and out of that wave cycle is essential to the seacoast lifecycle.

That 18 inches of water, in conjunction with land formations, can cause routine tidal elevations of as much as 30 feet, causing rivers to rush backward many miles inland.

The tides remind me of the ancient partnership between the earth and the moon that provides a life pulse that goes on and on. A rhythm, an eternal beat, of which we are all a part.

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I think the story of the old woman and the wave is great. The wave LOVES the old woman. And she doesn't even see it. The wave reaches out, gives her gifts, and waits for her patiently.

Now in reality, does the wave that is our destiny wait for us? Does it cycle in and out of our lives? Or do some opportunities come only once in a lifetime?

I believe that we are on a wave as a congregation—a wave of energy that began rising long before I got here. A wave that involves not only this congregation but the desires in our larger community for a liberal religious presence.

Over this past year we've experienced the rising energies of 50 BUFsters who attended General Assembly, our national Unitarian Universalist annual conference. We had dozens of canvassers for our last pledge drive fearlessly going out to say, "hey, I think BUF is great, tell me what you think ... and how would you like to help?"

We then enjoyed a budget surplus due to your extraordinary generosity; we received a national award for our long-term and comprehensive social justice activities. We've had tremendous attendance at Sunday services, and in the wake of significant staff transitions we fully engaged the ebb and flow of our collective spirit.

Looking ahead we see a huge list of programs for children and adults exploring life, death, and everything in between. Over the past two days we've hosted a young adult retreat, gathering the spirit of about 20 potential future leaders. (They might spread out all over this land but they will have an impact, and BUF will have made an impact). We had an equally well attended greeter/usher training yesterday—because you folks really want to share the prospects of liberal religion with the wider world. And yesterday afternoon about 250 people filled this sanctuary for a program about making difficult choices at the end of life, including voluntarily stopping eating and drinking. About 90% of those in attendance were not BUF members. So you truly provide value, and shape values—in ways that extend beyond these walls, in highly relevant ways.

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But be still I say;
We were never the water, only a wave;
We are not substance, but a form substance assumes.

I call "ministry" everything that we do together here to fulfill our mission. Our ministry is the form. That which we prize beyond all price is the substance. Our work takes on a certain form to meet the changing needs of our community. So different elements of our ministry will ebb and flow over time.

So let us pledge to discover the best shape that we can get ourselves into—the best shape for carrying all that is precious—the best shape for our time. Let us re-imagine the shape of the wave of our shared ministry, and then ride that wave as far as it might take us.