

“A Bright Future Awaits”
Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship
Rev. Julie Stoneberg
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Years ago I came across a newspaper article about Dr. Strangelove syndrome, commonly known as alien hand syndrome. I imagine that for those who suffer from this neurological disorder there can be little humour in it, but I find it both fascinating and darkly comical. Apparently due to a separation of the two hemispheres of the brain, one hand seemingly develops a will of its own, so that the sufferer feels they have no control over its movements. For example, one patient was observed putting a cigarette into her mouth with her 'controlled' hand, following which the alien hand grabbed the cigarette, and tossed it away before it could be lit. In other instances, the alien hand will follow the controlled hand, undoing whatever it does, unbuttoning buttons, turning pages back, etc.

I find this fascinating, I suppose, for its sheer oddity, but also because it speaks to a very human condition. So often we unconsciously work against our best intentions, sabotaging our efforts, unwittingly making progress more difficult. As Paul said in Romans 7:15, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” Now of course, Paul went on to say that such actions made him captive to the law of sin that dwelt in his ‘members.’ The last thing I want to do is to name these ‘alien actions’ as sinful, but rather as part of our very human beings that we would do well to become more conscious of.... but let’s get back to that later.

On this first service of a promising new year, it is important that we consciously mark and celebrate all of the incredible accomplishments of the year we are now leaving behind. There are many, many things that this Fellowship wanted to do and then proceeded to actually do, and to do brilliantly. Here’s what is most certainly a partial list...

- Last summer, with the help of a grant from the CUC, a beautiful and large new sign went up outside our building, making our presence more visible to the community.

- The Board of Directors made a commitment to action by forming the Way Forward Task Force to explore options and to propose recommendations for what Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship should move toward. This required bold and faithful confidence in our capability to make a difference, or as Adrienne Rich says, to 're-constitute the world.'
- Following the end of Rosemary Burris' years of dedicated service, the Religious Education and Personnel Committees were successful in hiring a new Coordinator of Religious Education, Pierrette Derochers-Kavanagh, and her presence and energy has been a blessing for the program and for our children.
- The RE Committee also took a leap of faith in exploring and committing to Spirit Play, an exciting new program for our primary group. A preliminary workshop was led last spring by the CUC's Sylvia Bass West and Karen Burney, and a complete workshop is planned for next month with the program's creator. This shows an incredible commitment to our children and their spiritual growth.
- We welcomed five new members into our Fellowship and the Membership Committee has worked hard to build a foundation from which to create programs that welcome and integrate newcomers. One of those programs is the monthly information sessions that introduce those interested to our Fellowship and to Unitarian Universalism.
- The pod system for Sunday volunteerism has proven to be successful. After a couple of tweaks, you all 'fell into place' (or pod) as greeters and coffee makers and snack preparers. The pod leaders, like Swimmy, have worked hard to shape you into working groups and have seen positive results.
- This community continues to be visible in social justice work in Thunder Bay. Our members are instrumental in the Empty Bowls/Caring Hearts dinner, at Shelter House and with the Friends of Africa Committee that brought Steven Lewis to town this past fall. We give generously to the Faye Peterson Transition House and the Symphony, to name just two, and take part in all

manner of consciousness-raising events, such as the AIDS walk and the Take Back the Night march.

- You've shown a commitment to fundraising for our own congregation. Not only do many members do individual projects to contribute, but we also experimented with a new format for our service auction, one that allows for broader and more equalitarian participation. Although the growing pains were nearly audible, it did work! An evaluation session creatively came up with ways to make it work even better this coming year.
- We have made moves toward embracing a 'whole church' concept of ourselves, by intentionally being more intergenerational in all of our activities. This has included regular intergenerational services that have been both well-attended and well-loved. We've purchased, and begun to use, this projector, for services and for other events...again, making things more accessible to more people.
- We've shown a great commitment to the larger movement; by being a 'fair share' congregation, by making use of CUC resources, and by taking part in the Annual Conference and Meeting. Fifteen members and youth traveled to St. John last spring.
- There has also been a great deal of 'behind the scenes' work on LUF's infrastructure. Many have poured over our bylaws looking for ways to improve them and make them clearer and there has also been work done on our financial policies. This is not glamorous work, but has been done lovingly and with dedication to this community.
- And the one that has affected me most directly has been your support of extending my initial contract and coming up with the resources for me to remain with you through this coming June. I don't have to tell you what a huge step this is - for a traditionally lay-led congregation to embrace professional ministry. You are to be commended for this vision and faith.

It's been quite a year and I applaud you!

So what next? All this (and much more that remains unspoken) has been accomplished and now duly noted. What shall we do next? As I mentioned, the Board created the Way Forward Task Force to work exactly on this...to develop a plan for our next steps. The task force has made a preliminary recommendation to the Board, and the Board is meeting in a special retreat this coming Saturday to further consider that recommendation and to make plans as how best to implement it. (By the way, everyone is invited to that retreat...this is not a 'closed' session, but an open dialogue for all.)

It is not my purpose, and perhaps not even my place, to talk about the specifics of that recommendation here. I believe that this work belongs to the congregation – it belongs to you to name and then to pursue a vision – and it requires the active participation of all of you ... to find your place in the choir, and then to sing out with gusto, all the while remembering that you're one voice in a larger chorus, a single cell in a larger body.

Whatever that vision is, however far the goal, there are some things that will be required of us in order to attain our dreams. We'll need to listen carefully to one another, we'll need to keep our values top of mind, we'll need to focus on the common good, and we'll need to truly rely upon the democratic process. Perhaps more than anything, we'll need to actually believe that we can accomplish something. We'll need to believe in ourselves and speak and act in support of our common vision.

A central assumption to working together toward a goal is that we're in it together. This can be a startling shift, maybe even an epiphany, for us religious liberals who have been fed the pabulum of the modern concept of the autonomous self – who have been rocked in a cradle where the self comes first, with society and community created out of individual selves. Unitarian Universalist theologian Paul Rasor, in his book "Faith Without Certainty", asserts that this subjectivist paradigm has become problematic, and that we cannot adequately satisfy our longing for community until we embrace a different view of the self. The truth is, he says, that we don't first exist as

individuals who then form social groups. The group always comes first, and it defines us. We are social beings through and through.¹

This alternative view of the self, a counterdiscourse to the dominant Enlightenment view, was put forward by philosophers and thinkers such as Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and Dewey. They saw the self as subordinated to the larger historical process. Selves never exist in isolation; they “can only exist in definite relationship to other selves”... the self is an organism in dynamic relationship with its environment. The self is not fixed, but rather is always “in the process of making.”² This is good news for us, I think – it provides a hopeful outlook. Since we are formed in relationship, and since we have the freedom to choose those relationships, we can act to improve both ourselves and our communities. Things do not have to remain as they are.

And therein is another ‘new’ thing on the social scene. There was a time, not so long ago, that our communities, our relationships, were dominated by place. Democracy flowered in the context of small towns where people who were not necessarily family or even friends, learned to participate together because they shared a common fate – they had to work together. The well-being of the whole community depended on shaping and pursuing some common good.³ One of the reasons democracy worked so well in these place-controlled communities was because everyone had to live with the decision of the group.

Douglas K. Smith, in a 2005 article in the UU World magazine called “What Ever Happened to We?” maintains that today, rather than determined by place, our communities are primarily voluntary associations with organizations. By default these voluntary associations are what he calls ‘thin we’s’...thin because they share a motive and an interest but little else. In ‘thin we’s’ we might vote with our feet and also with our dollars, and walk away from a group when it’s not meeting our needs or when it’s not doing things our way. But it is Smith’s contention that we cannot grow and thrive unless we turn our communities of choice into ‘thick we’s, by living and learning

¹ Rasor, Paul, Faith Without Certainty: Liberal Theology in the 21st Century (Skinner House Books: Boston, 2005), 89.

² Rasor, 93-95.

³ Smith, Douglas K. “What Happened to We?” www.uuworld.org/2005/02/feature1.html

together as if our fates are bound up together – because they are. He challenges us to turn our congregation, this community of choice, this voluntary association, into a ‘thick we’ by soul searching together, by determining what we want to do and who we want to be, and then by taking explicit action together. This is the only way we can ensure that our shared values will contribute to the greater good of humanity. In this way, and again, as Adrienne Rich has said, we can cast our lot (or our fate) with those who, age after age, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world.⁴

As you well know, one of the principles of Unitarian Universalism includes the use of the democratic process within our congregations. For that democratic process to have any richness, we have to actually participate in it. And by participating, I’m not referring to showing up and casting a vote, although that is important, nor am I talking only about being willing to voice your opinion, although that is important too. Participation, in the parlance of living democracy, is that conscious and intentional creation of a ‘thick we’, a commitment to being in it together, and to accept the collective wisdom and decisions of the group. Without that commitment to participation and to sticking with it, democracy is vapid. Without that commitment, one can vote, and if things don’t go one’s way, just as voluntarily exit the community, leaving the group ‘thin’ and ineffectual. There is no collective power, no effective collective consciousness, without your commitment and participation. You are ensured a place in the choir, but the choir cannot truly sing without the presence of each voice. You are free to choose... to sing or not to sing.

Living democracy and freedom go hand in hand, but freedom is not easy. It is about making hard choices that require commitment and accountability. Another of our principles, ‘the free search for truth and meaning’ is not meant, I don’t think, to give freedom without responsibility. Freedom is tough. Liberal religion is tough because it requires something of us. It calls us to a search that must be done with integrity and moral agency, perhaps made even more difficult because it is done in the context of

⁴ SLT, #463

freedom, rather than obligation. And if Razor is right, our work needs also to be done in the context of a 'thick we' community.

According to Razor, if contemporary liberal theology lets go of a view of the self as autonomous and adopts the new intersubjective paradigm of the self, it will need to take seriously several themes.⁵

One of those themes is one I've already mentioned, repeatedly, and that is participation. Our work in the work, our moral agency begins with and is constantly fostered in the ability and willingness to interact intentionally with others. By participating in community, we are reminded that "our well-being is deeply connected to the well-being of others and that we can be healed only when there is healing and justice for others as well."

Another theme Razor talks about is identity. We have to know who we are; identity gives us a sense of orientation that permits us to take moral stands. Ultimately, "who we are is always defined with reference to the social context within which our commitments and choices are made." As James Luther Adams once said, "by their groups, ye shall know them." Yet there has been a tendency, in liberal thought, that becoming part of a group leads to a loss of individuality. This is a myth, because in fact, our individuality, can only be understood, and can only develop moral agency, within the context of a defining community. The individual self is strengthened in the presence of a community that supports and challenges that self to be the best it can be. In this particular case, we each need to decide if being a part of this community is how we want to be known, and if it is, then we need to step up and claim that identity.

Today's message is titled "A Bright Future Awaits" and I fear that I've been a little heavy handed about responsibility and commitment and intentionality. We generally resist these things as guilt-inducing obligations. But what I mean to get across is that these are the vehicles that will move us into that bright future; these are the things we need to embrace in order to achieve our goals. And even though many of us can't appreciate popular psycho-religion such as "The Purpose Driven Life," which seems to be built on a foundation of religious and moral obligation, we still want to live

⁵ Razor, 103

purposeful and committed lives. The answer to this tension, I believe, is to understand that responsibility and participation are actually intentional choices made by the free self to help to create a world of meaning. Freely chosen, liberal religion believes that our sense of commitment runs deeper and richer. But we are left to choose.

A better world will not be created ex nihilo. Nor will that better world be created by individuals working completely alone. It will be created out of and by committed communities such as this one made up of committed individuals like you, who choose to toss their lots, and their talents, and their resources, together in rich interdependent existence, and purpose. The vision of a community like that is just brimming with potential and hope.

Moving toward a vision means that the status quo will shift, and rocking the boat makes most of us uncomfortable. When we are uncomfortable or afraid, our 'alien hand' is more likely to show itself, exhibiting unconscious behaviours that do not ring true to the people we would prefer to be. We say and do things that do not serve the common good of this community. I would suggest that most of the time, the people we would prefer NOT to be are those who put self-interest first, who are unwilling to stick with a community of choice when things don't go their way, and who forget that true freedom is imbued with responsibility.

Some say that the democratic process is a balancing act - keeping in tension 1) the collective power of the people and 2) the individual power of the person...and that balancing act might be compared to trying to do two things at once - like patting your head and rubbing your stomach simultaneously. Try it. Okay, now switch hands. Curiously, some folklore says that doing this is actually a cure for a stomach ache...⁶ Could it be that a cure for what ails us requires us to pay attention to both the needs of the individual and the common good of the community? Perhaps we are called to notice the tendencies of the 'alien hand,' to learn from it, and still to make choices that align with our best intentions and highest goals, both for ourselves and for our

⁶ http://www.folkmed.ucla.edu/FMDetail.cfm?UID=22_5491

communities. Indeed, if our fates are bound together, the common good has got to be good for each of us.

I would be the first to say that the recommendations of the task force are hopeful, maybe even aggressive and certainly not for the faint of heart. That's what's so exciting about them. Their recommendations create a vision of what this community can be if it works together toward common goals.

I know for sure that we will need to tap into all of our resources, which means the participation of each and every one of us, in order to maximize our contribution to this world. It's going to require doing more than one thing at once. And I guess that's my goal today. I want to pat you on the back, encourage and celebrate all the action you have taken and will take toward your highest goals, and simultaneously give you something of a kick in the proverbial butt. The potential this community holds is awesome. You have a collective conscience and a moral agency that will change the world. I encourage you to embrace it and to trust it and to act on it together. A bright future is in your hands, both of them, all of them.

Blessed be and amen.