

It's In Your Hands
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Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship
June 10, 2007

As usual, in preparing for today's message, I did some surfing on the Internet...to see what little pieces of wisdom and information I could find...in this case related to relay races and relay batons. I came across a website about an annual relay race that is held in Idaho, a fundraiser for kidney disease and organ donation. In fact, the race was held just yesterday, and is a 62-mile race, run in 12 legs by teams of six. The website includes a rather humorous description of 'how the race works in 10 easy steps.' It says:

1. Get up really early in the morning (and that's because the walker start times are between 2am and 5am!)
2. Think, "I want to go back to bed."
3. Think, "No. Must get up - must run."
4. Run quick. Like a bunny.
5. Stop Running. Watch someone else run.
6. Think, "Oh no, it's my turn again."
7. Run Again. Quick like a turtle.
8. Cheer as everyone else finishes the race.
9. (Most important step) Go to Party!
10. Think, "That was fun. Must do again next year!"¹

While this list leaves out some important stuff, it seems to me to relate well to the relay race that is the ministry of this Fellowship - that is, it's a pretty accurate accounting of the way we might approach our work together. Our ministry together is a relay... there's not one of us who can be the baton carrier all the time, and so we take turns, in order, as a team, that we might succeed.

One important piece that is left out of the list I just read is defining the race itself...in traditional terms, a race has a beginning and an ending. We want to know where to start and how long we must run. And this is where this analogy breaks down for me...because I actually don't see ministry as a race...or if it is a race, it is a race outside of time and

¹ <http://sawtoothrelay.com/sawtooth/raceWorks.cfm>

space...its map shows no starting gate and no finish line, since the work is ongoing and therefore never complete.

I think the words of UU minister Richard Gilbert describe our shared ministry just as accurately as they describe a life. He has written, "Consider that our lives are always unfinished business; Imagine that the picture of our being is never complete; Allow your life to be a work in progress."² Just so, our shared ministry is always unfinished business, a work in progress. The 'race', if it be one, is not a race with a finish line. It is not a race that need involve frenetic pushes of super-human energy. It is not a race for which we train, run, complete, and then leave to the annals of history. It is not a race reserved only for those with buff, muscular bodies. This race, if it be one, is one which includes all who would join in, which requires that each of us contribute to the best of our abilities, one that is grounded in teamwork and community, and one which asks each of us stay focused on the goal. This race has little, or maybe even nothing, to do with how quickly it gets done – there are no time-keepers and stop watches – but rather, the success of this race depends upon our simple presence on the path...learning, growing, sharing, challenging, questioning, living.

I'd like to suggest that these batons represent this shared ministry. These batons, when held by an individual, symbolize that person's willingness to carry some of the burden, some of the leadership, for a time. Unlike a conventional relay race, here there are an unlimited number of batons – they are available to whoever is ready and willing – and they can be put down or passed along as need be. And so, at this time, having held a Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship baton for these two years, I am preparing to pass the baton along to others – some of you will pick it up and carry it, at least a part of it, and hopefully a new minister will be here soon. But as I'm speaking today, I'd like to ask that you pass these batons along one to another. Hold onto one for as long as it feels right – long enough for you to get a sense of the responsibility and fulfillment that it promises – long enough to know how it feels to hold it – and then, when you're ready to let it go, pass it along. In the time we have here this morning, the baton may never get to you, or you may be passed a

² Gilbert, Richard S. "Life is Always Unfinished Business" in *What We Share: Collected Meditations, Vol II* (Skinner House: Boston, 2002), 61.

baton several times. Accept that the inability to know who will hold the baton and for how long that person will assume leadership is simply a part of the process. Just take it as it comes, acknowledging your willingness to share in this work, leading for a time, and then passing it on – allowing the baton to draw out the gifts you have to share with this congregation.

(Hand out two or three batons.)

You know, the Annual General Meeting is a great time to heighten our awareness of the work that this Fellowship does. That's why, in my report to this year's AGM, I basically listed many of the accomplishments of the past year, in an attempt to help you realize the scope and quality of the work that you do. This is a moment, the Annual General Meeting, to take stock and to celebrate this work...to record your successes and your current dreams...to mark one leg of the race, the past year, as complete...and then to move on, and to keep running.

I know that often, for those presently holding the baton, it can become pretty heavy...it can seem that there is too much to do, that there is so much 'race' ahead of us, so much yet to accomplish, that it is difficult to get into the zen of the lap.

The zen of the lap. Sounds good, doesn't it? To achieve this, I offer a few simple instructions.

- First, keep breathing. In and out, in and out, remembering that all of life is a cycle of giving and receiving. In and out...exerting and resting.
- Remember that nothing is permanent. This is just one leg of the race, one lap. When you tire, there will be someone there to take over, or in the alternative, the baton may need to be put down until it is picked up again. How you are feeling on this lap, holding the baton, will soon be a thing of the past – there will come a time when it is your turn to stand on the sidelines and watch.
- Don't expect to finish. Remember that this race is not about crossing a finish line; it is about being present for the parts that you are able and willing to do, to gratefully accept the baton from another person, and to humbly pass it on when the time comes.

- Make considered choices about when, how and for how long you will carry a baton. Remember the words that Margaret read earlier...the suggestion that our life, our hands, are defined by what we choose to do.³ Use your hands in a way that authentically speaks to the person you are and the person you want to be.
- Take rests when you need to. If you are doing what you are able, stepping up to the baton when you can, then there is no reason to feel guilty when you must pass it on.
- When it is your turn to carry the baton, run to the best of your ability. There are never too many opportunities in life to shine and to do our best. How a person runs the race is a very personal thing...each of us can only do the best we can in the time and with the energy that we have...and this is enough. This is enough.
- And, the zen of the lap requires that you carry the baton proudly. You have, I'm sure, occasionally watched the relay race that carries the torch to the next Olympic games. Emulate that spirit – a spirit that carries the flame on behalf of the whole team. It is an honour to be asked to carry the flame of this beloved community.

Now, another piece that is missing from the '10 easy steps' proposed by the Idaho relay race is about what to do when you're NOT running. The list suggests that you 'stop running and watch someone else run.' And yes, technically that is what happens. But to live a considered life as a member of a religious community, it has to be more than that. The person who is resting, or standing on the sidelines, also plays a key role in the race. It is that person's job to cheer on the person who is carrying the baton. This is an incredibly important job, and makes all the difference for the ones currently running the lap.

There's an inspirational piece in *Chicken Soup for the Soul* which tells of a mother, who with much trepidation, placed her retarded daughter in a regular classroom, but worried that her differences would ostracize her. When her daughter's second year in school culminated in a public competition, the mother was tempted to keep her daughter home that day, rather than allow her to face the potential humiliation. But her conscience

³ Refers to reading: Anderson, Kaaren Solveig Anderson, "One's Hands" in *Singing in the Night: Collected Meditations, Vol V* (Skinner House: Boston, 2004), 89.

wouldn't let her off that easily, and she sent her daughter to school. When the time of the competition arrived, she watched her daughter line up with her team for a relay gunny sack race, and her panic rose. But as her daughter's turn to participate neared, she saw the tallest boy on the team step behind her and, with the help of others on the team, lift her into the sack, while others held her hand until she got her balance. Then her daughter hopped off, smiling and proud.⁴

We all know that story could have gone another way. We have sometimes been the ones who've watched others, even others on our team, struggle and fall while we stood by. We've all done it, but this is not consistent with a well-examined life. We should strive to be the team-mates who celebrate the diversity of gifts on our team, lending a helping hand - cheering on the efforts of others - even if that person is not holding the baton the way that we would, or running as fast as we would. It is a given that sometimes the runners will be quick like bunnies, and sometimes quick like turtles. We will each run this race in our unique and wondrous ways - and that is something to be celebrated.

I am passing the LUF baton to you, and will now move to the sidelines, encouraging you, rooting you on, praying for the life of this Fellowship. There is nothing I wish for more than to see this community flourish and thrive, whatever manifestation of that flourishing you may create. This is your work, your work to do as a team, your work to do together. How you participate, whether carrying a baton, waiting for your turn, or cheering from the sidelines, matters. An attitude of teamwork, maintaining confidence in one another, exercising restraint about offering advice to the baton-carrier, and expressing gratitude for the work that another is doing...all of this matters to the health and wellbeing of this congregation. And that means that it matters to the ministry that you're doing together. So look at your hands carefully. Consider what you want those hands to express about who you are. Consider what those hands can contribute to the team. Keep them at the ready to pick up the baton. I leave this ministry in your competent hands. So be it.

⁴ [Http://heartnsouls.com/stories/b/s127.shtml](http://heartnsouls.com/stories/b/s127.shtml)