

All We Are and All We Can Be
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Sometimes when you first arrive in a new place, it can be easier to see the broader vista. You see the vast forest and how far it reaches. But in time, your focus narrows. You begin to see the trees, then the pine needles, the pinecones, and the lichen as it grows on the tree trunks. You look beyond the broad majestic beauty to see the narrow mysteries of tiny insects boring holes into the bark.

I suppose it is no different in congregational life. I remember when I first became a member of a Unitarian congregation. I saw such beauty and mystery in all the goings-on of the church. Things magically happened. Then one day I was invited to serve on the Board. It was one of those classic moments: “Look, a young adult! Let’s snag her.” Snagged I was with the glory of it all, and then I began to become intimate with the inner workings of the church. The mystery and the glamour faded, and there I was, knee deep in budgets and relentless laments for more volunteers.

At first, I resented the innocence I had lost. Then I got so involved in the nitty gritty. Each bump that the congregation rolled over felt like a mountain. That’s what happened when I first stepped into leadership. I found myself wringing my hands with worry and losing sleep at night.

Of course, I come from a family with a long tradition of professional worriers. Generation after generation, we’ve gotten better and better at it. We are the Olympians of worry. Each generation has passed along the important lesson that when you don’t have anything to worry about, you should *really* worry. I suppose you could say that, had I been smart, I should have stayed home. Life is, after all, very risky – especially life in an organized community. You are sure to find yourself in the middle of big knots of anxiety. Who needs it?

I have learned, however, that throwing myself into the tangles of anxiety and confusion has actually been the best cure for the disease of worrying. With each new challenge I’ve faced over the years, I’ve learned that it isn’t worth sweating the small things, and that somehow, miraculously, the big things usually resolve themselves – and when they don’t, well, I adjust – and my worrying doesn’t make a difference, one way or the other. Of course, there’s always work involved. But the less I worry, the easier it gets.

So, here we are, heading toward the end of January. Fiscal year 2010 has begun and we’ve only realized three-quarters of our canvass goal. We’ve got another \$50,000 to raise in a tough year. The global financial crisis happened last year, yet its reverberations are finally reaching us. The board dreamed that we, the congregation, would take full responsibility for our expenses, so that we could use \$5,000 of the income from our endowment to fund a social justice project together. Now our focus has shifted. Now we are more concerned about making sure we can continue to heat the building, plow the snow, and support the staff and the programs we already have in place.

But me, worry? Never!

There's a great Zen story about an elder monk who was so calm, that it drove the other monks crazy. So one day, they decided they would surprise the elder monk. They hid in a dark corner. Just as the elder monk was walking past with a hot cup of tea in his hands, the hiding monks jumped out, screaming as loud as they could. But the elder seemed to take no notice. Slowly and methodically, he made his way to a small table and gently placed his cup of tea down. Once the cup was safely placed, he leaned against the wall and cried out with shock, "Ohhhhh!"

Oh, would that we could all respond with such measured calm when facing unexpected crises. Which is to say, yes the surprises can be great and we can and should respond with shock. But not so much so that we spill or destroy that which we have been entrusted to hold with utmost care.

There's this other thing I've learned about worry. When things get stressful, I try to remember to get out of the forest and climb up onto a metaphorical balcony, so that I can see the stars and the endless horizon. Sometimes I do this alone, and sometimes, blessedly, in the company of others.

These days there is a small group here serving on something called the Governance Task Force. (Governance. Finances. I know these don't sound like very sexy or spiritual topics, but give me a moment.) Last year, the Governance Task Force was charged by the congregation to explore how our organizational structure could best fulfill our mission to welcome, nurture, inspire, challenge, and take action in the world. As part of this process, the task force has interviewed nearly all the committees and groups in the church, as well as many key individuals.

It has been an amazing process to sit with the many volunteers who do the work of this church, to hear their stories, their challenges and their dreams. I was particularly struck by the conversation that was shared with some of the former presidents, VPs, treasurers and secretaries of the board. They met as a group and offered their collective wisdom. "Things take time here," they said. "It takes time for the congregation to get used to new ideas. You try things once, twice, and often the third time is the charm." They also said that times of conflict were the most personally engaging and ultimately satisfying for them. "When things get tense that's when you really have the congregation's attention. That's when change happens."

Sometime ago, I found this sermon: *Five Ideals for a Church*, by Leonard Mason, dated February 8th, 1976. Someone had left a copy of it in my mailbox with a note attached. "How we doing?" the anonymous writer asked.

Leonard Mason preached that there are five ideals that have equal importance and need to be in balance to have a "living and friendly" church. The fact that he wrote the sermon at the end of his career makes me wonder if he was speaking with greater urgency.

First, he wrote, the church should be a stimulator of the intellect. Intellect brings us common sense and it makes "the concepts and ideals of the spiritual life relevant to everyday life... But intellect is much more than cold, exclusive, skeptical rationalism. Its findings can be as exciting as the experience of natural wonder, its speculations as spiritual as the sense of holiness."

Second, the church should be a beacon for the community. But he lamented that the congregation was too focused on the interior, “with the costly upkeep of a gothicized temple...” (referring to the old building on Simpson Street that was later lost in the fire). He writes, “We have inherited and embellished a religious retreat, a haven and sanctuary away from urban roar and frenzy; devoutness and devotion are turned inward... We are a church of Christian and Jew, of people from other world faiths and some who profess no official faith at all. Such persons should have a good deal of demonstration against racism, war, injustice, poverty and discrimination. But our light doesn’t shine clearly; our beacon is dim.”

Third, the church should be a warm center for fellowship, where everyone feels wanted and welcome, and there is a “shared sense of participating in something serious and profound,” as well as “being in fellowship with past times and times to come, with people who have died, children yet to come and friends who are absent.” He lamented that unlike churches and synagogues, the congregation did not have a ritual for those absent, sick or disaffected. He wrote that they needed “committees of concern to lubricate the circuits, to facilitate communication and love” so that the absent ones were not forgotten. (I do wonder if he would be pleased to see our meditation and candle lighting ritual, or our Caring Network, today.)

Fourth, the church should be the keeper of the conscience. He writes that, “We like to think we are keepers of our own consciences. How then can even an ideal church keep conscience for us?” None of us develop our conscience in isolation, and the church can show us this. It can bring us support, help us to be true to ourselves, and stay honest. “An ideal church’s task... is to be monitor of those needs not represented within the circle of the familiar faces. We find it very difficult to be quick in conscience and social action towards those outside the run of our middle class sentiments. Ours is not really the Church Universal – in spite of our affirmation.”

Finally, the fifth ideal: The church should be guardian of the devotional life. Leonard remarks that “the devotional life is now reduced to just one hour on Sundays, and not that very often.” He writes, “Whether it be reverence for life, respect for people, courtesy towards sacred objects, places and ideals, the lack of such is a serious impoverishment... The devotional life keeps open the dimensions, and demands a sincere, serious, quiet evaluation of life and death, of purpose and destiny. Whether this is done by prayer or sacred readings, by loud praise or quiet contemplation, by formal confession or by timely self-assessment, the church ideally is guardian of it. We have not much experience of how to go about it, its ritual tends to cause us some embarrassment and we are wary of pious hypocrisy. But that is no excuse...” he wrote back in 1976.

So, here I am, nearly 34 years later. I’m standing up on the balcony with Leonard Mason’s five ideals in my hand and I’m taking deep, non-anxious breaths. Looking out over the vista that is all of you, I see a community that has a long history of surviving challenges. I see a community that once dreamed of being a beacon in Montreal, a bright light that could be seen from the distance. Now that image has changed and expanded.

I see us as a bridge, a metaphor I’ve spoken about before, and can’t repeat often enough. I see us as a bridge that connects us to the greater world, that both welcomes the stranger in and invites us all to go out into the world to take action. I see the bridge being built in so many ways.

I see it in the way we deepen together in what Leonard Mason would have called the devotional life. I see it in our growing music ministry and our Sunday services. I see it in the past work we have done as a Welcoming Congregation and a Green Sanctuary. I see it in the way we are increasing our use of French in our services. I see it in our children's programs, where Spirit Play and our *Éducation religieuse en français* are bringing in new families who are seeking a faith community for themselves and their children. I see it in our pre-teen and teenage youth, who joyously gather for overnights, and serve us soup each third Sunday, so that all can eat and stay for programs or *La célébration en français*. I see it in our Hospitality Committee who feed us soup and other delicacies many Sundays, host the monthly Midday Meal, and provide feasts to chase away the winter blues.

I see it in our Social and Environmental Concerns Committee who reach out locally and globally each year. I see it the outreach we do to local organizations, and in our instant response to send relief to Haiti. I see it our Caring Network, who reach out to those in times of great need, visiting, providing rides to doctors' appointments, bringing food to those shut in (food is a big theme here!), or simply listening when a supportive ear is needed. I see it in our young adults who take with them the care and concern of this community out into the new worlds they face.

The list goes on, and you know I have not mentioned everything. Is our light still too dim, as Leonard would ask? Yes, it needs to get brighter. Could we be a stronger keeper of the conscience? Absolutely. Could we inspire and challenge the intellect and the heart more? Always. But this bridge is being built, piece by piece, step by step. It is a process that takes years.

"Everything takes eight times longer that it is supposed to," writes Laurence Gonzales in his book *Deep Survival*. That means working that much harder when you've got an excellent foundation for the future. The bare bones of this bridge have been laid down over the years. It will be up to us to continue the construction.

With great calm and care, we can work on this together. And when all is settled, then we can cry out with a collective sigh of surprise.