

Reverend Lyn Oglesby: On Sustenance and Stewardship, September 14, 2014

The service this morning focuses on Sustenance, and has been developed mostly by the Stewardship Committee, a team of people who love this congregation for many reasons, who are stewards of our Unitarian Universalist faith traditions, and who are stewards of this congregation in both spirit and generosity. The Stewardship Committee has included me in the planning of this service. They have let me have a part. They are the good cops, and I am the bad cop!

I am the one who is here to remind you that we can only do the good things we do; we can only have music; we can only have religious education for our children and youth; we can only maintain this lovely place of work, play, education, learning, and spiritual regeneration with your financial support.

As we build character and entrances that are accessible to those who don't manage steps and stairs, as we offer programs to enrich our minds and spirits, as we generously provide assistance to the needy, and as we sound the trumpets of a liberal religion that is based on deeds rather than creeds, we depend on your generosity of spirit and your financial sustenance that comes from your checkbooks as well as your hearts.

We are keepers of the flaming chalice that has brought hope and safety to the persecuted and downtrodden, we are a community of purpose and compassion, and we are the keepers of the dream of a peaceful and enlightened world.

In the words of Langston Hughes...

Hold fast to dreams, for if dreams die

life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams for when dreams go,

life is a barren field, frozen with snow.

Wendy Cohn Reflection 9/21/14

Here at SUUS and at other UU congregations one of our traditions is a rite-of-passage for middle-schoolers called "Coming of Age." The culmination of this period of time is a ceremony during which each young person presents to the congregation his or her "credo statement." During the months preceding the ceremony, the young people work with their teachers and with the minister on building the structure that will become that credo statement, or statement of belief. But they also have one very special person, an adult mentor, assigned to them who will guide them one-on-one through the process, and work beside them on their assignments and in their explorations of their beliefs.

I have had the privilege of being a mentor three times during my membership at SUUS. For me, this has been a highlight of my experience here. It is an opportunity for intergenerational communion, providing sustenance to both mentor and mentee. Together we work through some concrete questions, such as "what is my family's religious background?" and "if I were to design a worship space, what would it look like?" all the way to what we may call the big questions: "what is the purpose of life?" "what happens after we die?" "what is truth?" These are weighty questions and very often a young person will say, "I don't know, I really don't know," and I tell them that it is ok not to know. It is ok that their answer today will be different from their answer in 20 years or 2 years, or even 2 months. The important thing is to be able to ask the questions.

Each time I go through this with a young person, I find I am growing from nurturing their growth. It is a time of asking many questions, both to my mentee and to myself. A time of seeing things from their point of view, and marveling in this time of their lives when these viewpoints are just emerging but are so difficult to express. I reflect their statements back to them and ask more questions and they begin to see that they do know what they think and they can start to write it down.

I become close to my mentees, and I often become close to their families as well. It is a unique relationship that encompasses the intimacy of contemplating life's mysteries together.

There are many opportunities at SUUS to create meaningful relationships. Entering into a mentoring relationship with a young person is one of the special ways that has meant so much to me.

Reflecting on Sustenance, Lillian Rojas
Delivered at SUUS, September 21, 2014

Help! I'm in trouble. I'm afraid. I need you.

These are words that haven't come easily to me. I've spent a lifetime being self-reliant; priding myself on being a person who can figure out how to do just about anything that needs doing by reading a book.

By the time I was 16 I had read every book in the small library of the town I grew up in. The novels were fascinating, but when I discovered the reference section of the library, well, I was just in heaven. The only thing that challenged me was that I couldn't take those books home. Luckily, I lived a 5 minute walk away. I spent many hours of my youth in the library. I loved the peace and quiet, the smell of the books, and the approving nods from the librarian when she appreciated the authors I was reading.

Here's the thing - I never learned the intricacies of the card catalogue! The way I found things at the library was to go through the books. I've no idea how exactly I missed this important information during my schooling, but I did.

Fast forward to my mid-twenties when I was working at a small consulting firm. One day, I was given the assignment to do research at the Yale School of Management Library. I was to find all newspaper, magazine articles or books about a specific topic relevant to a client project. I was prepared for a fun adventure of discovery at the library. And then I walked into the building and saw stack upon stack of books, papers, portfolios, boxes, binders, and so forth. The amount of paper was endless.

I squared my shoulders and was determined not to be defeated. I started at the beginning with a plan to look through tables of contents and book indices. That would surely help me narrow the search. For at least an hour, I was sure I could accomplish my task in this fashion - have I mentioned that I'm an optimist?

Finally, I came to my senses and started to think that there must be a better way to do this. I got very brave and went to the check out desk. You see, I didn't realize until that day that librarians did things besides check books out and decided to ask her if she could direct me to an area that might have the materials I was looking for.

Asking for help from the librarian might seem like a simple and straight forward thing to do for most of you. But for me, it was anything but that. I had to admit I was stuck. I had to ask for help. I had to allow myself to be vulnerable in a way that made me incredible uncomfortable.

I'm happy to say that the librarian was able to help me; not only with the topic at hand, but she was incredibly kind. She must have realized that this major working knowledge was missing from my brain and she walked me through the card catalog - how the notations on the card connect to the aisles and even the archive stacks way at the back of the library. Her kindness was in not for a moment making me feel inept or stupid for not knowing.

I wish I could tell you that from that day forward I found it easy to ask for help. But the truth is that asking for help has been one of those life lessons that has not come easily to me.

Fast forward another few decades to just over three years ago when I first ventured through the doors of SUUS. Those first few Sundays, I most remember the Sharing of Joys and Sorrows section of the service. I felt as if I'd stumbled across a very unique and interesting group of people. People who seemed to find it natural to share in each other's good times as well as the difficult. People who were interested in being present to each other in ways that I had always hungered for but had not imagined possible.

I spent six months or so mostly just soaking in this new experience. I wondered if what I was seeing could also be true under the surface. I admit to being highly suspicious and skeptical, but I continued to come to service every Sunday on the off chance that it might be true and that just maybe; I had found my spiritual home. At about the six month mark, I decided to take the plunge into believing that it was real and I became a member of SUUS. I didn't want to be a guest any longer. I wanted to be a full working member of this community.

From you, I have come to learn how critically important it is to not only be of service to each other by lending a hand when we have the ability to do so. But to embrace this concept of exposing my inner self to you. The me that is sometimes scared, like when Deb, my wife, lost her job 18 months ago. Or when I worry about the future of how a potentially debilitating disorder that I was diagnosed with a few years ago might impact me as I age. One thing I am sure of, no matter the joy or the sorrow, I have been given the gift of this caring community that accepts the real me as I am today and will be tomorrow.

In many ways, most of us are faced with many situations throughout our lives of having to make a decision on things that feel beyond our control, particularly when we are faced with our own weakness or inability to do things. We tend to be harder on ourselves than others, and many of us tend to put a stoic face on things.

The truth is each of us needs to face our own vulnerability and limitations. We need to know that asking for help is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of strength and deep trust.

Author Brene Brown, who wrote the book "Daring Greatly," describes vulnerability as being the core and heart of human experiences. She writes that it is the "birthplace of love, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity."

Allowing yourself to be vulnerable is often having the courage to ask for help -- to be humble enough to admit that you are afraid, and overall to trust in ourselves and each other. This to me is the heart of Stewardship - to care for one another in ways both small and large. To share the joys and the burdens that lead to the creation of the strong bonds found in strong communities.

Recently, the first gathering of the Fall Small Group happened. The evening's topic of discussion was HOPE. I've given the topic much thought in the last couple of weeks as I prepared for and participated in the gathering. I'll close my reflection by sharing my hope for all of you here today as well as those destined to walk through our doors in the future. I hope asking for help becomes an experience of strength and deep connection for you as it has become for me.

Together, we have an incredible capacity to create meaning in our own lives and the lives of those who live beyond us by embracing wholeheartedly the concept that it is equally important to give to each other those things we are able and to ask for those things we need. Giving and receiving are necessary and equal partners in creating an authentic and sustaining community.

Our Visit to a New Church

Eve Struve

My husband Fred and I decided to visit Shoreline Unitarian Church one Sunday shortly after we moved to Guilford and were delighted to experience the friendliness of those we met on that first day. We appreciated the modified guided tour after the service meeting members who shared opportunities to participate in church activities. For me, joining the choir was an option I knew I would enjoy. Fred liked the men's breakfast group and a discussion group he later joined. We both loved participation in Sunday Services and the talk back sessions. In the coming months and years Fred was motivated to present a few services himself.

As time passed my retirement years seemed filled with Fred's health status. Fred's diagnosis of cancer was an immediate concern. Everything seemed to be changing for us and yet the friends we had made at SUUS continued to be a meaningful support to us emotionally and spiritually. How much we appreciated that friendship.

One day Fred had a terrible accident. His small Honda Civic had gone into gear and dragged him down our steep driveway as he had tried to remove the ignition keys without getting into the car.

He suffered severe burns which required skins grafts to heal his ravaged back. Tests at the E.R. signaled evidence that his cancer had spread from the breast to the bone. After Fred's surgery for his back, new protocols emerged to cope with his increasing pain. We traveled to Smilow, Yale's cancer service sometimes as often as three times a week for cancer treatment as well as palliative care. Always our friends at SUUS were there to give emotional support. Fred's zest for life helped in this process. He was willing to try any regimen if it might mean life. When he was sent to Apple rehab following a surgical intervention, he was frequently visited by our SUUS friends.

What helped me greatly was a long term group which lasted for several years following its initial introduction. Essentially a women's group it became an opportunity for all of us to share our lives with each other. In its formation it had not been the intention to continue for such length and yet it was a great bonding experience for all of us who continued to attend.

A writing group was another regular gathering that we enjoyed together. Fred spent hours at the computer and wanted to publish a book of essays. The writing group may have a rebirth at SUUS soon.

After eight years of treatment, it became very clear to us that further medication and unique cancer regimens would not be enough. I asked friends for help in traveling from Guilford to Smilow during what turned out to be his last month of life. These rides with friends were both special support and help during the increasing cold wintry weather. And then there was no option but to choose Hospice during the last week of Fred's life. Fred lived six days there and died on December 22, 2012. Friendship comes in many packages and my friends were there for support to the very end of his life, through the Memorial Service and more recently for his ashes to be placed in the Memorial Garden here.

That is the way it is at SUUS. A continuous giving during hard times as well as during the good times. I will always appreciate the kindness and caring of our SUUS friends. Most times words just do not communicate fully the appreciation I feel for all that was given and hope that in some ways I can reciprocate that magnificent outpouring of love and caring to others as they need support