

## ***The Gift of Asking***

**A Sermon by Rob Keithan  
Delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockville, MD +  
December 12, 2010**

### READING

We regard our living together not as an unfortunate mishap  
Warranting endless competition among us  
But as a deliberate act of God  
To make us a community of brothers and sisters  
Jointly involved in the quest for a composite answer  
To the varied problems of life.

-Steve Biko

### SERMON

Good Morning!

As you may have noticed, I am not the Rev. Lynn Strauss. You can tell because I do not wear glasses. You know, among other reasons.

And while this is my first Sunday as your sabbatical minister, it is not my first Sunday in your pulpit: I preached here, in the old sanctuary in October 2004 on the links between our religious values and voting. But my first extended visit to your church was over 10 years before that, when I came here for a high school youth conference. So I feel like I've had a positive connection to your congregation for quite some time.

I met Lynn around the year 2000, and very quickly came to really like her as a person and respect her as a minister. She was also very supportive of me, a wide-eyed recent college grad starting his professional career. I don't think I'll be wide-eyed about anything when I finish seminary in May, but I am glad this position worked out, and I look forward to meeting and working with you over the next six months.

So, there are two big events just getting underway: the winter holiday season, and the sabbatical. As I've thought about it, I think there is a common goal, or a perhaps a common challenge, that applies equally to both events, which is: how can we keep our cherished traditions intact, but also do things a little differently and hopefully even make some improvements?

Starting with the sabbatical, I'm guessing that you all can readily identify the many reasons why it is good for the minister who's taking it: education,

reflection, renewal, and so on. I'm sure Lynn and others have spoken about why it's good for the congregation as well, but as your sabbatical minister I want to share some of my thoughts directly so that you know how I'm approaching this experience.

Most importantly, having a minister go on sabbatical—especially when there is only one minister—requires the congregation to develop the leadership and systems to stand on its own for a while. It's not a time for massive change, but it's not a time to stay the same, either. There's a value in keeping up patterns and traditions, but there's also value in doing things a little differently and seeing how it feels.

Worship is perhaps the most obvious place most of you will experience the difference. For consistency, I'll be preaching twice per month, which usually works out to be every other week. Guest speakers and lay-led services will happen on other Sundays. I encourage you to come as often as you can, so you have the benefit of hearing different voices and perspectives than you're used to.

There's more to this than you might think, though. Have you ever heard this expression?

Gravity: it's not just a good idea, it's the law.

The parallel I see is that for Unitarian Universalists and other people of liberal faith, seeking out different viewpoints and perspectives isn't just a good idea, it's a profoundly important part of our history, theology, and practice. And this is true for a very good reason, which is that how each of us sees the world isn't how the world really is. It is only how we see the world, based on our own set of identities, experiences, and biases. We are socially conditioned from the moment we're born to see and relate to and understand the world in a particular way.

My worldview, for example, is highly, highly conditioned by the fact that I am a white, straight, middle class male who grew up happily in the suburbs. One of the most important and transformative experiences of my high school years was going to regional Unitarian Universalist youth conferences—like the one at this very church—and meeting people my age who were incredibly cool, wonderful interesting people whose experience of life was totally different than mine because they were gay. Getting to know them and hear their stories changed my view of the world forever. If that was the only thing I ever got out of UU youth conferences—and it certainly wasn't—it would have been worth going for that experience alone.

Given that our own perspectives are so limited; so subjective, if we want to see a more holistic picture of the world; if we want to get closer to

understanding how it really works, then we must seek out and learn from people with different experiences and views.

So each new connection or relationship we make; each honest conversation, each time we hear someone else's story; we have the chance to learn and see the world more fully.

We don't have to agree with everyone's opinions, of course, but there's still great valuing in listening and seeking to understand. As Parker Palmer, the great Quaker educator and writer once said, "The more you know about someone, the harder it is to hate them."

Some people, I think rightly, would call this process coming closer to God. Personally, it just makes me feel more aware and awake and alive. I like to think, as Biko, writes, that I'm making progress on the quest for a composite answer to the varied problems of life.

Now, if you're similar to me, the notion of hearing from different perspectives makes me think of trying to connect with people who are obviously very different from me, and in particular people from outside my regular circle of life. While this is important, and I hope that we all find ways to do it, right now I want to focus on going deeper within the relationships we already have.

The problem, as I see it, is this. I think that it's way too easy to move through important parts of our lives, like when we're together as a religious community, or with family and friends at the holidays, without ever actually talking about what we believe, or what we're struggling with. It's so easy to move from event to event, from worship to coffee hour, from presents to meal, without ever taking the time to really connect.

The greatest loss in this failure to connect is that we miss the chance to learn from each other and support each other. I'm reminded of a friend who was diagnosed with a challenging health condition right before Thanksgiving. He spent all of the holiday with members of his extended family, but news of the diagnosis only came out on the last day. When it did, though, he learned that one of his cousins struggled with a similar condition that he never knew about, and now they're in touch and talking about it. On one hand, of course, it's fantastic that the connection was made. On the other hand, those last few hours of the visit could easily have slipped by without it coming up, and the two cousins would still have no idea that they were riding in the same boat.

My friend could, of course, have volunteered the information earlier on his own. While that's always an option, it's also a hard thing to bring up out of

the blue. When *is* the right time to tell someone that you're going through a rough patch?

The easiest answer would be that you tell them when they ask. But what if they don't? Then you're back to square one. You have to self-disclose.

I think this a relatively common scenario for most people: there are things that we'd love to share —maybe bad things, but maybe good things that we're excited about, maybe a new development at work, maybe some random ideas we've had—whatever it is, there are things that we'd love to talk about *if only someone would ask*.

Waiting for this to happen is a valid option, of course, but it calls to mind the Chinese proverb, often attributed to Confucius, that “a person will stand on the top of a hill for a very long time with his mouth open before a roast duck will fly in.”

Another option is that we can help facilitate connection and sharing by taking the initiative. We can be the people to ask the questions; to create a space where honest sharing is welcomed. In this sense, our asking is not so much a request as it is an invitation. That's the image I keep coming back to: invitation. How can we invite people to tell their stories, to open up, to talk about whatever it is that they need or want to talk about it?

In some United Methodist small group ministries, they still use a discussion question originally posed by John Wesley: How is it with your soul?

How is it with your soul?

Part of me wants to laugh this question off as being too intense, or too Christian, or just too something that I'm not going to deal with. But I must admit that it strikes a chord. I don't really believe that we have souls, as in some divine substance or essence apart from our biology, but I can understand soul as a metaphor for my core self. So this question means: how am I doing? How am I really, honestly, truly doing?

Whatever the wording or approach you choose, the important thing is that you're issuing the invitation to share, and making it clear that you really are listening and you really do care.

There's a big difference between “hey, how are you?” I'm great, how are you?” and

“So how are you?” Really, honestly, how are you? How's your job, or lack thereof? How's your relationship? How's being single? How's your health? How are you? [pause]

I'll end with two challenges. For those of you who are active in this congregation, I encourage you to use this sabbatical time as an opportunity to get to know each other better. Make time before or after those committee meetings and events to really connect with someone else in the congregation. Find out people's stories. Who are they? What do they care about? What do they like? What do they love?

And for everyone here spending time over the holidays with family or friends, I challenge you to find a way to connect more deeply with someone along the way. Reach out. Create space. Ask a question. Make the invitation. Amen.

#### BENEDICTION

Whether sharing or listening, celebrating or lamenting, inviting or being invited, may this community and this holiday season be warm and welcoming to you all. Amen.