

“Tending Our Garden” Rev. Mary Gear  
Olympia UU Congregation June 14, 2020

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“I think we need to talk.”

Those are words that many of us have, an invitation for connection to resolve a tension. I recently received a message like this from the chair of the Auction team, Melanie Ransom, and share this story with her permission.

Now, Melanie’s message to me was not quite as direct as that because she is more tactful. But the invitation was clear. It got back to Melanie that I’d made a comment in a meeting, where Melanie wasn’t present, expressing concern about the auction. As often happens in congregations, someone in the meeting mentioned my comment to their partner, who contacted Melanie. Big thanks to Melanie for reaching out to me directly when she heard that I might be concerned.

Even though I had sensed some tension between Melanie & me, I have to admit, I was avoiding it. Avoiding conflict is something that, I’m guessing, most of us know well. On occasion it is an OK strategy, usually for the short term. In this case, the tension had become a problem and avoiding it wasn’t going to fix it.

I responded that, yes, I was concerned and had sensed tension between us regarding the auction planning. So, we talked, by Zoom as we do these days.

Melanie shared with me how important the auction is for so many people; not only the big auction kick-off event, but many gatherings offered that are the foundation of social calendars throughout the year. It helped me understand the depth of grief and loss the Auction Team was feeling as we faced a very different auction this year.

I learned that Melanie’s expectation was that, as the minister, my participation in the auction would be pretty minimal--to donate a sermon, attend the kick-off event, give a blessing, and purchase items if I wanted. That I had been asking many questions about the details of the auction and to attend some auction planning meetings was way more than she expected and -my words - I was mucking around in her business, business that she knew very well and was quite competent at.

That’s when I realized that we were operating in different contexts and with different perspectives. Melanie didn’t know that the Board and I had been reviewing the governing policies as they applied to the pandemic. How could she? She didn’t know that we had agreed that decisions about the congregation’s operations, including when to open and close the building, were the responsibility of the minister. The governing

policies direct that the minister will not cause any unsafe conditions for the congregation or the staff.

So yes, I was asking lots of questions about the auction, but not because I wanted to be involved in directing or micromanaging. I was trying to make an informed decision about whether or not the auction could even happen safely. I'd never experienced the auction here. How would I know how it works?

So, I shared my perspective and the responsibility that I carried. I apologized for not making this clear up front. I thanked Melanie for reaching out to me in the first place and for being willing to have the discussion. We ended knowing each other, and ourselves, a bit better and most importantly, building a relationship for working together toward the OUUC mission.

And, have you heard – there's an amazing on-line auction happening? Gratitude to Melanie and the Auction Team for their great work!

These past weeks, I've been reflecting on my first year serving as your settled minister. Last October our stewardship drive theme was "Planting Seed, Growing Love." I have experienced much love in my time with you so far. John and I have been warmly welcomed, a welcome that began last Summer before we even arrived in Olympia. We have been building a relationship, minister and congregation, a collective and individuals. I am very grateful that we had several months to get to know each other in person before we pivoted to on-line church. And, I have experienced the love of this congregation as you care for each other and for our wider community. Growing love for sure.

There were many seeds planted and growing when I arrived here. Many of you had fond memories of your ministry with Arthur and were ready to welcome a new settled minister. There were important congregational traditions, like the auction and Books, Brownies and Beans. There were social groups and covenant circles, formal and informal gatherings of community members creating connection. Plenty of seedlings and mature plants growing and thriving.

I tell the story about the conversation between Melanie and me because it highlights some of the seeds that are still underground or barely sprouted, waiting for some tending. One of those seeds grows a culture of healthy and generative conflict transformation.

Ours is a covenantal, not a creedal faith. We don't tell each other what to believe, we make promises about how we will be together. The covenant for this congregation says that we recognize that conflict is normal and that we promise to speak with each other directly and honestly from a position of respect, kindness and love. Our work is to live into the aspiration of our covenant.

We are a conflict avoidant culture, especially here in the Pacific Northwest, and this congregation has tended to avoid addressing conflict directly. I recognize this here because I recognize it in myself. If the overwhelming participation in the Board's Listening Session last Saturday about a disruptive behavior policy is any indication, conflict is on your minds, too.

As part of the search process last Spring when you and I were checking each other out to see if we were a good match, I learned a bit about OUUC's history. Part of that history is that there have been three settled ministers before me: Sandra Lee, Arthur Veini and Thomas Perchlick. The other ministers who have served here have been short term, contract ministers. And, every one of the three previous settled ministers ended their service here in conflict. Sometimes conflict was the cause of their leaving, sometimes there was conflict that resulted from their leaving, and sometimes the conflict took its toll in other ways. The vibrations from those conflicts still ripple through this congregation; I felt it when I candidated with you and I feel them now.

You might imagine that, from a minister's perspective, given that history, accepting a call to serve this congregation might be a tiny bit daunting. And, I want to remind you that I said "yes" to your call with my eyes as open as they could be, and my heart and arms wide-open. And, we have some work to do to understand this history, how it lives now, and how we can build a better future. I am eager to do this work together.

Another seedling waiting for some care is the covenant that we make regarding our governance, or how we agree to share power, responsibility and authority. No matter what we call it, how we allocate power and how we operate, must reflect our values and principles. And, like any covenant, our governance isn't just words on paper. It's how we live it. Over these past 6 years, OUUC has undergone big changes in organizational structure and governance. There are some things written down. Our job

now is to experience how we actually work together toward the OUUC mission, sharing power and authority in service to something greater.

The other seedling waiting to be nurtured has to do with the future. In my year with you I have heard a hunger for a unifying mission, a sense of unity and purpose. In that hunger, I hear these big questions, “Who are we and why are we here?” Those questions take on new meaning now in the midst of the global pandemic and a renewed national call for reckoning with our racial divide. Who are we now? What is our purpose, now?

One of the tasks of religious community is to offer support as we wrestle with big questions, as individuals and as a community. Many of us are wrestling with big questions in our lives. We are wrestling with big questions as a faith tradition. For example, on Thursday I participated on a Zoom call with over 500 Unitarian Universalist minister as we discussed proposed changes to our UU Minister’s Association bylaws and code of conduct that address accountability when we break our covenants with each other and with the congregations that we serve. Because it happens. Ministers are human and we break covenants sometimes. Our integrity as people and as a profession is determined by how we respond when we do.

And, we are wrestling with covenant as a nation. What promises do we make to each other? Do we pledge liberty and justice for all, and make that real? We are a nation of people, united in our humanity and unique in our differences. As wise leaders have said, we are one, but we are not the same. It is our inability to adapt to difference and address conflict that brought us to the place where a white public servant chose to ignore the cries of the black man saying, “I can’t breathe.” Until we can figure out how to live together in our differences, none of us will be free.

You might have noticed an addition to the start of the service today; we introduced a Chat Chaplain, who will help set some expectations and help hold this virtual space. Over these past weeks we have heard that some of you love the chat and some of you hate the chat. What we realized is that we’ve not made explicit any agreements about how we will use the chat. And, not knowing the expectations isn’t very welcoming for visitors or newcomers, let alone those who have been around for a while. So, today we started by saying how we use the chat, asking for awareness of when you are using it, and to save back and forth conversation for the breakout rooms.

New technology gives us the chance to notice that we are always in covenant, even when we are on the chat, or in a virtual service, or in the breakout rooms for coffee hour. New ways of being together doesn't mean that we leave behind our promises about how we will be together – speaking directly and honestly to each other with respect, kindness and love.

We could make a technical fix to any misuse of the chat by simply turning it off. But the real fix isn't technical, it's relational. When we make agreements about how to be in relationship and hold each other accountable when we break our agreements, we build healthy relationships and strengthen the bonds between us.

So, I am going to ask you to do two things, one now and one in the months to come. First, if you are in any group connected with OUUC, a social group, and book group, covenant circle, a team or committee, or a coffee hour breakout room, ask what your covenant is. What agreements have you made? How do you make sure that everyone who wants to can speak? Do you ask everyone to listen to understand, rather than to respond? Do you invite others to notice when they step up and step back? Are your covenants clear to everyone, including visitors? If you have a covenant, please revisit it to see if it needs adjustment for virtual gathering. And, if you don't have a covenant, please make one.

My second request is to engage with the big questions. In our next year together, I hope we will revisit our congregational covenant and wrestle with the big questions of who we are and why we are here. What will the OUUC of the future be like? It won't be like it used to. I think we know now that nothing will be.

For example, there are people here today who will continue to participate in congregational life virtually, even when we begin to gather in person again because we will continue to offer that option; people who live outside of Olympia and outside of Washington, people who are more comfortable participating from home. How will we make sure that their voices are heard and that they are seen as part of the community? It will take all of us to help hold the loss that some of us will feel as things change. And, it will take all of us to fully live into the possibilities of this community. I can't wait to see what that may be.

On June 4, 1923, Norbert Capek, who founded the Unitarian Church in Czechoslovakia, introduced a special service to his congregation in Prague. He looked for a simple ritual that would bind together his people who came from many different religious traditions and held many different beliefs. He looked to nature to find an element for communion that would symbolize the beauty of diversity. The flower communion was so popular that it became the final service before his congregation left for their Summer break every year. Introduced to the US by his wife, Maja Capek, in 1940, this ritual is used by

many UU congregations to mark the end of a church year and to celebrate the beauty of diversity.

In a bountiful and beautiful garden, the bright red roses make room for the big, yellow sunflowers, and the sunflowers tone it down a bit so the small, purple forget-me-nots can be seen. There is not only room for everyone, but we adapt to make sure that all are seen, all are heard, all are welcome.

As we move into our next year together, may we tend our garden, planting seeds, growing love. May we nurture our oneness without expecting sameness. May we nurture the seeds of change that have been there all along, waiting. It is time now.

On this flower communion Sunday, let's enjoy the images of our garden together.