

“Listening with the Heart”

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Imagine Lisbon, Portugal in 1941. Europe was at war; the United States and the rest of the world would soon join. The Rev. Dr. Charles Joy was serving as the commissioner of the newly founded Unitarian Service Committee, tasked with helping millions of refugees who came to Lisbon, the only port open in Europe at that time. Seeking a symbol that would identify Service Committee documents as official and also be a sign of safety and help to refugees, Rev. Joy commissioned an image from artist Hans Deutsch, himself a refugee. That image was of a flaming chalice. While the original intentions of Joy and Deutsch are not known, today we often say that our Unitarian Universalist flaming chalice is a combination of two ancient symbols: the cup or chalice signifies hospitality and refuge, and the flame suggests passion and sacrifice.

World War II was arguably the last time that the entire world was impacted by a shared event. Just like now, there was disruption, fear, violence, uncertainty. These things were felt in different ways and amounts in different countries, yet there was no country or culture that was spared. Over the next decades, our world would experience wars in Korea, Vietnam, the Middle East, Afghanistan, Pakistan. As the nature of war changed, the ways of thinking about war did, too. In the 1980's the US Army War College drew on the work of leadership theorists to coin a term to describe the new reality of war: VUCA. The acronym V-U-C-A stands for Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous. Volatile means that the nature of change is novel and that the pace of change is fast and getting faster. Uncertain means that we can't predict what comes next based on past information. Complex means that there is no clear chain of cause and effect and that there are many forces in play. And, ambiguous means that reality seems hazy, there is misinformation and lots of room for misinterpretation and mixed meaning.

Sound familiar? Indeed, this acronym has made its way into leadership writing and training and discussion in many disciplines these past few years, and has made a resurgence in the past 6 months. Last April, Unitarian Universalist minister Jake Morrill released a YouTube video titled “Church in these VUCA Times.”

Essentially, the question is how we respond when things are changing so fast, in ways that we can't predict, with too many variables to keep track of, and when there is a lot of information and misinformation to sort through? Morrill suggests that churches create online communities for worship, small group gatherings and other events; to begin on-line, then move to hybrid, meaning offering both online and in person, when it is safe and into the foreseeable future. Perhaps that sounds familiar, too; it's the model we are using for OUUC.

These past months have been so challenging in part because we are all having to figure out life in VUCA times. Some have even described fighting the pandemic as fighting a war. Whatever experience some of us may have had of stability, predictability, simplicity and certainty is gone. That reality didn't exist for all of us, just some of us, which the pandemic has brought into stark visibility. And, we know that it won't go back again, we won't go back to “normal” again. We are

looking at VUCA for the foreseeable future; times of fuzziness, uncertainty and tension. As the beautiful song of Hope tells us, many of us are feeling beyond belief, depressed, confused, and mad.

Bob Johansen of the Institute for the Future suggests that we can transform volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous to a different kind of VUCA: vision, understanding, clarity and agility.

Volatility becomes vision when we discern who we want to be and how we want to transform the world. Uncertainty becomes understanding when we respond with humility, empathy, and compassion. Complexity becomes clarity when we seek to hear the stories of who we have been and discern our deepest values to create the future. Ambiguity becomes agility when we are flexible in our response, paying attention to how we respond as well as what we do to respond.

One of the primary tools for transforming from one VUCA to the other, according to Johansen, is...listening. When we listen to each other with humility and empathy, we can discern our deepest longings and wishes to create a clear vision together that we can then work toward, responding to what may come with flexibility and grace. There is a constant feedback cycle as we listen, discern, act, reflect, and repeat. And, I believe we are hungry for this—listening, sharing and acting from our hearts.

Last Sunday I spoke about deep listening as listening to learn the heart and experiences of others, to hear their true nature and deepest values. We listen to offer a space for others to be transformed, and we open our hearts to the possibility of our own transformation. We listen with our hearts. And as our story showed us, our skill of listening is to hear all the ways that we communicate our deepest longings, not just words. And, when we listen deeply, we can discover beauty, like butterflies.

It means listening to all of the voices, especially the voices that have been silenced. Like the voices of LGBTQ people who say that gender binary is false and harmful, and that pronouns matter. The voices of the First Peoples who continue to nurture the deep relationship to the land that they have had for millennia, and who say that they are still here. The voices of African-Americans who say that Black Lives Matter. Oppression thrives in an atmosphere of silence. Their voices need to be amplified. This listening involves welcoming who we each truly are.

It also means listening to the voices that are screaming messages of hate, to hear what is underneath the screaming. This is especially important for those of us who can listen without being as harmed by it; allies can provide this for those most vulnerable. We listen to the pain that is underneath the voices of hate, and listen to the pain underneath the voices that are encouraging the hate. James Baldwin wrote in *Notes of a Native Son*, "I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain." Those voices need to be calmed, quieted and contained. Baldwin also said, "We can disagree and still love each other unless your disagreement is

rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist.” This listening also involves setting boundaries and offering protection.

It is the work of any spiritual path to listen. The book of rules for Benedictine monks to live by created by St. Benedict in the 5th Century CE begins with: “Listen carefully.... and incline with the ear of your heart.” The Jewish Bible teaches us to listen to the voice of God, what I might call the voice that does not use words. The Quran instructs us to open our hearts that we may hear the sacred words.

The flaming chalice of our faith tradition invites us to listen with an open heart. We are invited to listen with love, the love that is in each of us and that connects us. And, listening to that love and with that love nurtures our work for justice. As the modern-day prophet Cornell West says, “Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public.”

So, here we are, in a time of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. It is natural to want certainty and predictability, a return to “normal.” There are some who promise us that they can provide certainty, voices in the political and religious arena. These are often the same voices that spread misinformation, sow confusion and encourage discord. Beware of those voices, those who use their power, money and energy to sell certainty, stability, predictability, a return to what once was. They offer false certainty of return to a time that didn’t really exist, and that was harmful for so many, when black lives didn’t matter and LGBTQ people were in closets and Native people were extinct. They are false idols, shiny and alluring, hollow and harmful.

Instead of clinging to false certainty, I encourage us to listen deeply to seek clarity, by which I mean seeing what is real and true, clearing through the misinformation to make meaning of our current times. From that we can create clarity for our mission, purpose, values, and then work together to make that vision real in the world. I support wholeheartedly one of the Board’s goals this year, which is to revisit the OUUC mission, vision and Ends. It has been about 5 years since the congregation did this important work and just a few things have changed since then. Join us for the Q&A after the service next Sunday to hear more.

I believe my role in the process of discerning mission, vision and Ends is one of support. I am not here to tell you who you are, but to journey with you as you discover who you are. I am here as a mirror, to reflect back to you the stories that I hear of who you have been, what I experience of who you are now, and what I hear that you want to be. My role is to listen deeply and reflect back, listen and reflect.

What is hard about this process is that it asks us to be in a time of uncertainty about the road forward. As a congregation, OUUC has had several years of uncertainty. Some of you may have thought that uncertainty would end with my arrival as your settled minister. Perhaps some uncertainty did end. Little did we know that there was plenty more waiting for us to weather together. Settled isn’t exactly the word I’d use to describe this past year.

And, so we will weather it together. Part of our work now is to build resilience, learning skills like courage, silence, trust, laughter, wonder, listening. You have some experience with this already as you have learned skills to weather challenging times. We will need to reinforce those skills and learn new ones, building resilience for the long haul, / for the time to come will be filled with volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. And, we will need each other for the possibility of transformation to vision, understanding, clarity and agility.

Just like our Unitarian ancestors working in WWII Europe to offer safety and refuge to those displaced by war, these times are asking much of us. We don't know what is ahead and I cannot promise you that everything will be OK. We are being invited into nothing less than transformation of ourselves and our ways of being and doing, as individuals and as a culture. I can promise you that we will journey together, holding space for each other, holding on to each other, inviting each other into the work of possibilities and transformation.

May the flame of our chalice remind us that in our time of unknowing, our hearts can listen deeply, that we are connected in love, and that we are not alone.

May this be so. Blessed Be. Amen.

Let's hold a moment of silence together.