

# *What Equips Us for Bold Living?*

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**The Unitarian Church in Summit**

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**Vanessa's Fortune Cookie Fortunes from the summer of 2006:**

"If you can't accept losing, you can't win."

"In great attempts it is glorious even to fail."

**Reading: Marianne Williamson from *A Return to Love*:**

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

**Sermon:**

Sometime last year, the staff – that is Tuli and Emilie and I realized that we were all being drawn toward the same sense of what was becoming the driving purpose and organizing principle of our work and what we thought it ought to be for the church as a whole. This purpose and principle got articulated in slightly different terms but we came to see that it was all around equipping ourselves and others to live boldly; that the purpose of church, of our church, was to equip people to live boldly.

Of course, no sooner had we come to that conclusion then we realized that now we had to be able to articulate what bold living looked like and what it meant to equip people for such. So, this past summer we gathered a group of lay leaders to meet one day to join us in this conversation. We didn't expect final answers but we needed help making sure that we were on the right path.

The conversation was fascinating. And we almost, in an act someone suggested was "truly bold," tore up the flip chart notes full of ideas trusting that what had been spoken had sunk in so deep that no one needed it in writing. Thankfully, caution prevailed because I referred to those notes a lot in the writing of this sermon.

What came up around what it meant to be bold in life for each of us was wide-ranging. The words that came up were inspired, open-ended, trusting, tenacious, responsible, independent, aware of fear but choosing not to give into it, accepting sacrifices but at a

fundamental level not being willing to sacrifice, the willingness to make mistakes, flexible, claiming who you were, toughness, idealism, centered, not expecting adulation, acting without guarantees. Boldness someone said was respecting the fool in us, the one willing to be laughed at even as he or she spoke the truth, and respecting the fullness within us.

Of course, there is much that works against such living or we'd all be doing it all the time, right? I mean all those words sound like such a great way to live. At the core of the resistance we realized was pretty clearly fear – all kinds of fear. Fear that we'll embarrass ourselves, or that we'll fail, that we'll risk change and not like what life is like at the other end of change, fear that people won't like us or that we'll hurt feelings or alienate those around us when we claim some new authority. And all of those are legitimate fears. We can fail. We won't know what to expect when we begin. Some folks are always challenged by changes in their loved ones, even if those changes are for the better.

In addition, we can and certainly do put up lots of amazing roadblocks to our own motivation to live our dreams. Just this summer I had a conversation with a member of the congregation on just this subject. This member was talking about a revelation she'd had ten years prior that had changed her life. She said that shortly after she had divorced and after a health set back that had her lying in bed for days recuperating, she began to think about the fact that so far she'd pretty much played life by the rules. She talked about how she realized that there were a lot of things she wanted out of life that she'd had found excuses not to do. "I had really good excuses," she said, "but I finally realized that in the end all I might be left with were excuses." That was the beginning of ten years of very methodical pursuit of five very different dreams. They included remarkable creative accomplishments to significant new professional endeavors to a major leap into a very public kind of public service. What's more, she accomplished all of them this year.

Sometimes it is an epiphany like this woman's that helps us find a way to overcome our resistance to change and a willingness to overcome fear that enables us to live the life we dream for ourselves. The key can be to simply get out of our own way.

This summer I picked up a couple of books by leading evangelicals, just to see what these most innovative of folks on the American religious landscape are up to. One of the books I read was by Rick Warren in Lake Forrest, California. I think it's safe to say that Rick is the minister to the unchurched. Before he started his church, he began by doing spontaneous focus groups outside a supermarket in the city in California in which he knew he wanted to plant a congregation. He asked people to tell him what they wanted in a church and what kept them from going to church. The result was his Saddleback Congregation with lively rock n roll music, comfortable theater seats, and his Sunday garb of a Hawaiian shirt – all influenced by these surveys and what would make people who were unchurched more comfortable and even happy to be in a worship service together. His church has 10,000 members.

So, Warren is someone who seems to know intuitively what it means to live boldly, because he does it in so many of the ministries he leads. In one of his books he had three

great points to make about bold living. It starts, he said, with ambition. We are meant, he writes, to have ambition for our own lives, for our relationships and our world. After we have ambition, he said, we must protect against some tempting but false lies we tell ourselves that delude us into not putting our greatest ambitions into practice. The first among these lies is the one that is told a lot in religious institutions that says that smallness is a virtue. "People have said to me, 'I serve God in my little way.' My reply is, 'Well, why don't you start serving [God] in a bigger way? Let God use you more!'"

A second misconception that gets in our way is the one, he said, that would confuse contentment with laziness. We can and should love our lives, he writes, but that doesn't mean we don't also hold up dreams for them. "If contentment were a valid excuse for laziness," he writes, "who would ever feed the poor or do something about world hunger and equality and justice? How would anyone ever get an education? A third-grade kid would say, 'I've learned to be content with the third grade,' and he wouldn't go any farther."

So, for instance, we should love our partner and still have the ambition that our relationship will grow deeper and more intimate. We should love our work and still hope its reach to be farther in the world. And we can and should love our congregation and still dream for it that it serve a wider embrace of people, bind up more wounds, and inspire more of the desperately despairing.

My husband pointed out to me that just coming to this congregation and becoming a Unitarian Universalist is a bold act. I hadn't thought of it that way but I see his point. To begin with, for 90% of our folks coming here meant making the decision to leave the faith they grew up in. For everyone here it means answering the question about where you are on Sunday mornings with a big mouthful of words that name a little known faith that prompts further questions that makes you say things like "non-creedal," and "people of different faiths together in one religious community" and "no need to believe in God" – all of which scares a great segment of this country's population, 60% of whom claim to believe in the Rapture and the creation story as written in the Bible. And I'm not just talking about it scaring people in the Bible Belt. I'm talking about it scaring people in New Jersey. Just this week a colleague in Baptistown said of his congregation's attempts to secure some town permits that at one hearing a member of the town council said to all who are gathered, "Well I don't like your doctrine, but I like your plan." And another said, "I guess we'll have to treat you like a church," implying, of course, that that they really weren't one.

Maybe the positive way to look at this is to say that being UU means that we are all lucky enough to have already had a lot of upfront experience being bold around our faith. At the Board Retreat last weekend we were asked to write up the list of things we had accomplished in the last year. This list indeed spoke of an ambitious, tough and idealistic group. I was amazed at what we had done in only a year. In a year we'd weathered a hard conversation about what we called ourselves that brought out core philosophical differences and come out on the other side largely whole. We'd put a policy in place that makes explicit and puts money and time behind our commitment to keeping our children

safe when they are in this religious community. We hired a staff person, Emilie Boggis, part of whose job is to take seriously our welcoming of people into this community by weaving them into the fabric so they know they aren't just welcome in theory. And this is just the first three of about 15 that were all impressive and visionary.

Yet to really set ourselves free to fly, I think we need to make another turn in this evolution we are already in the midst of. I think we need to be more and more about liberating others for passionate work in this world, less and less about control and anything that would slow down boldness in the name of anything that is just a cover for fear.

There are a few things we will be guaranteed of if we do this. We will certainly be uncomfortable here a little more often as we tread some new ground. We will absolutely make mistakes, maybe even some big ones. A bold congregation, after all, is not a congregation that wants peace at any cost, even as it learns how to weather change and uncertainty and growing pains well. A bold congregation gets good at moving out of people's ways and giving permission to their ministry in the world. It has clear lines of accountability and approval giving. Finally what is central in all of this is that a bold institution has to be about helping each of us articulate what is bold for us and then after articulating that must become the place where we are supported, coached, cheered on as we take the steps to strengthen the muscles of risking on our ambitions.

What might all this mean? Well, the possibilities are endless.

- Maybe it would mean that we would never again worry about whether taking two offerings at a service might make people uncomfortable, but instead raise up the world's needs and let us each battle our own demons around the great Green God while the offertory music plays.
- Maybe it would mean we would stop talking about whether or not we want to grow, and how much, whether in breadth or depth, quality or quantity and instead realize that our children need a playground and a chapel to worship in during children's worship, and our members who are disabled and our visitors need parking that is plentiful and easy to find, and our adults need more good, full visibility seats on Sunday.... and make Bill Dangler an offer he cannot refuse. Let's build a sanctuary that seats four hundred with a roll down screen and shades on the windows so, among other things, you can all see the excerpt from "Cinderelmo" next time I show it in service.
- And after we do that maybe we could pipe our services out via the web to churches who cannot yet afford ministers as A. Powell Davies did in Washington spawning more than half a dozen congregations still alive and thriving in that area today;
- Maybe it might also mean (and this is Emilie's idea) that when we do this building campaign we'd raise a dollar for outreach for every dollar we spend on ourselves and have an endowment that funds bold work in the world, like micro-lending for earth-friendly initiatives or support for international family planning so that families can have a chance to be something other than dangerously poor. You dream it up then let's do it!

Why do we need to be bold? Well two reasons came to me this week. First there were the messages in my voicemail, one from a member and one from a friend. Both were women, mothers of young children, both having just received serious diagnoses of major health concerns that will change their lives. It reminded me that if you and I are going to leave an imprint on the world the only guaranteed time we have to do so is now. The second came when reading this week about the fact that children are dying of simple infection in refugee camps in the Sudan because refugee workers have left, and the African Union Soldiers who protect these people are possibly going to be recalled from service, leaving whole camps vulnerable to death squads. And I thought, "I bet we could do something about that." And the reason I thought we could do something about that is because we have done something about similar issues. Because we saw that there were gay men and women who need the legal stamp of approval that said that their family was as legitimate and protected as any other and we worked hard to do something for that, and we have been waiting for the New Jersey Supreme Court to hand down their decision, and what we hear is that the court is waiting to issue you this ruling as the last – the swan song -- of the soon-to-retire Supreme Court Justice who has supported gay rights in other rulings. In other words, we may just have done something about this!

So, I'm not talking about a vision for us that is about breaking free from our tradition. I'm talking about taking a tradition that has always been about boldness and setting it free from any moorings that would hold it too closely to the ground. I'm talking about giving our faith permission to fly.

Audrey Lorde said, "When I dare to be powerful - to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid." And one woman without half the advantages with which most of started life once wrote, "Life is either a daring adventure or nothing."

May it be so for us. Amen.