

## Possibly, But Not Just Yet

A sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz  
Sunday, January 6, 2019

A couple of weeks before Christmas I was passing through the toy section of Target and I had to step around a little girl who was plopped down in the middle of the aisle playing with a Rubics cube. She was turning that thing over and over as if trying to solve the puzzle. Her mother, looking as if her last nerve had been tested, said “Sonya, can we go now?” The little girl looked up and said very seriously, “possibly, but not just yet.” As I thought about this Sunday, whose focus for the month of January is “Possibility,” I thought of that little girl, who, unbeknownst to her, had not only given me the sermon title, but an opportunity to reflect on what it means to live both in that space between the possible – and the not just yet.

The first Sunday is typically a New Year’s themed service and for good reason. We invoke the Roman God Janus, the namesake of January, who presided over transitions – whether beginnings or endings; transitions and time; dualities and doorways; He is depicted as two-faced, looking back to the past and forward to the future. He was called a gateway God, one ritually invoked at the beginning of ceremonies to both mark and anticipate the passage of time.

It was exactly a year ago this Sunday when I stood in the pulpit for the first time and introduced myself to you as your Interim Senior Minister. We had no idea how the year would unfold. We knew only three things at that time; that Rev. Fred Muir, your minister of 34 years had retired the Sunday before; that Rev. John Crestwell was here and would soon be celebrating ten years of ministry with you and that I would be here, God willing and the creeks don’t rise as they say back in Ohio – until June 2020. The rest was a clean slate – or a blank page – depending on your perspective. So, in honor of the great Roman God of Janus, I too want to look back at 2018 for a moment to describe what I thought I knew when standing here on January 7 2018, and then I want to look ahead at what I predict will happen in 2019, knowing that we live in the place of possibility and we live in the not just yet. And one final thing I’d like to say to the visitor

and newcomer to the church this morning, first – welcome! Perhaps you made a New Year’s Resolution to explore your own spiritual life – or to grow your soul – or to develop a social life – or to be of service. If you keep coming back, you will find all of those things here – and more; and while today’s message is more directed to the members, I hope that you will find rich meaning as we explore together the arc of a year in the life of a congregation. Consider this then, an introduction to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis— and welcome...welcome to what I hope will be your new spiritual home.

A year ago this Sunday, I asked Reverend John if he would sing Sam Cook’s “A Change is Gonna Come.” Little did I know how prescient that song would be. The changes that have occurred here at UUCA in some cases reflect trends that are happening in the larger world of church. Other changes are unique to UUCA. The pastoral milestones that are more evident to the majority of members will be marked in next Sunday’s Wheel of Life Service, as we honor and recognize births, coming of age, graduations, marriages, retirements and deaths, so this morning I don’t intend to delve deeply into those milestones. My task as an interim is not to help you find your next minister or ministry team; it is to identify and to describe what I see and compare that against my own experience of the past 25 years of working in churches and in constant professional development around church work. That larger vision is framed by the five developmental tasks of interim ministry, which are: (SLIDES) **understanding a congregation’s history; discovering a new identity, assisting with leadership changes and developing new leaders; connecting with denominational resources and commitment to new professional leadership and a new future.** I keep all of these in mind as I frame the work we do together.

So the first question that I ask myself about a church and about you is simply: **Why do you exist?** Or, in other words, what are you called to do and to be? People seek out and join a church for a

number of reasons; they need religious education for their children; they are lonely and looking for community; they want one place from which their needs to be of service to the world through social justice can be realized; they see the church as a home for the arts and appreciate deeply the ways that music and aesthetics can enhance their lives; they want a community of people around them as they enter the last chapter of their lives. These are all good and meaningful reasons for the church to exist. Yet, is that all the church is – a collection of needs and a desire to create programs to fill those needs?

I think UUCA does a pretty good job of all of the above, but I do see one thing that's missing here, and that is an opportunity for a deeper dive into how, apart from the programs listed above, we learn to grow our souls. I resonate with the description offered by my colleague the Rev. Rob Eller-Isaacs when he writes: "I believe the church is in the world to engender the unmediated experience of the Holy in the real lives of real people, our people..." The experience of the Holy is not language that a lot of UU's like to use. We tend to shy away from words that can't be scientifically quantified. And yet, when you search your hearts and minds, I'll be you can identify experiences which have provoked in you such a sense of awe and wonder and mystery that it changes you. I believe that all of the other programs which we place so much importance on is to serve this one essential task – to engender the unmediated experience of the Holy.

How does this translate to actual church work? Well certainly your ministers can provide opportunities for you to engage more deeply in Soul Work through sermons and Middle Hour and other programmatic offerings. But at some point, either towards the end of my time with you as the interim or at the beginning of your new ministry or ministry team, you will be engaging in something called "Ends work." The church's Ends are not just an obscure way of saying goals or a strategic plan. Under UUCA's governance system, ends describe the largest and most important values which undergird and sustain the church. These are not written by the minister or the Board, but ultimately by you – the congregation. They will describe who you are and why you exist. They then serve as the

marching orders for your Board, for the Executive and/or Ministry Team and the staff. The new by-laws which will come before you in April are not just boring details of governance – they are a values document as well. We take the democratic process seriously and as such, the Board hopes that you engage at least once between now and the congregational meeting in April with the new proposed by-laws.

One of the interim tasks is asking a congregation about its identity. So, after asking yourself "why do we exist" the next question that arises is "**Who is the we?** Is the "we" primarily the people who are here now? Is the "we" the dominant majority of people who identify as white, who are my age or older, who don't have children in Religious Exploration, who would consider themselves middle-class? If the church is to not only survive, but thrive, there needs to be a reset of how the church understands that word "we." We are younger, we are single moms and dads, we are transgender couples, we are black humanists in search of a rational community; we are Latina who have let go of the Catholic church but who love Jesus; we are noisy, runny-nosed children who grow up to energetic and thoughtful and sullen teens, we are widowed elders in need of companionship and rides to church and we are people who live to paycheck to paycheck who have much to teach others about how spirituality can be food for the soul when the cupboards are bare. The church – and that means you and me and Rev. John and Leika need to be able to respond to radical diversity. We need to understand this not a threat to who "we" are now – but an opportunity to grow into who we are becoming. And "grow" is the operative word here and one that must be grappled with before you call your next minister or ministry team.

To be honest, almost every church I've served from 60 members to over 600 members have all expressed ambivalence about growth. It's framed in terms of self-protection; we – the leaders – are tired, burned out, we need new people to hand over our work. Getting serious about the "we" is more than saying "we need fresh blood to do the work that we have decided needs to be done." I believe that UUCA is in a unique position to see a growth spurt, especially during the first couple years of a new ministry. Do I think this just because

I also think you're pretty awesome? Yes, but there are some factors that could contribute to this.

You have a reputation in this community for being a church which is progressive, thoughtful and attempting to practice what you preach. Of course, none of us get it right. We fall short of our own aspirations all the time. But when I go out into the community, I've been impressed with the fact that most people have heard of this church and know of the work of Rev. Crestwell and Rev. Muir. You have a legacy and a reputation in a city which has the feel of a small town and yet which hosts the State Capital. I have been impressed by the numbers of people attending the well-run Inquirer's Series – so much so that the Library is beginning to not be big enough to hold them. I've wondered what we should do space-wise about the number of children and families which are attending the church on a regular basis and hoping that we can solve the space problem not too long after the new ministry takes effect. I've said before - these are good problems to have! But, what's also clear is that UUCA can't continue to do all of the same things that you've done in the same way.

All churches are caught in a huge cultural shift, an awkward intermediate stage between church as a default religious option in North America to a time of far greater religious choice and competition. Growing numbers of Americans switch denominations; and more still are electing to check “none of the above” when I come to religious affiliation and opting out of church altogether. The one group that still seeks out church on a regular basis are families with young children. That's where all Protestant denominations, including Unitarian Universalism, is realizing that the models of Religious Education which were so cherished in the 50' through the early 90's are becoming increasingly out of touch with the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century families.

On February 2<sup>nd</sup>, Dayna Edwards and I will be leading an RE Visioning Session to which you are all invited; regardless if you have children in the program or not. Why would you come if you don't have kids? Because Religious Exploration is one of the most important entrees into church life and growth and will drive the decisions you make about your building, your next minister, and your next

Director of Religious Exploration. The days of the nuclear family, attending church every Sunday, with children sitting down in a classroom to be “instructed” in religious education is over. Families are divided between spouses or churches. Sports dominate Sunday morning schedules. Teaching methods have changed from pure didactic methods to embodied and experiential ones. Technology is no longer a cool option; it's a necessity. What Dayna and I want to share with you is a different vision for Religious Exploration. It's called Family Ministry, and it re-centers the focus from that one hour a day in a classroom led by volunteers to equipping parents and guardians of children with the necessary tools to be the resident theologians of the children under their care. The Faithful Parenting series described on the back of your order of service is a sample of the kind of programs to be offered regularly, helping to parents and care-givers concrete tools to deal with thorny moral issues. More than that, it asks the entire congregation to be engaged in some form, with the care, nurture and instruction of our children and youth.

### **Why do we exist? Who are the we?**

These questions go to the heart of UUCA's identity. Perhaps the biggest question that lies at the center of living in the possibly-but-not-just yet- realm, is your work towards becoming an anti-racist, anti-oppressive congregation, as expressed in the 8<sup>th</sup> Principle. I say “becoming” of course, because that work never ends. It doesn't matter if you marched during the Civil Rights era, or read a book or two, or have some black friends. What I've discovered is that racism and white supremacy is so embedded in everything we do and in all the institutions that have been started and run by white people that it takes intentional effort for white people to see it and then to know how to counter its effects. And in the meantime, the people of color who have brought their hearts and minds to this church are alternatively gracious about white people's ignorance and angry, exhausted and tired.

And as white people, we get confused and frustrated and angry and scared. We're afraid that we can't name something that a person of color does that we don't like for fear of being branded a racist. We try to protect ourselves through what Robin DiAngelo calls “White Fragility,” a well-crafted defensive screen against facing the horrors

of racism and white supremacy. It's one thing for me, as a white woman to applaud the passing of the 8<sup>th</sup> Principle here at UUCA, but it's quite another for a person of color to say – “well, possibly, you're getting there – but not just yet.” I will take up the theme of White Fragility in a sermon on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, but for now, let me just say that if the 8<sup>th</sup> Principle is to be more than a rubber stamp for white people to feel good about themselves, it will ask all of us to look at the church through an anti-racist, anti-oppressive lens. It will require all of us to apply that lens to everything we do – from worship, to music, to religious exploration, to building use, to hiring decisions, to investment strategies to the way we welcome the newcomer who has finally decided to visit a church on the first Sunday in January.

Friends, this is going to be year like no other in the life of this church. This will be the year you select a Search Committee, who will of course, also be guided by the 8<sup>th</sup> Principle. This will be year you pass new by-laws. This will be a year of cottage meetings and conversations, some easy going and some difficult. There will be disagreements and differences of opinion. There will be hard feelings and hurt feelings. There will also be forgiveness and laughter and the warmth that comes from knowing you are part of a larger community – that when you are sitting at home alone nursing the wounds that life has just dished out, you can remember your other home at 333 Dubois, a place where you find kind people, caring people, people who know you or who will know you.

You'll find a place for you to think out loud, to explore those parts of your psyche which you feel deeply but have no words to express.

You'll find a container for our common humanity; people whose bodies are strong and healthy and failing and aging; people who have

suffered incredible losses, and who may become your inspiration – knowing that if they can make it through that loss – you can surely make it through yours.

You'll find here other people like yourselves and not at all like you – from whom you can approach with an eager curiosity, because as you heard from Margaret Wheatley “*There is no power greater than a community discovering what it cares about. Ask “what's possible?” not “what's wrong? Keep asking”* she tell us. What I predict and expect to happen this year will be this community discovering what it really cares about – and to do that, we will be asking not what's wrong, but what's possible?” It's taking a hopeful stance amidst a lot of transition and change.

Cornell West describes himself as a prisoner of hope – but cautions us to be realistic about our expectations. He says “to engage in the struggle means that one is willing to acknowledge that there is no triumph around the corner, but you persist because you believe it is right and just and moral to persist.” He continues “As T.S. Eliot said, “Ours is in the trying. The rest is not our business.”

UU Church of Annapolis, I didn't know what to expect when I stood here a year ago and introduced myself to you. I didn't know then how much I'd enjoy working with Rev. John and the entire staff of UUCA, past and present; I didn't know how profoundly the work on anti-racism would impact me, nor how impressed I'd be with your governance and board work; nor did I fully know the communal grief of losing a beloved to tragedy or the resilient spirit of love and care and compassion that still continues to shine. I'm honored and privileged to be walking this journey with you and thankful we have another year and half to see what and how it will all unfold. May it be so.