

“Do We Disappoint You?”

a sermon by Dan Lillie
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at First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque

“Begin with the End in Mind”

In a presentation to my UU Theology class in seminary, the Rev. Nancy Bowen once advised my classmates and I to “begin with the end in mind.”

And so, I think I’d like to start this sermon where most of them end: with the comments and feedback. After every service, whoever delivers the sermon stands just outside the doors of the sanctuary to greet everyone as you make your way to the social hall for coffee, to the RE building for your kids, or to the parking lot for brunch, home, errands, or whatever else awaits you after church. And on your way out, many of you stop to offer your thoughts and reflections on the service, letting us know what resonated with you, and what missed the mark.

Multiple Intelligences

These moments serve as a reminder that there are different types of “learners”- in fact, Howard Garner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences¹ identifies at least eight distinct ways in which we can process and understand the world.

So in this sermon, I might only be reaching 20% of you, which is roughly the percentage of the population that uses verbal-linguistic as their primary intelligence. For many, this presentation style just doesn’t get through as powerfully as visual, musical, or physical-kinesthetic ways of connecting. So when I get feedback, one person may say, “I don’t like that we do a meditation”; and then the next person says, “I love that we have a meditation!”

What inspires some of us will disappoint others. So, although you shared that you wish we would do away with the Meditation, continuing to include

¹ <http://www.institute4learning.com/resources/articles/multiple-intelligences/>

it doesn't mean I didn't hear your feedback. It means that someone else is getting value out of that part of the service, and we're leaving it in place for them. We don't all learn the same way; not everything will resonate the same way with everyone, so we try to be inclusive, to create an experience that appeals to many different people with a variety of preferences and styles.

Joiners

Another topic where I hear many different, and strong, opinions is about membership and joining.

What are your thoughts on "joining"?

We have many here who participate in this community who we classify as "friends". These are people who contribute financially, as well as give of their time and energy, to the mission of our congregation, but for any number of reasons, choose not to sign the membership book. "I'm just not a joiner" they say.

On the other end, we have folks who, on their first visit, connected with this community and wanted to belong right away. They become a member that very same day.

And then there's everything in between; some of us taking anywhere from a few weeks to a few years to decide to become members.

Part of being an inclusive and welcoming community means allowing for all of these levels of "connectedness" to our church community. Certainly, we would love for everyone to join, and so we extend the invitation often. *And*. We do not wish to have you join just for the sake of joining. Your participation and contributions to this community are in no way diminished or less appreciated because of your official status. We want you to join if you decide that joining is right for you. Because you believe so, not because we believe so (which, by the way, we do... but no pressure... really).

But whatever your relationship to this community, what does it mean to *belong here*? What are we really here for?

Why Community?

It seems that this community is about more than our preferences. In the reading we heard earlier in the service, Rev. Dana E. Worsnop articulates what she is seeking from a spiritual community: in short, the beautifully diverse, messy, imperfect, opinionated and loving people who make up her congregation. And I think the same is true of us here. When we get to the heart of what it is we are seeking together in beloved community, it is each other; and through each other, affirmation of ourselves.

So it is no wonder that when we feel slighted or not recognized and affirmed for our contributions to this community, one reaction we might feel is to want to leave. I understand that feeling. And, I ask you to reconsider it.

Nadia says...

Now, if the name Nadia Bolz-Weber, sounds familiar, it is because I quote and refer to her often, and I'm going to do it again. Her book *Pastrix* about her experience as a Lutheran Pastor in Denver, is both full of wisdom and highly entertaining. And profane. You've been warned.

In one chapter, Pastor Nadia shares her approach to newcomers at her church. She says:

"despite how much I love [my church], I am still not an idealist... Every human community will disappoint us, regardless of how well-intentioned or inclusive..."

As a matter of fact, at our quarterly "Welcome to [our church]" events...

I tell them that... This community will disappoint them. It's a matter of when, not if. We will let them down or I'll say something stupid and hurt their feelings. I then invite them on this side of their inevitable disappointment to decide if they'll stick around after it happens...

Welcome to [our church]. We will disappoint you."²

² Bolz-Weber, Nadia. *Pastrix*. Jericho Books, 2013.

So I ask you, First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque: Is this true of our community too? Do we disappoint you?

We Will Disappoint You

Certainly we have, at some time or another, not done what you were expecting, or hoping, or really wanted to happen. And when I say *we* are guilty of letting you down, I invite you to also consider the times when you may have been part of the “we” that has let down someone else. Because that is the nature of our messy imperfect community: it is made of us messy imperfect humans. We will both disappoint, and be disappointed, by each other.

And. And, we will fulfill each others expectations, sometimes expectations we didn’t even know we had. We will lift each other up in ways big and small. I don’t know that I expressed adequate gratitude for the outpouring of support, in the form of cards and kind remarks, when my Grandfather passed away last fall. It truly meant so much to know that people cared about me. So for all of you who lifted me up in that moment, thank you.

The Dark Night of the Soul

But I don’t want to gloss over the disappointment part. Let’s go back there. I’m often tempted to want to rush to the solution, but life generally doesn’t work like that, with a neat and tidy solution waiting for us the moment we hit a rough patch. In fact, I wonder if it’s not the time we spend wading in what some refer to as “the valley of the shadows”, or others call “the dark night of the soul”, that is the dark yet fertile place in which growth and transformation is possible.

In response to the results of the presidential election in 2016, Sikh leader and justice activist Valerie Kaur asked “What if this is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb?”³

Can this be true of our dark moments? Can it be that our moments of disappointment, pain, and loss hold the promise of a way forward?

³ Kaur, Valerie <http://valariekaur.com/2016/11/a-sikh-prayer-for-america-on-november-9th-2016/>

If there is any comfort in the impermanence of the world, it's that whatever challenges, hardships, obstacles, and devastating blows we are made to endure, are temporary. Perhaps we can take solace in knowing that *this too shall pass*. And I'm not going to say that all things happen for a reason; that the evils of the world that we endure are part of some cosmic plan. I don't believe that. But I do believe that bad things happen to all of us; that no one gets through life without encountering evil, loss, and grief.

And if, in the course of these dark times, we are able to glean some wisdom, some insight into the human condition, or tap into a reservoir of strength and resilience within ourselves that we didn't know we had, then may we seize that silver lining.

So, community may be a place where we will be disappointed and let down. But can it also be a source of resilience when we are passing through the dark night of the soul? Can the beloved community we try to live into here provide support and healing, along with the disappointments?

Enduring the Disappointments

The answer is yes, if you stick around to let it.

If you are willing to endure the times when we as a spiritual community will disappoint you;

if you are willing to call us on it when we break covenant, and then allow us to own our failures;

and if we are willing to re-covenant with each other, to re-enter a new agreement built on a deeper and stronger relationship, then this community can be a life-affirming source of deep peace and satisfaction.

But you have to be willing to endure the disappointments. As Pastor Nadia said, it's not a question of if. It's a matter of when. We will disappoint you. And the question she asks of her community I now pose to you: knowing we will disappoint you, that as a spiritual community we will eventually let you down, how will you decide to respond, now, on this side of the disappointment?

Will you leave, in search of some other community that *is* perfect? One that will never let you down?

Sorry to disappoint you again, but it doesn't exist.

Based on Covenant

So why not belong to a community that is willing to admit it, and willing to re-covenant when it happens.

Perhaps I should say just a little more about this re-covenanting. Pastor Nadia encourages her people to be willing to stay through their disappointment because it's an opportunity to see the Grace of God at work. But because of our theological diversity, we Unitarian Universalists don't necessarily share a view of God or of Grace that we can agree on, much less rely on when we are disappointed.

Instead, we have covenant.

Our tradition being based on covenant means that, rather agreeing on a shared theology, we agree on being in right relation with each other; we agree on committing to figure out what that means together; and we agree that when we wrong each other, we try to make it right.

In the words of theologian Martin Buber, "The human being... is the promise-making, promise-keeping, promise-breaking, promise-renewing creature."⁴

So when we find ourselves disappointed by our community, rather than turn to God, we look to the relationship itself as that which is both worthy of our reverence, and as the powerful force that has the ability to heal us. It's a holy thing, this kind of relationship between an individual and the community, and it can be a source of goodness, depth, meaning, and purpose... if we stay through our disappointments to let it.

The promise of spiritual community is not that we won't let you down. It's that we will try, again and again, and as best we can, to lift you up.

⁴ <http://www.uua.org/safe/handbook/leadership/165735.shtml>

I Want to Be With People

Or, as Rev. Dana E. Worsnop puts it:

“I want to be with people who are willing to walk the tight rope that is life and who will hold my hand as I walk mine...

I want to be with people who covenant to be honest, engaged and kind, who strive to keep their promises and hold me to the promises I make...

I want to be with people who know that human community is often warm and generous, sometimes challenging and almost always a grand adventure...

In short, I want to be with people like you.”