

SERMON: Growing Together

Ever wondered where ministers get inspired? Sometimes it's by going to worship elsewhere. Once upon a time, I attended a ministerial installation. When I arrived early to Jeff's installation, he asked me to do a reading- kind of a slam poetry sort of thing.

To my surprise there was a Time For All Ages story during the installation. That's an unusual liturgical element in that sort of service. And it was Rev. Keith Kron, of the UUA's Transitions Team, who playfully read "*We Don't Eat Our Classmates*" by Ryan Higgins.

I'm uncertain how he managed to read it while turning the pages and carrying a stuffed T-Rex around with him. People were in stitches laughing as he read the story. You could almost hear his secret message- *We Don't Eat Our Ministers*.

I leaned into a colleague and whispered, "This story would be fantastic for a new member Sunday." I would like to explicitly say to all our new members: *We Don't Eat Our New Members*.

Being a new person in a church takes great courage. Long time members who have been here can sometimes forget that. Y'all know the way things are done. You might take for granted the ease you have developed with one another. That ease is packed full of trust and care, but it doesn't mean we've stopped growing together. We're in a constant state of change and renewal.

New folks can attest that their learning curve is steep no matter how welcoming and friendly you are. Anxiety can overwhelm any new person. You could be the most observant, intuitive person, but you know that there are the hidden rules you may miss.

You realize that you'll mess up because you don't know where all the boundaries are. You're hopeful that this beloved community is as forgiving as it is friendly, but you are uncertain how things will go when that time comes.

Admit it, you love it here and you worry because you don't want anything to tamper with that love. Did I get it right?

I know a bit about what it was like to be a new face here and in other UU churches. It's wicked hard, but what I want to lift up is that we are as forgiving as we are friendly. We expect our new faces to mess up because we all mess up. We assume that, like the rest, you are only human and not a hungry T-Rex.

What Penelope's dinosaur story reminds us is that there are leaders here who, like the teacher in the story, asked Penelope to spit out fellow mates. We have lay-leaders and clergy who will kindly point out the things a new person may overlook and ask older member to be extra kind to them. Be patient with the new folks as they learn.

We assume you won't eat us. And likewise, you can assume we won't eat you. You'll be grateful to know that a handful of us are actually Vegetarians. But more importantly, we are all forgiveterians- meaning that we are full of grace. We want to share that grace with you whenever a mistake is made. Our only hope being that you will return the favor.

What we are talking about is a Covenant of Right Relations. It's a promise of how we want to be with one another here. It means we come together to be in agreement on how right relations work. This is a great example of how we are continuously growing together and how we may need to continue to have these kinds of holy conversations.

So, no, despite what you may hear from other faith traditions, we are not an 'anything goes' kind of church. We have values that guide us and our overriding desire is to be in right relationship with one another as we serve the mission of this church to be a beloved community.

We don't call this a sanctuary for no reason. It's a safe place for all who come. You can expect that Walter will not chomp on your finger here, but if he does, come see me. This needs to be a safe place for all, our leaders will make certain of that because they are charged with protecting the health of the whole and they take that task seriously.

I am grateful for our leadership and our new members that are here! Can I get a hallelujah?

Let's get back to Jeff's installation. A few minutes before the worship began, I had a chance to connect with Woullard Lett. He's an old friend from my days serving in Manchester, NH.

At that time, he was the UUA's New England Regional Lead. Once that position would have been called the District Executive Director, but things have changed and continue to change. Our current UUA's New England Regional Lead serving 232 congregations is Evin Carvill Ziermer, who grew up in this church.

Woullard Lett was at Jeff's installation to bring blessings from the Regional Staff. I had a few minutes to find out how things were going in his home church.

He had been to church earlier that day because it was their Annual Meeting. He didn't want to miss that. I asked him if they had any big decisions. He said that there was one big item on the agenda – a change to their bylaws about new members.

There was a requirement now that each new member must take a new member orientation before signing the membership book. I smirked and he knew what was coming, "That's new, that wasn't practiced when I served there." "Of course not!" Woullard responded. Nobody could remember a time when they did that. And they wanted to remove impediments to membership since their numbers had been in decline.

"What are your numbers?" I asked. "87 adults," he told me. "With a fulltime minister?" I added. He nodded. "How is that possible?" I asked. "We have a healthy endowment." He told me.

Things have changed for them and many churches. They had 120 members when I served there in 2012-13. Once upon a time, there had been 5 UU churches in Manchester, NH. Slowly, they merged together. If you are unfamiliar with Manchester, NH, its population has over 100,000 people with a median age of 37.

It's the largest city in NH and it's surrounded by towns that feed on its bounty. Twenty minutes south is a larger sized UU church in Nashua and to the north is another larger sized UU church in Concord. Ironical that the largest city has a smaller church.

I cannot say exactly what happened. When I was there, the sexton was black mailing a member and the Director Religious Education had their pay garnished due to making too many personal purchases on the Religious Education Credit Card. The Board fired that sexton and some staff has changed over time including the current minister who did their ministerial internship here.

Today, we welcome seven new members that have signed our membership book. We are a church that's growing. We are growing together in trust and care. We have lost some dear members, good ones, too, but ultimately our growth is greater than our loss. Today, we celebrate that new members have joined us and the annual rotation of our lay-leadership has been made real.

A lot of changes have happened in a short time. We have lost some good friends: Dick Danzinger and Fran Reilly. Gone are a few other friends who have moved away or slowly faded away during the pandemic.

What we have gained through new faces are new ideas, Ping Pong in Barnum, and a clear message that UUCM believes Black Lives Matter and Pride is where our heart is. Justice deeply matters to us in all we do.

We're considering new ways to do fundraising and we've been able to keep our full-time ministry while adding minimal hours for a Director of Religious Education. That's a lot! Some may say too much. I say, UUCM is behaving like a thriving church that continues to grow together.

Maybe some of these changes freak you out because change is hard, but staying the same is futile. We can keep some things the same while we make room for the new because with it brings so many immeasurable gifts.

I look to Fred Rogers for wisdom about growing together. He said, "I doubt that we can ever successfully impose values or attitudes or behaviors on our children -certainly not by threat, guilt, or punishment. But I do believe they can be induced through relationship where parents and children are growing together. Such relationships are, I believe, built on trust, example, talk, and caring."

Now, what if I were to change what Mr. Rogers said so it read like this: "I doubt that we could successfully impose values, attitudes or behaviors on our new members -certainly not by threat, guilt, or punishment. But I believe they can be induced through relationship where older and newer members grow together. Such relationships are built on trust, example, talk, and caring." Might you agree with that statement?

Today, we hold tight our newest and oldest among us. Ralph Waldo Emerson reminds us, "It is one of the blessings of old friends that you can afford to be stupid with them." He reminds us that deep down and for a long time Unitarian Universalist's have known that it's alright to make mistakes. That we are human.

Here, we take pride in the sacredness of our growing together and the dream of where it may lead us. And I leave you with the wise words of Helen Keller who said, "Alone we can do so little, together we can do so much."

Blessed be. Amen.