

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“A Season of Anticipation”

Rev. Samuel A Trumbore December 6, 2015

Call to Celebration

This has been a difficult couple of weeks hasn't it? The distressing attacks in Paris, in the Colorado Planned Parenthood clinic, and now a holiday party in San Bernardino, California. I expect some of you have heard there have been more mass shootings in this country in 2015 than days of the year so far. How much domestic terrorism does it take for this nation to consider restricting access to assault style weapons? If Australia can do it ... I think we can too.

For this hour, however, let us leave these troubles aside. The more difficult the troubles, the more we need to develop better ways to make peace. We need to develop our ability to negotiate our differences in ways that lead to reconciliation and away from violence.

As some of you might remember from my sermon about this time last year, I discussed the Jacobean's Jewish civil war that happened twenty-two hundred ago. It pitted Hellenized Jews attracted to religious pluralism against fundamentalist Jews rejecting any accommodation with the heathens. That kind of conflict continues today all around us. What is happening with ISIS is an extreme form of a similar conflict being played out in the Islamic community. One of the biggest struggles of our century will be finding a way for people of different beliefs experiencing the stresses of climate change to live together in peace as they make accommodations.

From Biblical times until today, Jewish sects and rabbis have been in conflict with each other. Yet they have found a way to co-exist, mostly without violence. I wonder if we can learn from the Jewish community something about navigating differences ... and recognize no one has completely figured this out.

Remembering Hanukkah begins on Monday, Matt and the choir will perform a song in Hebrew that translates as:

The world is sustained by three things, by Torah, by good works and by beneficence,
also translated as by truth, by justice and by peace.

This advent season, as we anticipate the birth of a holy child, may we contemplate this vision of truth, justice and peace that Jesus also brought into the world. Truth, justice and peace bound together in love for the good of all.

Sermon

People Look East is one of my favorite advent songs. Yes, the time is near for decorating the house, lighting candles, hanging ornaments on a tree, making festive foods, and celebrating. Rather than fairies and sugar plums, new electronic games, cell phones and action figures are occupying today's children's heads.

Adults can have their own anticipation that goes beyond what gifts might be coming their way. They hope for joyous emotions to be the result of their preparations whether throwing a holiday party, or finding the right gift. Our merchants encourage the belief that the perfect gift will open the heart of the receiver and fill them with joy and happiness.

Seasonal wisdom comes to us through our pagan ancestors to cope with the lack of sun and the cold weather. They knew that transforming the anticipation of the longest night into a celebration of light, generosity and food would ease our minds and carry us through to new hope in the new year.

We are hardly strangers to the pleasure of anticipation. Novelist Iris Johansen says it well in the observation, "anticipation makes pleasure more intense." When I was a boy, I remember waiting for a Schwinn ten speed bicycle. I saved my allowance and the money from odd jobs my parents were willing to pay me to do. That Schwinn was my ticket to freedom from my parents' control. When I got that shiny, green bike, I day-dreamed, I'd be able to go wherever I wanted to go whenever I wanted to go.

Half the fun of vacations, at least for me, is the planning stage. I love looking through the travel guidebooks deciding where I want to go and what I want to do. I enjoy the careful planning so there is enough time, but not too much, to spend at each site of interest (with adequate travel time). And there needs to be time for the spontaneous activity too that comes up – especially places to eat. It is hard to anticipate the smell, or attractive setting that pulls us into a restaurant.

Anticipation is a big part of the experience of pregnancy. It is eight months of wondering who this little being growing in the womb will be. Each movement or kick becomes a source of speculation. A space is lovingly prepared for this new being to occupy as space is made in the lives of the parents to provide the anticipated care.

Yet anticipation can also be quite difficult and unpleasant. I remember the day my application to Starr King School for the Ministry was being considered. I took the day off from work because I couldn't concentrate. I took a hike in Muir Woods among the ancient redwood trees north of San Francisco to calm my mind.

The biggest source of anticipation for Unitarian Universalist seminarians is seeing the Ministerial Fellowship Committee. This Unitarian Universalist Association committee reviews and decides who will become a credentialed UU minister. After a one hour interview, they decide if the candidate will be accepted into fellowship ... or not.

The tension of applying to a school, waiting for grades to be posted, waiting for an employer to respond, waiting for the result from a medical test or scan, making an offer on a house, or proposing marriage are examples of life events almost all of us have endured. And those of us with children know the excruciating anticipation of childbirth waiting for that little being to appear.

Sometimes that anticipation isn't rewarded. Acceptance isn't offered, the grades are lower than expected, the job isn't offered or the test comes back positive (... which is negative) or the proposal isn't accepted. And sometimes the pregnancy is lost. What makes these situations so much more difficult is the emotional energy we've invested in the anticipation process and our hope for a good outcome.

One way of understanding anticipation is as a consequence of the process of creating expectations. In our "live in the moment" world today, expectations have gotten a bit of a bad rap. Eckhart Tolle declares, "People don't realize that now is all there ever is; there is no past or future except as memory or anticipation in your mind." I hear that contemporary critique in Stoic philosopher Seneca saying, "Expecting is the greatest impediment to living. In anticipation of tomorrow, today is lost." I hear that critique in Anne Lamott's quip, "Expectations are resentments under construction." The message is, lower your expectations and you will not be disappointed.

This is especially true of marriage relationships. I caution couples in the preparation for their weddings about the transition from courtship to matrimony. During courtship, expectations hide in the subconscious knowing they are not particularly attractive to the other person. After the wedding, however, expectations suddenly appear that each partner sometimes didn't know they had. They appear first as emotional reactions before they are recognized as expectations. This is especially true for new parents. A great deal of the strife in marriage comes as a consequence of unexpressed and negotiated expectations. This is one of the downsides to eliminating gender role expectations – everything has to be negotiated.

Yet expectations can be very good too. I doubt any of us would want a job without a clear job description. (This turns out to be one of the more challenging aspects of ministry) We want to know what standards and expectations will be used to evaluate our performance. Setting expectations of our own performance can stimulate the attainment of our goals.

This has become a source of controversy when it comes to parenting. The "tiger mom" approach is to set high expectations and drive children to achieve them through intimidation, fear and punishment. The more liberal approach has been to set "effort" expectations, negotiated with the child to stimulate their adoption of the expectation. However expectations are introduced, just about every parent knows that teaching children how to set expectations of themselves and follow through to achieving their goals will support their success in life.

Religions have traditionally had the role of shaping us toward social ends by setting expectations of our behavior. Judaism stands out in this regard by giving Jews 613 mitzvot or commandments collectively known as the Law of Moses. There are 365 things an observant Jew should not do, one for every day of the year. And there are 248 things an observant Jew should do, one for every bone and organ in the body. Thanks to Wikipedia, I had a chance to look through the list (ranked from most important to least) this week. Some I'm sure we'd all agree should be avoided like lying, killing and stealing. There were a few others that seem questionable, like "To break the neck of the donkey if the owner does not intend to redeem it," and to refrain from "crossbreeding animals," and wearing "a cloth woven of wool and linen." I do like this one however, "Not to appear at the Temple without offerings."

Christianity is lighter on the rules but still sets the expectation of following Jesus' example. That in and of itself can be pretty difficult. I think there are often better options than getting oneself crucified. I'm not sure turning the other cheek is always the right answer either, especially in the case of domestic violence. But the spirit of Jesus, to make love the foundation of a community and the way we strive to relate to one another is a very worthy expectation.

Rather than setting rigid rule based expectations, Jesus was more interested in motivations. Our inner motivations matter as much as what we actually do. Not just the act of murder is wrong. Being angry at your brother and insulting him can bring the expectation of judgment. One who looks lustfully has already committed adultery in the heart. Fasting and charity should be done in secret without the expectation of public reward.

What about expectations and Unitarian Universalism? We're probably the lightest on imposing rules and expectations on our members. Currently, when one decides they would like to become a member, we ask three things of them (which is clearly stated on our Intent to Join form):

1. Participation on Sunday morning;
2. involvement in and helping with our activities;
3. Financial support of the congregation.

There are no beliefs, dogmas, doctrines, rituals or rules that are required of being a member here. Even the Purposes and Principles that guide our congregational life are optional on the personal level. You don't have to believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. You are not obligated to follow a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. You don't have to subscribe to the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all or the use of the democratic process. You can stay off the interdependent web if you don't want to get stuck there. This congregation takes the offer of the free search for truth and meaning very seriously. So do I.

The problem this kind of individual freedom creates in a liberal congregation like ours is a bit of a crisis of expectations. We don't demand a great deal in exchange for being welcomed into this community. Participation, involvement and financial support doesn't necessarily create a strong, caring, committed and visionary congregation. How do we, therefore, bond with each other as a cohesive community rather than being atomistic billiard balls bouncing off one another?

Just because we don't *impose* expectations on each other, doesn't mean we don't *invite* people to make commitments to one another. The difference is we *choose* our level of commitment *voluntarily*. One can be a lightly committed member here as well as a deeply committed member. The choice is ours to make individually. We commit ourselves to expectations voluntarily by saying yes to them.

We find a deep sense of meaning and belonging by finding common connection between our identity and the values of this congregation. We also grow, develop and create our own identity in tension with the identity of our congregation. And over time, both the congregation and each individual continue to grow and develop in an evolutionary process. Unlike a revealed religious tradition that cannot adapt to a changing world, our approach responds to the advance of knowledge and understanding driven by reason and scientific discovery.

That process though doesn't happen all by itself. Each person must be engaged with that growth and development process. That happens through the stimulation from and reflection on the message from the pulpit on Sunday morning. That happens in growth oriented small groups like Meaning Matters, Small Group Ministry and Wellspring. It happens in our religious education program for children, youth and adults. It happens in our many discussion groups like our Philosophy Group, book discussion groups, All Sides Considered, and most recently, our White Privilege Study Group, and our different Social Responsibility groups and task forces. We create many ways for people to get involved and to challenge their limits.

Rather than conforming our inner life to a revealed perfection, both our congregation and each individual grows and develops toward a greater wholeness and integration. Each person is discouraged from standing on the sidelines. All of us grow, develop, create and transform our congregation through mutual effort. I can't do it by myself, the UUA can't do it by itself, our visionary leaders can't do it by themselves, no individual UU no matter how brilliant can do it by themselves. We are part of an organic process of spiritual evolution, not knowing where we came from or where we are going.

But for now, we can sense the right direction and follow it, knowing future generations may reap the reward of our efforts.

That is my challenge for you this morning. Don't stay on the sidelines. Get engaged in this vitalizing growth and development process. Wrestle with the parts of our tradition you don't

like but also support the parts with which you find affinity. Let us be about creating this living tradition together ... and by doing so, fulfill the highest expectations of what a liberal religious tradition can be.

That is what I anticipate we can do together. So be it.

Benediction

I close this morning with these delightful words on anticipation from Fred Rogers:

I like to compare the holiday season with the way a child listens to a favorite story. The pleasure is in the familiar way the story begins, the anticipation of familiar turns it takes, the familiar moments of suspense, and the familiar climax and ending.

Let us take Mr. Rogers' advice. May our own experience of this time be brightened with anticipation of familiar holiday events and enriched with surprise when things don't go as planned ... sometimes even better.