

“Our Hearts’ Desire: The State of the Fellowship”
Rev. Kathleen Rolenz, Rev. Dr. Wayne Arnason, Rev. Leah Hart-Landsberg
Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Appleton, Wisconsin
fvuuf.org

February 20-21, 2016

Wayne: So – whaddaya know?

Kathleen: Not much – you?

Wayne: Maybe that’s all we can say today. It’s a little weird that our closest connection to Wisconsin was a public radio show until this year! And now we’re supposed to be giving expert advice to one of the largest congregations in Wisconsin that everyone says has done a terrific job of creating a healthy and effective UU community.

Kathleen: You’re certainly right about the healthy and effective community that’s here! Let’s thank the incredible volunteers who made this event happen. There are too many to name, but the 2021 committee, the volunteers who came to help set up; the facilitators, who will be taking the tables down; if you have been a part of the team that has volunteered to make this happen – would you please stand to be recognized?

Wayne: The way this event came about is pretty emblematic of what we’ve see here on a regular basis these last six months. We’ve seen an enormous amount of institutional health represented by the dedication, commitment, loyalty and affection on the members of the Fellowship. I’ve been pleasantly surprised at how well this year’s experiment, involving us as a transitional consulting ministry team actually worked. I know we have both appreciated the emails when a sermon has touched someone; personal notes when a service has been particularly moving; the overall willingness people here have to walk with us through this time of transition for all of us.

Kathleen: Ok – so when I first thought about writing a “State of the Fellowship” address for this weekend, my initial thought was that it should obviously start in the same way that every State of the Union address from every president I’ve ever heard starts: The State of the Fellowship is Strong! But then what? Is everyone expecting us to launch into an insightful critique of everything you’re not doing so well? We gotta tell you, that’s not a very long list. So rather than treat this like a State of the Union address, we decided we’d rather have a conversation together, just like you’re going to do in a few minutes, about all of our first impressions after six months here. This is how we propose to go at this.

Wayne: First, we do want to do a conversational brainstorm about all the things that we see that tell us that the state of the fellowship is indeed strong. Then, we want to go back and forth between us about three challenging questions that we see for the state of the Fellowship in the future. They are – do you want to continue to grow Unitarian Universalism through this

Fellowship to a new and larger size in the future, or do you want to plateau and maintain at your current size? 2nd: How do you keep alive the small Fellowship inside the larger one? 3rd: Is the Fellowship's role in your life more about what it gives you, or is it more about what we together give to the world as Unitarian Universalists? Finally, we want to ask you, through the questions you've been given to answer on your note paper and in your table conversation, to share your own hearts' desires for what this community can become.

So – let's get started. The state of the Fellowship is indeed strong, and the biggest reason for that are the deep ties of affection, caring, and support among members.

Kathleen: Beyond that, there is an impressive array of programs and committees that not only function well, but are even ground-breaking in their scope and vision; three that come to mind are the Journey Groups and the ways that people find connection there; the Board and their committees, especially the Leadership and Crystal Ball or Planning Committee who have done a fantastic job of interpreting the vision, mission, and ends of the congregation; AND, the Healthy Congregations Team – not just a conflict management group, but literally a conscience of the fellowship that assists with and insists on healthy practices between members that make for institutional integrity.

Wayne: I've also been very impressed with the commitment and outreach represented by the Social Justice Action Teams and by the Partner Church Program. Many congregations we know would be envious of the strength of all the Fellowship's programs. It's also been obvious to both of us that this congregation has a healthy respect for ministers. Boy, is that a relief! Your love for and appreciation of Roger Bertschausen's ministry is wonderful to see, and something we honor at this weekend's services. It seems to us that the Fellowship did a good job of saying good bye to him and respecting the request to not be in touch with him despite the emotional connections that remain from your years of shared ministry.

Kathleen: Maybe more important than how the congregation has handled Roger's departure is how much love and appreciation we've seen for Leah's ministry. She is rock solid, isn't she? It's been so great to have this full partner in ministry with us. The congregation looks to her for guidance and support; and our ministry would not have gone as well as it has if it weren't for Reverend Leah. You know what else I appreciate? Wow --- does this fellowship have a competent and hardworking staff? Siri Witt, Marie Blohowiak, Jay Thomas, Kim Hartman, Cyndi Polakowski, Dan Van Sickle and this year Theresa Hannah-- all of them are people willing to go the extra mile above and beyond their stated hours and job descriptions. They approach their work with creativity, enthusiasm and out of a sense of deep love and appreciation for the work of the Fellowship. It's more than just a job – it's a calling and a ministry.

Wayne... I couldn't agree with you more! At the same time, the fact that they are willing to work so hard is also a liability isn't it?

Kathleen: What do you mean?

Wayne: Well, for example, we've noticed that the Fellowship feels understaffed, with the biggest example of that being staff members routinely doing jobs that are really not part of their job descriptions because there's nobody else to do them.

Kathleen: Like what for example?

Wayne: (holds up a rubber mouse) We have the highest paid mouse catchers in Wisconsin! Seriously, that's just a symptom of having the highest paid custodial staff in Wisconsin. With only a weekly cleaning service but no facilities manager, we see the staff not only checking the mouse traps (to release them back into the wild, of course) –but doing kitchen cleanup after people, doing room setups and take downs, clearing snow – lots of small things they do divided among several people because they need to get done, but they all add up. I think one of the questions you have to ask next year, Kathleen is -- how sustainable is this kind of arrangement over time?

Kathleen: It's not just the building custodial duties. What about when Kim Hartman steps in to offer child care or disinfect a classroom because there is no one else to do it? Or when Jay Thomas spends time being a default sound engineer or event manager instead of being able to write and practice music for the weekend? Overall, I would say that there's an impressive do-it-yourself culture in the Fellowship that is really a plus, but it has a downside in that the staff has to backstop whatever doesn't get done-ourselves, and a small group volunteers often has to work very hard.

Wayne: You've got to admit that the Fellowship's do-it-yourself culture is one part of their we-can-do-it culture. Maybe you can't have one without the other. A fellowship doesn't grow from 100 members to now over 700 members just because of a minister. It's because of everybody. But one of the things that stalls a congregation's growth is how they answer the question: "Who is everybody?" That first question we said we wanted to raise today about whether you really want to continue to grow or whether you want to plateau is really a question about whether you want to remain the same "everybody." When you are brand new to the Fellowship, there are immediate clues as to "who is everybody." As a newcomer to the Fellowship this fall, I was made to feel really comfortable in what seemed to me like a familiar like-minded community – but what's wrong with this picture? I'm a baby boomer upper middle class straight white guy! Even in Wisconsin, I am not the breaking edge of the demographic population curve.

Kathleen: Now, you must admit that since we've been here, we have met lesbian and gay members, members who identify as people of color, and Millennial and Gen-X members. They are out there, but I'm not sure they are really reflected in the culture of the Fellowship.

Wayne: We've used this word "culture" a lot. What do you mean by culture?

Kathleen: A culture consists of the markers of meaning-making. It's the clues on the surface that tells you who and how meaning is being made under the surface. We've talked this year about how white culture permeates the Fellowship, and that's pretty obvious to everyone intellectually, because of who the vast majority of our members are. Our white culture is hard to

see if you're white-it's what you're used to, but it's got to be constantly challenging for our members of color. Despite the Fellowship's recent history of high profile advocacy for gay rights, in our first six months here, we've seen no visible evidence of a gay or lesbian *culture* in the Fellowship – that is, signs, symbols, programs, events. If there's a Fellowship-based social network, or programming for queer people, maybe we don't see it because we're straight, or maybe it's not for us to say what queer people in this Fellowship want for themselves. But we notice this difference going back and forth between two congregations, in which one has those visible signs that LGBTQ people are an important part of the community, and one that doesn't have them, at least right now.

Wayne: Signs and symbols are a really important part of conveying to new people what the culture of the Fellowship is. The second issue we told you we wanted to raise today is how to sustain the small fellowship inside the larger congregation. I think we've both admired how successfully that has been done here.

Kathleen: That's true, and it's been intentional. This Fellowship can teach other congregations about best practices for keeping small fellowship “intimacy” while engaging in large fellowship “ultimacy” all at the same time. It's a difficult thing to do well. Then Journey Groups are a great example. However, it's easy to get stuck on things that are *the symbols* of the small fellowship, without regard to whether they are still the *best practices* for encouraging the Fellowship to grow, or whether they are really the most important reasons why the small fellowship keeps happening inside the big fellowship.

Wayne: So what kinds of symbols are you talking about?

Kathleen: Everybody knows that what they are! There's THIS! (waves the coffee cup) Coffee cups in the sanctuary! There's the reading of Joys and Concerns. There's the Congregational Response after the sermon. These are all symbols inside the service that convey a message about who “everybody” is here – “Everybody” are people who can be comfortable in a worship service sitting next to people balancing coffee on their laps, and who are interested in hearing news about people they don't know, and listening to comments about the sermon afterwards. There can be an implicit message sent that if you don't appreciate those parts of Fellowship culture, then maybe this Fellowship is not your cup of tea. You're not going to be part of the “we,” and that includes the Fellowship's expectation for its next senior settled minister. To be part of the “way we are” you have to share the suspicion of things that remind people of what “churches” do – and buy in to not acting like a “church” because churches, especially big churches are stuffy and judgmental and boring.

Wayne: So, let me ask the million dollar question here. What's wrong with that?

Kathleen: There's nothing wrong with it, unless you want to consider the possibility that there are potential Unitarian Universalists out there in the Fox Valley who aren't that comfortable with a culture of informality in the service. I guess the question for me is: Where is there room in their hearts to be changed by the new person or the new minister? As I said earlier, it's not that any of these things are in and of themselves wrong – or that I am determined

to change them -- it's the tenacity which some in the congregation seems to insist on maintaining them as part of their identity that is of concern to me for the future.

Wayne: I know there is a lot that has changed over the last several years that some members of the Fellowship miss and wish would return. I presume there will be more changes. So it seems to me that the Fellowship is still growing into its larger size; almost like a kid who keeps grabbing the same pair of pants without realizing that the pants don't quite fit as well anymore.

Kathleen: I know -- speaking of size -- can you believe they used to fit all these people into the Fellowship Hall? It's hard to believe! People tell me -- yes, we had to have four services to make room for everyone!

Wayne: Hey -- that reminds me of something else: "Didn't it feel great to have so many people in the 4:30 pm Saturday service?" There were over 100 people here last night!

Kathleen: Yes, it did! But I have heard that the Saturday night service used to have this kind of attendance, both for adults and children, but that over the past few years, attendance has gone down. On a given Saturday evening service, there are anywhere from a high of 70 people, to a low of about 40. Having 40 people in a 300+ seat sanctuary scattered around looks -- well -- strange. For the first time visitor or guest it doesn't reflect the vital Fellowship that this place is -- it looks like a dying congregation instead of a thriving one. We know that's not the case -- but they don't!

Wayne: It's also a question of resources, isn't it? One Saturday this fall there were no children at the Fellowship at all -- but Kim Hartman and I prepared a children's story -- she had recruited volunteers for religious education and created a program -- for no kids! Music Director Jay Thomas finds it difficult to get musicians -- whether professional or volunteer -- to offer music so that there is a consistent musical presence at all three services.

Kathleen: That seems to be the theme here --that the Fellowship reached a period of expansion and it adjusted itself to accommodate the growth. But some of the ways it accommodated that growth is still based on having a service style that was created for the Fellowship Hall, and a growing program that relies on the same size of staff. In the future it's going to require more staff time and therefore more money to sustain the current level of services and some of the programs that were begun under Roger's ministry. So, one of the things I think we need to do in the transitional year ahead is look carefully at the programs that are being sustained by Fellowship members with little or no staff support, versus the ones that are dependent upon the existing staff to make happen.

Wayne: Nobody's expecting, and we're certainly not challenging you today, to have a heart's desire of becoming a stable 800 member congregation over these next two years of transition. Plateaus are OK places to be when it's a time of review, and re-evaluation. But one of the things I've wondered about is whether people here are feeling content to rest on their laurels, and be comfortable in their culture. It's an easy thing to do.

Kathleen: There's no doubt that this one of the most successful and admirable congregations in the state, and yet we think you've barely scratched the surface of how many people you could attract and involve in Unitarian Universalism in the Fox Cities. To fulfill that potential requires intentionality, and an ability to be critical of your own culture.

Wayne: In asking that third question about whether the Fellowship is here to give you what you want, or whether we are all here to figure out what we as a community can give back to the world, the question of whether we are functionally mono-cultural becomes more and more important. It takes intentionality to be able to not only welcome and include new people, but to have those new people come from a wider spectrum of the Fox Cities population than we will attract by default. I think it will be important to keep re-framing this interim time as not just about what do we need for ourselves, but how do we need to change so we can connect with and give back to the community even more than we already have?

Kathleen: What a year the Fellowship has ahead! You'll elect a search committee later this year, and I'll be here full time starting this summer. I'm really pleased and grateful I've been asked to stay for the second year. I'm excited to be able to continue to work with Leah and with our staff on the five tasks of interim ministry: naming history, renewing mission, encouraging leadership, building connections and envisioning future. Right now, however, we'd like to invite your response to this unusual sermon.

Reflection *Moving Forward* By Rev. Leah Hart-Landsberg

In June, the very day before Roger drove out of town and away from the Fellowship, I faced another big change, one at home. I took on the satisfying, transformative, gut-wrenching, humility-inducing, more-fun-than-you-would-believe role of foster parenthood. Amy and I went from having one feline roommate to being outnumbered by adorable children—loud, intelligent, hilarious, needy, beautiful children. If that sounds like a rollercoaster, well, it is! And the more I think about it the more I realize that ministerial transition at the Fellowship is also a rollercoaster. It's satisfying, transformative, gut-wrenching, humility-inducing... and sometimes even more-fun-than-you-would-believe.

In both cases, the future—of my foster placement and the Fellowship's senior leadership—is unwritten. Impermanence looms large in the tiny eyes that follow me as I make toast in the morning and the bigger eyes that watch me as I take my place up here. This nervous energy—its blessings and curses—permeates my life. At the Fellowship, we are starting to memorize the litany of that which is uncertain. We can all recite the list of unknowns. It's the same at home, where we sometimes read a picture book about the open-endedness and up-endedness of foster care called *Maybe Days*.

It can be very hard. I am sometimes sleepless with worry about that which will not be helped by worrying. Can the natural resilience of kids off-set the impact of childhood trauma? Did everyone floss last night? (I doubt it.) How will my ministry change based on who else is part of the ministry team? Will people stay in committed relationship with the Fellowship, even as it changes in key ways?

In my hard moments of not-knowing, I find consolation in naming what is true, which is this: All I have is the present. The right now. *This* winter's midnight snow walks to City Park, which end promptly by 7:30 so tiny heads can start battling sleep by 8 pm. Or the logistical challenges and anticipatory excitement of Fellowship services *this* weekend, and how glad I am to see all of you here *today*.

When it comes to parenting and the Fellowship, the task is clear. Both ask of me the same work. I am—and in the case of the Fellowship we all are—called to be all in, right now. The children in my care need me to be all in, regardless of for how long. And I am, more than I ever thought I could be. I don't know what the future holds for them or for us together. It scares the hell out of me. But here I am. Right where I belong. I cannot avoid the uncertainty and so somehow I am able to embrace it.

The future of the Fellowship is bright. I've always known that. I know our membership. I know this community. But I am even more heartened after hearing from our transitional ministers and from all of you about what you love here and also what you long for. It inspires me to demonstrate my commitment to a good future (at home and here) by how I show up today, in the here and now.

So, if I want this to be a friendly place in 50 years—and I do!—then I'm going to greet as many people as warmly as I can *today*. If I want to connect fully and well with a new senior minister—and I do!—then I know what to do. I'm going to keep throwing myself into relationship with our transitional ministers and re-commit to this with Kathleen for next year. And I'm going to remember, on those occasional sleepless nights, to give myself a little credit for my commitment, for staying put, despite inevitable worries. Maybe these simple practices of presence-in-the-face-of-uncertainty will help me be all in, in it for all that there is. Because there is a lot.

We are a high demand community. You expect a lot from me and from the Fellowship. I would not have it any other way. I thank you for this compliment, this gift. It is a clear sign that you—that we—take seriously who we are, what we do and what we mean. Our mission deserves to be fully lived out, in our hearts and in our wider community as the years continue to unfold. The Fellowship of the future is deserving of our energy and attention, but you know what? It's not nearly as important as the Fellowship of today, of this moment.

When it comes to my wee darlings at home, who I occasionally (when they're getting into everything) call 'termites,' and here in the wide seas of change at the Fellowship, the more we are grounded in who and what and where we are right now, the more we will ever and always be able to keep on moving forward. We can take up this practice of moving forward together right now with our closing singing. Please join me.

© 2016 by Kathleen Rolenz, Wayne Arnason, Leah Hart-Landsberg. All rights reserved.