

BLESSING THE FUTURE
A Sermon offered by Rev. Wayne Arnason
Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Appleton, Wisconsin
fvuuf.org

May 21-22, 2016

READING from *THE ART OF LOVING* BY ERICH FROMM

“We have faith in the potentialities of others, of ourselves, and of humankind because, and only to the degree which, we have experienced the growth of our own potentialities, the reality of growth in ourselves, the strength of our own power of reason and of love...”

“Love is a decision, it is a judgment, it is a promise. If love were only a feeling, there would be no basis for the promise to love each other forever. A feeling comes and it may go. How can I judge that it will stay forever, when my act does not involve judgment and decision?”

SERMON

My Mother made me do it! And among all the things she made me do, it is one of the top two or three for which I am most grateful. I’m talking about attending my first meeting of the high school youth group at the Unitarian Universalist Church where I grew up. I had been a regular and frequently enthusiastic participant in religious education classes at my congregation from the nursery through ninth grade, which was when middle school ended in our system. There was no Coming of Age program for 8th-9th graders in my congregation at that time, or for high school age youth. There was a youth group called LRY – Liberal Religious Youth. My 9th grade class was the original version of the Neighboring Faiths curriculum and when it was over, I was told we had graduated from religious education and I was given a Life Magazine – published book about world religions with a congratulatory sticker inside that had my name on it.

Although nobody said it outright, I had the feeling that “graduating” meant that nobody could make me come any more. I could choose whether I wanted to come. Starting high school was a stressful time for me, and when September came around I felt like it was all too much and the one thing I could really control was to say “No” to getting up on Sunday morning and going to the youth group.

My mother was obviously disappointed, but she didn’t pull rank. She tried persuasion instead. And when that didn’t work she went to the next level. She asked me to try it once, for her. I said OK. I’ll go just once. For you. And this changed the rest of my life. That day my mother blessed my future. She gave me an ongoing spiritual life, a career path, and a religious community that has meant everything to me. Without going to that first local youth group meeting, I never would have continued down a path of involvement and leadership that opened up the possibility that I might become a minister. My mother had no idea that she would bless my future by pushing me just enough to try something I didn’t understand and wasn’t sure I

wanted to do. What she did know is that she loved me, and that when she was in 9th grade her own Unitarian church youth group was a great experience for her. She didn't lay on me all of her own stories about her experiences as Unitarian youth. She was too smart for that. Instead, she just asked me to do something for her, one time, and that was how she blessed me.

When I went to that first youth group meeting, I didn't know the older youth all that well, and the advisor to the group was someone I had never met. He was a young chiropractor named John Kos: an intellectual, and a relatively new member of the UU congregation, attracted by the philosophical and humanist community he found there. He knew nothing about what we might today call "youth ministry" or even much about youth. His own kids were toddlers. But he was excited about a book he had just read and he thought we could start the year by talking about some ideas from that book. The book was Erich Fromm's "The Art of Loving."

Now, having just heard one short reading from "The Art of Loving," you probably noticed that this might be a heady book to throw at a bunch of high schoolers. It was. Dr. Kos gave us short pieces of the book, and we began by talking about love. I had never talked about love before. With anyone. It was rare in my reserved Icelandic family for anyone to talk about love or even say "I love you." Love was taken for granted until it was gone. I assumed love had something to do with taking care of other people and maybe with sex, but that was about it. So I found the idea that in this group we were going to talk about love a little overwhelming.

We started with the question: *What is love?* A few of the brave older youth mumbled answers about being attracted to someone or getting married, and about what you have to feel about them to say to someone that you love them. After a while Dr. Kos inserted Fromm's question in the reading we just heard: *What if love is not just a feeling? Feelings come and go. What if love has to have other things along with the feeling? What if love is a decision?*

I'd never thought about that before. I thought love was a magical experience that happened to you, not something you *decided* to do or to express or to be. But now the group was over and Dr. Kos said he hoped maybe we could have some of our meetings in members' homes on some Sunday nights. Would anybody consider volunteering their house? He looked around, and I looked around, and everybody else was looking at their shoes. So I raised my hand. I raised my hand even though I had told myself I was only going to come to one meeting. And here I am today. I can't say that raising my hand was a decision to love, but it was a decision to step through a door into a future that promised a deeper exploration of love.

It was a door my mother had walked through herself at one point and she wanted to show me the way. It was a door that Dr. Kos was trying to open for himself and he knew there was something important on the other side that needed to be shared. I look back fifty years at these events and give thanks for these two people who blessed my life.

Through the experiences I had in my UU youth group I continued to meet people who became guides and door openers and personal examples for me for a shorter or longer period of time. What they had in common, whether they were consciously trying to be that kind of person in my life, was that they took me seriously as a person of worth and dignity who had gifts to offer the world and who wanted to help me discern what those gifts might be.

Taking someone seriously as a person of worth and dignity sounds like such a simple thing to do. Yet it is something that isn't done enough. Too many of us too often are busy judging and calculating and manipulating other people to serve the needs we have. Or we are not aware and confident enough in ourselves to make a habit of seeing the unique gifts in others and what they have to offer, not just to us, but to the world. This is the challenge that teachers in our schools and colleges, and that volunteer leaders and teachers in our religious education program face week in and week out.

On Friday night here at the Fellowship, we had an open meeting for anyone who cared about the future of our ministry for and with youth. We had sixteen people turn out – five youth, eight adults, and three staff members, who spent three hours together exploring the challenges, the gaps, and the successes of our current programming for youth. The adults included parents, current middle school and high school volunteer teachers, and former Coming of Age mentors. It was a great group, and the conversation was deep and meaningful. Why did we do this? One reason was that as a congregation, in your annual meeting in 2013, you the Fellowship voted to approve an “end”, that is, a five year goal, stated as “Youth (ages 12-17) and young adults (ages 18-35) will discover lasting ways to connect to The Fellowship and the greater Unitarian Universalist community.” Your interim ministers take ends statements seriously. We feel obligated to study them and respond to them. So the first thing we noticed is that when we arrived here last fall is that despite this end, at weekend services, there were hardly any youth and not many young adults!

When we asked why, of course, we found out that the middle school class meets at only one Sunday service, and the human sexuality class called Our Whole Lives, (the OWLs for short), as well as the biweekly youth group, both meet on Wednesday nights, and the Coming of Age program for High School age wasn't happening because it is offered every second year. It wasn't that youth didn't have programs, but for most Fellowship members, they were hard to see. We also saw that most young adults involved here are parents connecting through the RE program, but the campus ministry outreach to Lawrence students is on hiatus, and there's no social group for young adults that might be attractive to people with or without kids.

For some parents, the invisibility of youth at the weekend services was representative of a broader concern they were feeling that we were falling short of the goal of that stated end, that youth and young adults were not “finding lasting ways to connect” with the Fellowship. A group of youth and parents brought this concern to Kim Hartman and the ministers, and earlier this year, started to act on it. They have taken the lead in gathering a Sunday Morning Breakfast Club for peer engagement with the themes, services, and sermons as well as other explorations. We identified a 9th grade gap where people seem to be falling through a crack in the programs we are offering and we looked at how that can be remedied by shifts in class and age groupings and some flexible choices for which parts of the youth program most engage you.

The conversations we had that touched on “lasting ways to connect” were especially compelling to me. In your own life experience, ask yourself why and how have you found “lasting ways to connect” with any person, community, or institution? I am sure that for most of you, the answer that comes first to mind is that you built a positive, safe, mutually respectful, and enjoyable relationship with that individual, or with enough people in a community or an

institution that you wanted to stay connected. Sharing the same values, or religious perspectives, is important for long term involvement with another person or a community, and that may be what attracts you first to showing up, but for the long haul, meaningful personal relationships is the key. That's true for both youth and adults of all ages.

The new members we recognized today will be in and out the Fellowship within two years if they were to come only to services and didn't talk to anybody or get involved in anything else. It's not that the services are bad – but the services are only one of many doors to a deeper life of meaning and purpose that the Fellowship offers, and you have to go through more than one door. That's especially true for youth.

So during the Friday night meeting, we did a small group exercise about the “best things” about the current offerings we have for youth, and brainstormed a great list – that described the safe and inclusive spaces we create together, the youth community that our programs create, the importance of connection with adult mentors, and the quality and depth of the conversations that happen along with engaging in service learning and having a good time together. Almost everything on that “best things” list was rooted in the quality of relationships that are made possible among the youth group members, and with the involved adults. Particularly meaningful to hear were some of the adults' responses about how meaningful relationships with youth had become to them. One said “I live for the ‘aha’ moment, when a new insight into yourself or some life issue arises.”

In the reading we heard earlier, Erich Fromm observed that: “We have faith in the potentialities of others, of ourselves, and of humankind because, and only to the degree which, we have experienced. . .the reality of growth in ourselves, the strength of our own power of reason and of love. . .” If what Fromm is saying is true, then our ability to bless the future, by taking the risk of cross-generation relationships, does not depend on having any superhuman spiritual abilities. It does depend on making a choice, to prioritize these relationships in your time. It means being vulnerable and maybe a little humble about what you know. But it also means knowing and trusting our own insights and experiences of wisdom and beauty and having the courage to express them in relationships with people younger or older than yourself. Deciding to love the world and the people in it is not an intellectual choice based on beliefs. It's a decision of the heart. It's risking relationship. Each of us has to make that choice. There's a poem that Unitarian Universalist theologian Rebecca Parker wrote called “Benediction” that is probably being quoted a lot around the country during this month when we are taking up the theme of Blessing. In part the poem says:

Your gifts—whatever you discover them to be—
can be used to bless or curse the world.
You must answer this question:
What will you do with your gifts?
Choose to bless the world.
The choice to bless the world can take you into solitude
To search for the sources of power and grace;
Native wisdom, healing, and liberation.
More, the choice will draw you into community,

The endeavor shared,
The heritage passed on...
The choice to bless the world is more than act of will,
A moving forward into the world
With the intention to do good.
It is an act of recognition,
A confession of surprise,
A grateful acknowledgment
That in the midst of a broken world
Unspeakable beauty, grace and mystery abide.

None of us alone can save the world.

Together—that is another possibility waiting.

Like Erich Fromm, Rebecca Parker affirms in this poem that loving the world and blessing the world and its future involves choices. You make it happen. It doesn't just happen to you because of a role you have or a person you love or a job you do. But Parker adds something else. She says: "The choice to bless the world is more than act of will, a moving forward into the world with the intention to do good. It is an act of recognition, a confession of surprise." That's a good way to describe the ah-ha moments that happen over and over again in relationships that develop among youth and between youth and adults here at the Fellowship. We recognize each other, and we quietly confess our surprise at how unexpectedly beautiful we all are. In all our quirky imperfection, "unspeakable grace, beauty, and mystery abide."

We can never be sure how our lives affect others. My mother's personal generosity to people and to institutions she cares about is not something she does intentionally to set an example for her children. It's just who she is. My first high school youth group advisor Dr. Kos probably did not remember much about his few months of volunteering to teach that class at the Unitarian Church. Because we can never be sure which of our actions, our attitudes, our choices is going to change a life, or change the world, they all become equally important.

So consider how you can bless the future through your involvement here. We have ongoing opportunities for you to be involved in doing that through the Fellowship's youth programs. We are looking at how the successful Neighboring Faiths curriculum could appropriately lead young teens towards OWLs and Youth Group participation. We are imagining new possibilities for building UU connections and identity for 8th to 10th graders. We are preparing to have a Coming of Age class for 10th to 12 graders next year. All of these programs have opportunities for adult involvement as part of year-long teaching team, as mentors in one-on-one relationships with youth, as presenters in classes, as sponsors for field trips and conferences, as companions on service-learning trips. Kim Hartman and I would like to hear about your interests and gifts and willingness to be involved.

With the speed of change in so many aspects of our world, it is more difficult than ever to anticipate the future. The children and grandchildren that we are parenting will live out their last years in a world of technologies and political challenges that we can't begin to imagine, and so the blessing that we give to them can't be something that can intentionally and confidently address that future directly. What we can give them is a blessing that has been tried and stayed

true in the past and that has not been destroyed by greed, cruelty and oppression. It is the blessing of human community – the very work that we gather here week after week to affirm and create. “None of us alone can save the world,” says Parker, but together – Together -- that is another possibility waiting.”

© 2016 by Wayne B. Arnason. All rights reserved.