

“The Journey Begins”

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The *first* time I started seminary (grad school for theology), my Dad and I drove from Michigan to New Jersey in my mom’s red Tacoma truck. I didn’t have much. Clothes, books, a framed print for the wall, a small wooden trunk that my grandfather had helped me to refinish. I don’t think I even had a computer! But I had dreams.

However, at 24 years old, my dreams were somewhat ill-defined. I had no religious denomination supporting my studies, nor did I have a multi-year plan to become a minister. Rather, I had questions. I had longings. What really matters? Will I find a place to belong? What’s right? Good? Are all those other religions really wrong? What is God asking of me? Is there a God?

Beginnings are full of uncertainties. They hold possibilities . . . and fears. As I began seminary, I was afraid of being lonely, unloved. And so, over Christmas Break I married my boyfriend from back home. By the end of January, I was pregnant. At the end of the spring semester, I took a leave of absence and returned to Michigan.

The *second* time I started seminary, I was newly divorced and a single mom to a three-year old son. This time, I drove a U-Haul truck full of furniture and toys to New Jersey. Driving solo with my medicated, drowsy cat as my co-pilot, I trembled with determination to reclaim my disrupted dream. After arriving safely, I flew back to Michigan to retrieve my son and begin our new life together.

I *still* had no denomination or clear career trajectory. And, I *still* had those questions, longings, and a sense that religious community would be the place to find what I was seeking. Over the next two years to complete my degree, I did learn a lot about theology, Christian history, and world religions. But the most important lessons came from a community of friends, classmates, professors, and neighbors who generously cared for and supported my son and me. Over dining hall meals, late-night parties (I *was* still in my 20’s!), classroom discussions, and chats on the phone, a web of relationships helped me to heal from my divorce, rediscover joy, and learn new depths of friendship, trust, and love.

This was not what I expected when I began seminary. Nor did I expect that my journey would lead me to question whether I belonged in *any* Christian tradition—an uncertainty that led to a new beginning here in Boston for my doctoral studies. As I took the long route

to earn my doctorate, I did not expect that the journey to Boston would lead me not only to a Unitarian Universalist faith, but also to become a Unitarian Universalist minister . . . and, well, eventually, *here* to the first church in Boston!

Its funny isn't it? How often we don't actually know where we're going when we begin a journey?!

Like today. We are here at the beginning of a new church year. A year ago when we gathered for Water Sunday, we were still in an election season. We didn't know who would be the next president. We didn't know about the funding cuts, the job losses, the massive crackdown on immigration. We didn't know all manner of things—the names of babies not yet born, the diagnoses that would upend a life, nor the unexpected encounters with a new friend, a piece of art, a beautiful vista.

Beginnings are like that. Transformative possibility lays ahead, but the shape of change can be unpredictable, tumbling us into heartbreak or healing, and so often, a tangled skein of both.

At the beginning of this church year, none of us can say with any certainty what lies ahead. Given our political, economic, and social context, I think it's likely that there may be much that is hard and difficult in the days to come. Whether or not we are directly impacted by economic changes, healthcare access, detention by ICE, or erasure of civil rights, we are all already impacted by a rising culture of fear and violence. From gun violence in schools to the shooting of public figures, the use of violence undermines public safety and community trust.

I am afraid of many things as we begin this church year. Are you afraid too? I wish I could tell you that I or the church or our shared faith had *the* answers to simply assure us “all will be well.” Before my summer break, I met with a congregant who shared their fears and asked what hope I had to offer. Over the summer, I wrestled with their question. I continue to wrestle as I am not sure I have an answer that will satisfy them or maybe you or even myself on the hardest days.

Hope is so often linked to a future horizon. And right now the near horizon is streaked with violence, fear, and injustice. It is hard to begin a journey when the near horizon looks so bleak. Where do we go? What is the path forward from *here*, through *that*?!

For me, I found two helpful frameworks in my summer reflections. First, I listened to a podcast (*which I cannot find again!?*) which described the need to imagine the *far* horizon.

Where does the journey lead in two, three, seven generations? Maybe we don't live to experience the world where the climate is protected, the rule of law is exercised with justice, and people live in peace without fear of gun violence or war. Maybe what we *can* do is prepare the way for that far future. Maybe what we *can* do is foster the images of that other world in pieces of art, compositions of song, fragments of poetry. Maybe what we can do is practice being the kind of world we want in small ways, in this community, in this city? Confronted with pain and loss today, I acknowledge this framework may not be enough to anchor your hope.

And so let me also offer this second framework—finding hope in tethers. In a storm, tethers seek to secure an item to a more stable structure. Sometimes, we cannot ignore the storm or stop the storm. Sometimes we have to figure out how we are going to increase the chances of making it safely through a storm. I wonder if in these stormy times identifying and strengthening our tethers might help us. For example, our friends, neighbors, or family may be our tethers. Or, this church with its weekly coming together can be a tether. And the values we share with hundreds of other Unitarian Universalist congregations can be a tether. In a moment when the storm can seem so big, tethering ourselves to larger communities, principles, and histories can ground us in a sense of larger purpose and meaning.

Hope so often drives our commitments to change, to a better world. And, sometimes, that better world may not be on the near horizon. In such moments, our hope may need to imagine a farther horizon for which we plant the seeds today. As we do so, we may also find meaning and purpose in tethering ourselves to a larger story, a more stable structure that we have faith will hold us amidst the storm.

On this day, as we begin the journey of this church year, my *hope* is that we will find new ways to strengthen this community—not only for those of us already here, but also for all those searching for places of sanctuary in these stormy times. As members of the First Church in Boston (founded 1630), we are stewards of an old story of faith and hope. We can tether ourselves to the knowledge that this community has endured revolution and civil war, great depressions, and all manner of change.

In these coming months, I invite you all to be part of the journey. To show up as often as you are able to give what you are able to this community—especially the gift of your presence. Like the water we each contributed to the common bowl today, I believe giving what we can will make a difference to others as well as ourselves. As poet Alberto Ríos writes,

“You gave me

What you did not have, and I gave you
What I had to give—together, we made

Something greater from the difference.”

May it be so. Amen. Blessed Be.