

Transforming Together

April 8, 2018

Reflection: “Mission/Vision,” by Paul Haidet (Congregational Life Team)

I once fed a patient on rounds. I am a physician, and I often hold “rounds” by visiting patients who are hospitalized, along with a team of residents, students, and other physicians-in-training. I was part of a group of teaching physicians around the country who were interested in teaching humanistic care in the hospital environment, and I was looking for opportunities to teach humanism. I was on the first day of a month-long assignment on the wards of the hospital, and this was the first time I made the rounds with this particular team. We came to the room of an elderly gentleman who suffered from dementia, and had been admitted to the hospital with an infection in his bladder, a relatively straightforward and common illness. He was sitting in the bed with a full tray of food in front of him, untouched, because his dementia was advanced enough that he could not feed himself. I saw the opportunity to do some good, and perhaps teach something humanistic, too, so I sat on the side of the bed while we discussed his case and fed him. The residents and students looked a little perplexed, but they ran with it. When we were finished discussing his case, one of the students stayed back to finish feeding him, since the nursing staff was crazy busy that day.

Later in the month, the senior resident asked me to watch her make rounds with the team, to give her feedback on her teaching. As I watched, the team swooped in on one patient after another, fluffing the pillows, getting ice and water, and doing all sorts of things I had never seen doctors do before. I asked them: “What are you doing?” They said: “What do you mean?” I remarked that I had never seen a team doing all these nursing things before. They replied: “We saw you feed that guy. We know the nurses are busy. We got this!”

I had repeated the Gandhi quote “Be the change you seek in the world” many times before that, but never REALLY understood what Gandhi meant before that moment. I believe that Gandhi was telling us to pay attention to our own transformation, and if that transformation is good, the world will transform around you. I had made rounds for 10 years and saw countless patients with the same situation, but never fed one, because I was so locked into what was and what was not “appropriate” for a physician to do. It was not until I broadened my view of my role and mission and actively looked, that I could see the myriad of opportunities that were presenting themselves to me.

Reflection: “Conflict Transformation,” by Barbara Van Horn (Congregational Life Team)

Some people may think that the only thing I ever do is protest and get arrested but that is far from the truth. I have had a long, full life raising a family and teaching for 25 years and working for 10 years with Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service. I am now 86 years old and have 2 daughters, 4 grandchildren and 1 great grandson who is expecting a baby brother soon that he has named Vanilla.

Both in my family life and out in the world It has become increasingly obvious to me that the most important tool we have is communication. We really need to talk honestly and listen carefully to each other. This personal conviction led to my studying and being trained as a mediator and spending the last 25 years as a volunteer community mediator in the Harrisburg area and Victim-Offender Mediator for York Co. Juvenile Probation and the PA Department of Corrections. Community mediation occurs by contact from either party involved or referral from agencies connected with law enforcement. Victim-Offender mediation only happens through a request from the victim of a crime of severe violence.

I have many stories I could share of conflict and people being transformed by mediation and also just through really hearing each other when we share our thoughts and feelings. Since we don't have time available this morning for all those stories I will share one miraculous experience from Graterford Prison (SCI). Two sisters whose brother had been murdered years before wanted to meet with the murderer who, because of an inexperienced judge who was running for office, had been inappropriately sentenced to life without parole. After months of preparation with both sides we entered that dark, old prison and discovered that the inmate had arranged with the guards to serve tea and cookies to us. He graciously hosted us as if we were in his own home and we were honored guests. The prison guards had so much respect for him that they willingly arranged this for him. Another time I visited to find that his cell block was on lockdown and the visit would have to be postponed. But wait, the respect kicked in again and he was permitted to come out and meet with me while all the other inmates were locked in. I wondered what was going on here. Nothing like this had ever happened before in any of the prisons I visited.

This man had become a totally different person from the young murderer who had entered Graterford years before. Instead of being filled with resentment and hatred over the injustice done to him he had transformed into someone who took responsibility for what he had done and had become a model prisoner trying to atone for his past actions. He began programs in the prison to help troubled, at risk teenagers from the streets of Philadelphia. In partnership with lawyers from Philadelphia he arranged for kids to come to the prison and learn first-hand from him the consequences of their actions. He also

learned several skills and practiced them over the years in Graterford as well as gaining the trust and respect of the guards who worked with him.

The sisters of the man he shot have become staunch allies, visit him regularly and have been working for years to try to have him released. They became convinced that he was only partly to blame for the murder and have totally forgiven him. All of the people involved in this story, including me, have learned valuable lessons about taking responsibility for your actions and being fully open to the benefits of sharing your thoughts and feelings with others.

Reflection: “Assessment” by Sandra Hamstra (Congregational Life Team)

As many of us do, I had a plan for my life when I was 17 years old. I was determined to become an ICU nurse, marry the man that I loved, have two children and grow old with my husband. There is a saying, “Life is what happens, while you are planning other things.” This was true for me! To sum it up, I became disillusioned with nursing and changed professions. I went through a divorce. I lost two husbands to cancer and then I returned to nursing. During all this, children were educated and launched and grandchildren were welcomed, homes were bought and sold, my father died and my mother required placement in long term care.

Put so succinctly it sounds like a simple process, but it was not. My choices and life events set me on a path of self-assessment, letting go, changing direction and moving forward. There were “dark nights of the soul” that were filled with grief, guilt, uncertainty, fear and confusion. The support of family, friends, counselors and healers was invaluable. Then followed times of healing, increased confidence, a return of optimism and clarity about my next steps. This process recurred many, many times and continues to cycle in my life. The process is not easy and is painful, but the outcome has been growth and transformation. I can say at this point that I am grateful for these experiences for they have changed me in ways that I could never have imagined. My life has a richness and a resilience that may not have happened had I not chosen to commit to the process of letting go of what was, to embrace what could be.

I do not think that my experiences are vastly different from many of you or from this congregation in general. We have all, over the years, experienced losses or events that caused us to rethink, grapple with fear, grief and uncertainty. This congregation has gone through a challenging period of transformation. With time and effort, we have listened better to each other, re-evaluated with the aid of a consultant and several

interim pastors, let go of that which was not working, made changes and moved in a new direction.

I believe that we have come through our “dark night” stronger for what we have wrestled with and accomplished. We are ready to step into a new day with a better sense of who we are and what we are about. The Congregational Life Team has been formed to help us to keep our focus on our vision and mission, to help us resolve conflicts so they will not cause us to stray from our mission and to help us periodically reflect on whether we need to make changes to keep us on target.

We have over the past couple of years set ourselves on a path for transformation and growth.

Together, we will travel this path with hope and courage.
May it be so.

Homily: “Transforming Together,” Rev. Lyn Cox

We have heard three personal stories from members of the Congregational Life Team. They remind us that, in order to live our values, we must return to the path again and again. To fulfill our mission to the best of our ability, we open ourselves up to course corrections, to learning experiences, and to redefining our purpose as we gain new skills and insights about the people we are called to be.

Paul Haidet reminded us that when we actively seek to broaden our sense of what our role and our mission in the world might be, that unexpected opportunities will present themselves. Barbara Van Horn shared her story about the heart-centered work of mediation and conflict transformation, about each of us taking responsibility for our actions, even when we are sure we are “right;” and about the gifts that may arise when we communicate directly about our thoughts and feelings.

Sandy Hamstra spoke about plans, and what happens when they come into contact with real life. That doesn’t mean that planning is worthless, it means that we need to assess and revise our plans every so often. I hope you heard in her story the common threads of compassion, service, responsibility, and love; her values remained constant, even when it was necessary to let go of expectations and plans to make way for the next right thing. You can pursue your mission in a totally different framework and through entirely different tools and means than what you expected, while still remaining true to yourself.

Each speaker was honest about the hard parts of transformation. Rethinking purpose and mission leads to a sense of disorientation. Confusion is not fun. Suddenly not being an expert, even on your own life, is not fun. It can feel vulnerable to let go of a sense of righteousness and to dare to believe that people across the divide can be allies and collaborators for healing. The path of growth goes through gates of fear, guilt, and uncertainty. Seriously and honestly assessing whether the road you're on is following the direction of your values, or if it's taking instructions from fear and habit, is difficult. Even staying committed to the original path, the skills for traveling together could always use some polishing.

We also heard today about the gifts of transformation. As each person comes into closer alignment with their purpose, the people around them reach further for their true purpose. Compassion is contagious. There are unknown reserves of generosity, respect, and forgiveness within people, unknown to us within ourselves, unknown in and to others. Reconciliation defies the calculus of probability. It starts with direct, compassionate, honest communication. Sandy's words resonated with me, "My life has a richness and a resilience that may not have happened had I not chosen to commit to the process of letting go of what was, to embrace what could be."

May we all embrace what could be. There is a quote about change attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson, though I haven't been able to confirm the source. It says:

"Nothing is secure but life, transition, the energizing spirit....People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them."

This congregation has been through a great deal of change. You have learned a lot about speaking the truth in love, listening to one another, and the many different ways of manifesting your mission and values. Some may have wished that this would lead to a period of stability and certainty. That is not going to be possible in the short term. Not only is this congregation at a turning point, the whole landscape of American religion and voluntary association demands something different from all people than it did 50, 30, or even ten years ago. The good news is that you are more prepared than ever for a brave, new world, one filled with excitement and opportunities to live your Unitarian Universalist values. Predictability is not the arena this congregation is being called to at this time. In that, we can rejoice. There is hope in being unsettled. There is joy in expanding your sense of purpose and what it means to live that purpose. Through wholehearted exploration of the future, you will find untapped reserves of grace, resilience, and strength.

The next few years will not be easy, but they will be true and meaningful and excellent opportunities for growth. You have the tools you need to travel them well. You have a covenant of right relations. You have a sense of commitment. You have a living tradition that teaches interdependence and persistence. You have people who are trained and ready to assist with issues of assessment, conflict transformation, education, and mission. You have leaders who care deeply for this congregation and who deserve your respect and kindness, even when and especially when you disagree. This congregation is equipped to face the future.

I believe in you. I believe in the leaders of this congregation and in the members of this congregation. I believe that the living tradition we share has abundant resources for inspiration, and I believe that the future is calling all people of faith onward to new manifestations and new forms. Change is part of life. Collectively, you have choices before you about what kind of change you will embody. You are ready. Go forth and live your values together.

So be it. Blessed be. Amen.