

Aspirations and Inspirations

Written for the Unitarian Church of Harrisburg, August 20, 2017

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Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley and Clyde Grubbs ask, “Who are the prophets who inspire you?” <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/prayer/historys-road>

This congregation has been hearing all summer about personal stories of inspiration. You have heard of mentors, friends, and ministers. You have reflected on prophets of racial justice, and on what you are inspired to do to dismantle white supremacy.

The question of inspiration is not an idle one, nor does it hide neatly inside the folds of private spirituality. Inspiration is a deep breath, a connection to the forces that create and uphold life, an expansion of our consciousness past the limits of what was imagined before. Inspiration can cause trouble.

Yet we need a little bit of that. We need the winds of freedom and justice to blow and trouble the waters. Let us breathe in time with that wind. The prophets and mentors and ancestors who urge us onward show us how we and all of our siblings and the planet we share can have life abundantly. We know we need to change course. Inspiration is one of the ingredients that give us the courage to follow a new path.

Remembering the people who have inspired us is a beginning. The next part in moving us toward the world we dream about is figuring out what parts of those stories we want to weave into the future. Inspiration, breathing in a connection to something that is larger than ourselves, is paired with aspiration, exhaling into an expression of our hopes. Our sources of inspiration may lend us boldness to move forward. Our aspirations give us the power to join together and embrace what we are called to do.

We have to do a little bit of work in the space between inspiration and aspiration. We don't want to simply imitate the people who have gone before. For one thing, our own times have their own challenges, and we may be able to borrow strategies from the past, but we have to choose them carefully. For another, nobody is perfect. Each person's favorite historical figure is, most

likely, problematic. We can work together to tease out which parts of our heritage and learning will become our inspiration, which parts will become cautionary tales, and how that translates into a list of shared goals.

So there's a journey between inspiration and aspiration. Next week, I'll talk about moving from aspiration to perspiration, hope into action. For right now, though, let's back up to the inspiration part. I would like to tell you about some of my role models.

I grew up in a liberal United Church of Christ congregation in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. Until I was around nine years old, the church I went to was served by a co-ministry couple: a man and a woman. I listen now to the stories of my elder colleagues, those who were ordained in the 1970s and 1980s, and I hear them talk about being in their teens or twenties or later before they realized that women could be clergy. For me, gender diversity in religious leadership has been a given ever since I could remember.

Our ministers were a great team. They had different gifts, and they clearly cared about one another and thought about how they would collaborate. One of our ministers had a wry sense of humor, drew analogies between children's books and each week's gospel lesson, and taught us silly songs about faith. The other minister played sincere folk hymns on the guitar and sang in the choir and made references to Hebrew and Greek languages. They spent time with children's ministry as well as adult ministry, and they were there right alongside the members to raise money for the Crop Walk or the Heifer Project.

I did not consciously set out to show evidence of their influence on me. Once I noticed it, though, I had a chance to think about what I wanted to do with that inspiration. What about my upbringing did I want to carry forward into the future, and what did I want to leave behind?

When I was in my mid-twenties, much to my own surprise, I applied to seminary. I asked one of my childhood ministers for a recommendation. As we were talking about it, she explained to me that professional religious leadership is not just one thing, much like congregations are not just one thing. The collaborative ministry of clergy and lay leaders bears a whole rainbow of fruits.

That's the kind of minister I wanted to be, the kind who pays attention to the whole circle of what a congregation can be and do together. I knew I wanted to be the kind of minister who worked on developing music, caring, religious education, justice, and service.

On the other hand, there were things I wanted to do differently than the way I perceived them as I was growing up. I had already decided to become a Unitarian Universalist, though with much gratitude and affection for the tradition in which I was raised. In the intervening years, I have discovered and re-discovered many sources of inspiration. The church of my childhood is one that I am glad to have.

Here at the Unitarian Church of Harrisburg, I see evidence of the ways that your heritage has inspired you to grow your aspirations. I hear how a long tradition of welcome and inclusion and enthusiasm has brought you to dearly cherish your music ministries, including the choir. I see how you have cultivated green spaces around each campus, expressing hope in ways that only trees and flowers can do. Throughout the congregation, there are smaller gatherings, affinity groups, Covenant Groups, and COUCH groups that express hopes for depth and relationship. The White Supremacy Teach-In two weeks ago and the Peace Candle are just some of the examples that show your hope in a world that finds peace through the practice of justice, equality, and compassion.

It is this tradition of commitment that has led your Board of Trustees to sign on the Unitarian Church of Harrisburg as a supporting organization for a unity rally this afternoon at Italian Lake. The event, "Speak Up for Unity: No Hate Here," will be hosted by the Community Responders Network from 3:30 until 5:30. If you are planning to go, you are welcome to bring positive posters and to park at the Hadee Mosque on Division Street. Speakers and performers will "support unity, diversity, and love and condemn white supremacy."

This is a community where people find comfort, challenge, and renewal together, so that you can be prepared to build relationships and be accomplices for the power of love in the world. I gather from what I know of you great aspirations of participating in the work of justice, disrupting the

oppressions that get in the way of the full unfolding of life for all in safety and abundance. I believe you are inspired by famous community builders and civil rights leaders, and I also suspect that there are elders and ancestors from within the congregation whose legacy inspires you. I look forward to hearing more.

The world needs this. The world needs allies for love and justice to renounce White supremacy in its many forms of racism, anti-Semitism, and xenophobia; and to block its advances. The world needs warriors for compassion; those who heal directly, and others who make way for that healing with science, policy, education, and by defending access to health care. The world needs those who do the radical work of introducing people to one another, those who step outside their comfort zones to connect communities, those who build coalitions and make common cause and show up in solidarity with neighbors.

The world needs accomplices for the Spirit of Life, and I believe this congregation is called to be some of them. You have demonstrated your aspirations. The raw materials are there. The work before you includes clarifying those aspirations, committing to them and prioritizing as one people, and clothing your values in practices of community.

Knowing your aspirations and inspirations does not make the path ahead easy. Being clear about our call to be neighbors in solidarity and stewards of the earth doesn't mean we have certainty about the future or that all the resources are lined up neatly in a row. Yet I believe that the gifts we have among us, including the resources of our heritage and the renewal we can draw from our faith, are enough to take the next step.

Sometimes our aspirations show up, even when we don't think we're ready to move forward. Before we close, I'll give you an example from our Universalist heritage. You may have heard this story before. It bears repeating. I don't know if the story happened exactly this way, but I believe it's true.

In the year 1770, John Murray was ready to give up everything. About ten years before that, as a preacher in England, he had converted from being a Calvinist to being a Universalist. He was personally mentored by James Rely,

the founder of English Universalism. Universalism holds that all souls will eventually find reunion with the Divine; in other words, salvation is the destiny for everyone.

Over the course of the 1760s, John Murray and his wife Eliza became more and more deeply involved in this heretical religious movement. Then disaster struck. First their infant son, then Eliza became sick and died. John Murray was thrown into debtor's prison. Murray's brother-in-law rescued him, but he was so demoralized that he refused Rely's urging to return to preaching. Murray said he wished "to pass through life, unheard, unseen, unknown to all, as though I ne'er had been." He boarded a ship bound for New York, the *Hand-in-Hand*.

The *Hand-in-Hand* got stuck on a sandbar off the coast of New Jersey, near Good Luck Point. Murray was among those who came to shore in search of provisions, and it was there that he met Thomas Potter. Potter had built a chapel on his land that was open for traveling preachers. Potter invited Murray to preach, but Murray insisted that he had left that life behind him, and that he would be leaving as soon as the wind shifted and the ship was able to move off of the sand bar. Potter assured him that the wind would not shift until Murray preached in his chapel.

According to the legend, Murray tossed and turned that Saturday night, but arose on Sunday to preach a sermon for Potter and his family and friends. Indeed, following the service, the wind did shift, and John Murray went on to reclaim his vocation as a preacher. He was one of the people who ensured that a religious movement of Universalism was established in our young nation, creating a heritage of freedom and a vision of unity that we still draw from today.

That we still tell this story almost 250 years later says something about our inspirations and our aspirations. I believe that we can hold reserves of hope for one another, as James Rely and Thomas Potter did for John Murray. We can challenge one another to use our gifts to bless the world. Unitarian Universalist congregations like this one hearken back to Thomas Potter's chapel, practicing open minds and open doors, creating a place of sacred

hospitality. When we practice abundance and welcome the stranger, we may find a word that lifts us up and renews our spirits.

In the coming week, I hope you will take some time to give thanks for the people who have inspired you. They may be historical figures, ancestors, or friends who are right beside you today. Take stock of what they have taught you. Look around for the evidence of the ways they have already influenced you for the better in your words and actions. Write down the hopes and goals you draw from these role models and mentors and loved ones. The world needs communities of love and justice. We begin to answer that call when we understand how to translate our inspirations into aspirations.

So be it. Blessed be. Amen.