

“Perspiration,” Rev. Lyn Cox
August 27, 2017

“No matter what issues I have with other Unitarian Universalists regarding our visions of God/Spirit, justice, race, and age—at the root of everything is community, love, and faith. That day, something larger than our individual beliefs rose up in my mind. I thought of the principles, values, and family that are the connective tissue of our faith community ...”

That’s what my friend Elandria Williams said about the way her community and her faith held her and other members of her church in the aftermath of trauma. She talks about connective tissue, experiences and relationships that transcend differences of identity and opinion.

I think this explanation shows how we get things done as Unitarian Universalists. From some on the outside, UUism doesn’t seem like it should work. We do not all follow the same creed in terms of the existence or nature of a God (or gods) or what happens after we die, yet here we are, worshipping as one congregation, supporting one another, and changing the world together. When I tell people on airplanes or buses what I do and about our religion, they often find it unbelievable. How can so many different ideas translate into a faith movement?

There are some ideas we tend to have in common, like the idea that we are born worthy, but it’s possible that the secret isn’t in the realm of ideas at all. The secret is in our connective tissue: the values and the relationships, the why and the who. There is a lot holding us together. That’s how we turn our hopes into action. We go from inspiration to aspiration to perspiration, and we don’t do it alone.

One example of turning inspiration to perspiration is a garden. Tending a garden is a process of turning ideas, soil, and water into food. My friend’s observations about Unitarian Universalism turn out to also be true for how other things come to fruition. There might be common-sense tweaks in how we do things, but the emotional and

spiritual energy we need to put wheels on our sense of purpose runs on mission and relationships. Principles, values, and people are the connective tissue holding a group together as they pursue a shared purpose. Keep coming back to the why and the who.

The why and the who of my garden this year initially had the same answer: my children. I have seven-year-old twins. My goal was to have an activity we could do together that would also be educational. I wanted them to have a concrete sense of where their food comes from, to feel a connection with the earth, and to practice working toward something over time. More than that, I wanted experiences that we could share of planning the garden, helping it grow, and feeling joy with the harvest.

Knowing the why and the who guided my decisions about how. I went through pages and pages of graph paper figuring out what we might plant where. I put together an achievable plan, then I asked the kids what they wanted to plant, and my achievable plan was modified to an ambitious one. I wanted to plant carrots, cucumbers, green beans, and cherry tomatoes. They wanted to plant corn, pumpkins, edamame beans, and watermelons.

In early March, the kids and I went to the garden store. We got all the seeds on our list, and somehow also ended up with six kinds of herbs, plus the free packet of sunflower seeds the store gives out with every purchase in the spring.

We planted some of the seeds in little pots by the window. We started cherry tomato, watermelon, baby jack pumpkin, and sunflower seeds. It was thrilling to watch them grow. We got containers and raised beds ready and planted our first seedlings. Fun fact: birds think sunflower seedlings are delicious, not just the seeds themselves. We tried starting sunflowers three times. But that's OK! The why of our garden was about learning, and the who was about our family.

This is the point when my errors in planning started to catch up with me. I planted the pumpkins and watermelons too close together, not anticipating how far they would spread or how much I would need to do to control weeds around them. I had protected the carrots and cucumbers from wildlife with netting, but I did not realize that deer like to

eat edamame and tomato leaves, so we lost all of the edamame and several tomato plants. That's OK! This is a learning experience! The why of our garden was about learning. I will admit that I considered giving up, but I was held accountable by the people who were committed along with me.

Around the time the corn got about knee-high, I realized that I had made another error, and that was that I defined the who too narrowly. I wanted to plant a garden to build a stronger relationship with my children, but I had forgotten that we are part of an interdependent network of people who care about each other, not limited to our household. Spending more time outside meant I had more casual conversations with neighbors and friends, and several of them knew quite a bit about gardening. Wisdom had been all around us the entire time. If I had been more broad-minded about who from the beginning, life might have been easier.

Trading information about gardening meant that we had something to talk about that was life-giving, concrete, and grounding. Those of our friends and neighbors who were also gardening, or at least raising herbs in pots, traded crops with each other. None of us tried to grow zucchini this year, so that's lucky. We have learned a lot. I learned that I don't want to grow pumpkins and watermelons again next year, but I am all in for cherry tomatoes and beans.

Turning the idea of growing things into a living garden was a project powered by the why of learning and relationships and by the who of people in my family AND other people in ever-expanding circles of love and care. When we're transforming goals into action, it doesn't hurt to break out the graph paper and do some planning, yet the connective tissue of values and relationships is necessary for holding the whole thing together and giving a project or a mission the spark of life. In addition to household projects, I'd like to think that the questions of why and who are relevant in big goals, huge endeavors that span decades and borders and cultural divides.

Once upon a time there were two religious denominations. They had a lot of ideas in common. They both liked the idea of a faith that learned, grew, and adapted through the ages. They both liked the idea that loving God and one's neighbor were important. Yet

the denominations remained separate. It took almost a hundred years between the time they first started discussing their common ground until the time when they completely joined forces to become a unified faith that brought its combined history and potential into the future. I'm talking about the Universalists and the Unitarians, and their consolidation into the [Unitarian Universalist Association](#) in 1961.

Universalists were convinced that union with the Divine is the shared destiny of humanity, and therefore we joyfully choose to care for all of our siblings on earth. Unitarians were dissenters who used reason in matters of faith, and by applying critical thinking to the evidence, found support for free will and a loving God, along with skepticism for the doctrine of the Trinity. Briefly, Universalists: no Hell; Unitarians, one God; both: free will, love your neighbor. These are powerful ideas. Ideas need people to put them into action.

The first time there was a resolution for a merger of the two denominations was in [1865](#). It was defeated, but the two movements had so much in common, they kept talking about cooperation. What separated them was not so much theology as culture. Universalists were more likely to be found in smaller and more rural communities. There were perceived differences of wealth, class, and education. For many years, the two groups focused on the mechanics of the how question, "How can we cooperate with the people who are different from us in these ways?"

Meanwhile, at the local and regional level, [cooperation was happening all over the place](#). Many ministers held dual fellowship and sought positions in either or both denominations. Some individual congregations merged or federated, starting with congregations in Mukwonago, Wisconsin, in 1878. Even congregations that stayed separate got into cooperative arrangements, like the Universalist and Unitarian congregations in Syracuse, New York, that remain good neighbors to this day. Sunday School leaders swapped books and lesson plans. These relationship-building efforts sped up as years passed. In 1953, the Universalist and Unitarian youth groups merged to form Liberal Religious Youth. In 1955, faith development professionals combined to form LREDA, which is still the professional association for Unitarian Universalist religious educators.

The question of who was clearly involved. Then there is the why. In the documents prepared for congregational discussion about the consolidation, the authors stated reasons about religious freedom and responding to the issues of the modern era. In retrospect, I would phrase it a bit differently. Universalists and Unitarians grew from the same source material of faith that moves people to love their neighbor and to promote liberation, and a faith that comforts its people in the spirit of love. By coming together, they were able to carry forward the most vital, transformative parts of their reasons for being, and leave behind the mechanics--the hows and whats--that didn't necessarily support the why and the who. From there, Unitarian Universalism was able to adapt to a changing world.

Maybe you know something about two groups of religious people, rooted in the same source, who have more that brings them together rather than drives them apart. Sure, there could be differences in culture or class or expression, but the essence of these two groups is to love your neighbor, practice liberation, and find connection with the source of love. Maybe you know that the questions of how and what are important, worthy, difficult, and time-consuming; yet staying centered on the questions of why and who brings the peace of pursuing a mission with faith.

This is where experimentation comes in. The Worship Team and I have come up with a theme for 2017-2018: "A Year of Spiritual Risks." We decided that spiritual practices that help us to stretch our comfort zone are exactly what we need to equip ourselves and encourage each other for what's ahead in the congregation, in the community, and in the world as it is. Each month, we'll be exploring a different practice of spiritual risk. In September, we'll be taking the risk of authentic connection.

Our year of spiritual risks is not just for the heck of it. We have a goal, a why, of deepening our sense of purpose and community, and we have the people of the congregation and all those who might like to journey with the congregation, a who. Our experiments are aimed at strengthening the connective tissue of values and people.

In two weeks, I'll be back to lead worship for the Ingathering. This is the beginning of our liturgical year, a celebration of renewal and community. On that Sunday, you'll notice a few changes in the worship service. These are experiments, and the Worship Team and I will evaluate whether these experiments are helping the congregation with the why and the who. We'll try new things with the Message for All Ages. We'll do Joys and Sorrows differently, most notably at Clover Lane. We'll greet each other near the end of the service rather than near the beginning. Let's try these things out in the spirit of curiosity and discovery.

Moving from inspiration to aspiration to perspiration is a process. The energy we need for that process comes not just from time management and noble abstract concepts, but from a deep sense of our purpose and values, and from a sense of connection with the people and forces that sustain us. There are techniques that can help us refine the what and the how, and yet we must change and grow and adapt our what and how in the service of why and who. May we remain true to our purpose and values, and in right relationship with the interdependent web of life.

So be it. Blessed be. Amen.