

The Fear that Binds Us
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UU Congregation of Danbury

When I was studying for the ministry, we were taught that each sermon would require twenty to twenty-five hours of preparation. "Preparation" can mean anything from research time at the library to lying awake at 2:00 a.m. mulling over something that just won't come together. Today's topic of fear is one that I can truly say has been thoroughly "researched" and experienced. If I use the twenty to twenty-five hour guideline for preparation, then I should be able to speak on fear for years to come.

Starhawk said, "Where there is Fear, there is Power." That was the title of the sermon delivered at my ordination. "Where there is fear, there is power." My friend and colleague Judith Meyer delivered the sermon. She wanted me to know that fear could be an asset in ministry. The places in our lives where fear is present, power is present also. There is great power in fear. And there is great fear in owning our own power. The places in ourselves that we fear most can be the sources of our greatest power to grow and to change.

Fear is something with which most of us are familiar. As children we were taught to respect our elders and their authority. In reality, we often obeyed parents and adults out of a fear of being punished. Today, the fear of not being liked and accepted makes it challenging for children and youth to resist peer pressure. They are afraid that they may lose something of value to them.

Research studies suggest that "fear... is one of the most, if not the most, powerful learned motives" we human beings experience. (C.N. Cofer & M.H. Apply, *Motivation: Theory and Research*, p. 499)

Fear is something that can shape our lives. Fear of reprisal. Fear of failure. Fear of hurting others. Fear of not being loved. Fear of being abandoned. I know each of these fears. And, like some of you, I often act from these places of fear. It has taken me many years to learn that there is another way of being and acting. And that way is Love. Love can motivate us to overcome fear. Love can help us to move through the fear.

I don't mean to suggest that fear is always a negative force in our lives. We experience fear for a reason. Fear can identify places within us that call us to grow in order to be fully ourselves. We can learn from the fear. And that learning can transform us.

The courage to be “has to do with affirming who we are in the face of all the contradictory messages we receive.” “Courage is fear that has said its prayers,” according to one writer (attributed to Dorothy Bernard, and also to theologian Karl Barth). When we live out of fear, we deny ourselves the inherent worth and dignity we affirm for every person (as Unitarian Universalists). When we act out of love, we affirm that who we are matters. When we act out of our fear, we respond to life from a sense of powerlessness. It is when we learn to live through the fear – with love – that we come to know our own power.

Power has to do with “being.” Being who we are. Being who we are called to become. “Where there is fear there is power.” Power, disguised as fear, is the power of love. Scott Peck defined love as “the will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth.” (M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled*, p. 81) Love is a motivating force for change. The power of love enables us to move through the fear that keeps us standing still.

People sometimes say to me: “You have a lot of courage.” I am always surprised. (And amused.) “Courage is usually described as the power of the mind to overcome fear,” according to theologian Paul Tillich. (*The Courage to Be*, p. 34) I don’t know that we ever really overcome fear. But I do believe that we are capable of moving through the fear. Love is the antidote. Therefore, I would not say that I have a lot of courage. What I believe – is that the power of love can transform us.

“By love,” as Maya Angelou put it, “I mean that condition in the human spirit so profound it encourages us to develop courage and build bridges, and then to trust those bridges and cross the bridges in attempts to reach other human beings.” When Maya Angelou was asked what she’d like to read in her own obituary, she said: “What I would really like said about me is that I dared to love.” (Maya Angelou)

The third Unitarian Universalist principle affirms our “acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.” The word “spiritual” originally meant “something that cannot be seen but that we nevertheless experience.” (Ernest Kurtz & Katherine Ketcham, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, p. 31)

It’s that unseen “something” you experience here that makes you the congregation you are. That “unseen something” is Love: the Love that is the spirit of this congregation.

Although you might not frame it this way, I believe it is Love that has been your guiding force as a congregation.

When Maya Angelou talks about building bridges, you know exactly what she means. Because you are a Congregation that dares to love. You build bridges and you cross those bridges to connect with other human beings.

That's why you moved back to the city of Danbury after more than thirty years in West Redding. You had a vision of yourselves as involved participants in the life of the city. You wanted to be a force for good in Danbury. And you dared to love it into being.

It took courage to participate in the UUA's educational process about diversity, and then to vote to become a Welcoming Congregation. You dared to stretch yourselves and follow the call to welcome all people – including gay/lesbian/bi-sexual/ and transgendered people. You've stood up to harassment and vandalism because of that decision.

And yet you dared to love – again – and not give in to fear – as recently as January when you voted to offer sanctuary to an undocumented immigrant facing deportation.

Since Rev. Barbara Fast left in 2016, you have continued to move ahead with building projects, community outreach, and expanded social action. Some congregations get paralyzed when a minister leaves. Not only did you not freeze up, you actually came up with new ways to be engaged in the life of the Congregation.

Why is that? Because it is in this "open religious community" that celebrates together, works together, and "welcomes a diversity of people, ideas, and beliefs" together, that you experience spiritual community. You gather in community to "encourage lifelong spiritual and intellectual exploration" in the life of the congregation. All from a place of love, not fear.

When we exercise our will to love we enter into something that is beyond our "visual grasp and control." (ibid) The power of love is that it transforms. Love can transform us spiritually, in ways beyond our control.

So – where there is fear there is power, and the power of love is transformative. Fear and love can be competing forces in our lives. Living out of fear is a form of control. We fear the unknown, we fear change, and we fear seeing ourselves as we really are. We fear any number of things that we cannot control. When we choose to live with love, instead of being bound by fear, we admit that there is something greater than ourselves that can transform us spiritually.

The fear response we have learned is part of us. If we have been hurt in relationships, we may fear involvement. If we were let down by the adults charged with caring for us as children, we may fear trusting ourselves to another. If we lived through the Great Depression – or were raised by parents who did – we may fear being without needed resources. This can teach us to live out of a sense of scarcity that causes us to hold things close and tight, fearful that there will not be enough to go around.

These are all valid fears that come out of our experience. I am not going to suggest that you deny what you know. What I do want to recommend, though, is that we think about the fears we bring here. Because what you bring to this congregation becomes part of its identity.

So – if you can, think about some of your fears about UU Danbury. If you feel comfortable, please call out what your fear is:

Some Responses from the Congregation:

Burn out Money Growth
 Events outside the congregation and people to lead them
 Fearful of when Charlie leaves
 Getting used to being involved in a smaller congregation

You have a lot going for you here. The most valued parts of your congregation are those of “community,” “social action,” and “religious education.” These are your greatest strengths as a congregation.

Identified areas in need of attention are volunteer burnout, communication, growth, and money. These could be seen as fear-based aspects of the congregation.

- Volunteer burnout – fear of being used up.
- Communication – fear of missing something – FMS – because information didn’t reach you in a timely and effective manner. People get left out of the life of the congregation when they don’t know what’s going on.
- Growth – fear that the intimate “community” you value so much might disappear if you grow too big.
- Money – fear that you will be tapped again and again to sustain this Congregation until you are tapped out. (We’ll be talking more about that last one in the weeks ahead.)

These fears are all at work here; they may be undermining your ability to grow spiritually and numerically.

An article in UU World a few years ago (available on line) suggested that the UUA “cannot flourish if we only offer one way of being in religious community. If our congregations only focus on serving the needs of their

present membership, we become rapidly more insular and irrelevant to the larger community." (Terasa Cooley, "Into the Beyond," UU World, Summer 2014, p. 24) This is where I fear you may be now.

Terasa Cooley, author of the article "Into the Beyond," is very aware of the fears our congregations experience: "fear of declining numbers and abandoned churches, fear of the next generation rejecting church, fear of learning new technology and social media, fear of changing the congregations we love..." (ibid., p. 27)

In order to be relevant to the next generation, Cooley says, we have to create "new ways for people... to connect, serve, and deepen their spirituality with others, with or without a congregation – while making smarter use of interactive technology..." (p. 26) She says that "these changes must become a major shift in the UUA's mission and also in our congregations." (ibid) There are congregations that can't even manage to post recorded Sunday services on their web-site (despite years of discussion). So the prospect of trying to grow the membership may be a daunting prospect.

There are questions posed for us in the article:

How can we more clearly communicate our values to the many, many people looking for this very approach to their spiritual lives?

How can congregations serve not just their own members but also the surrounding community?

How can we help people organize spiritual communities with or without a building?

"To answer these questions, we'll need to let go of some old assumptions and then embrace the inevitable changes in our wider culture." (ibid, p. 25) "Changing how we do church is scary, but not changing means decline and a lost opportunity." (ibid, p. 24) "The question for us is, 'How can we use our love of this (congregation) to try new ways, even if that means giving up some things we're very attached to?'" (ibid, p. 27)

And that is the question I want you to consider in the days and weeks ahead as you prepare to dream of the Congregation you wish to be.

"How can you use your love of this congregation) to try new ways, even if that means giving up some things you're very attached to?" (ibid, p. 27)

There is a power that can move through the fear that binds us. We can trust that where there is fear, there is power. And that power is love. Love is the power that will move us through these times of uncertainty and growth. We cannot control the outcome. We can only act out of love for one another, for this congregation, and for the future of Unitarian Universalism in Danbury, Connecticut.

I believe in the power of love to transform us and to move us beyond where we are. My concern is that we will be bound by the fear of an outcome we can't control. Living with love involves taking risks. We cannot know what awaits us in the future. No one knows that. We can only act in the present as if we have a future. We can be motivated to act out of fear, or we can let love be the force that moves us into the future. The choice is ours.

Let us choose to respond to these times with love. Amen.