

What's Enough?

Don't ask what the world needs.
Ask what makes you come alive and go do it.
Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.
- Howard Thurman

First I want to greet the people who have come into this meetinghouse for the first or second time this morning, those curious ones who have come to see who we are and what it is like here, those seekers who long for a congregation to call home. Every person in this room once came in here for the first time, and we remember what it was like to be new.

You are welcome here. We are glad to see you. We want you to get to know us and to understand who we are and what we are doing here. Our mission is be “a caring and inclusive spiritual community...[and to] provide support in loving and open-hearted acceptance” (from the 4th UU Mission Statement, ratified March 16, 2008).

We are committed to speaking the truth with love here, and the truth is this morning we are a little distracted. Last

week the minister—that would be me—announced that she is leaving at the end of July. All of us, including the minister, are trying to wrap our heads around what that departure will mean for each of us and for the community as a whole. It's a lot to take in and digest. Most of us have just taken our seat on the roller coaster of change. We are heading out toward the precipitous drop that begins the ride, the great downward fall, experiencing shock, disorientation, turmoil, rage, anxiety, feelings of loss, nostalgia, triumph...lots of different emotions (the image is from a workshop chart, "The Roller Coaster of Change" by Gil Rendle of the Alban Institute).

After a time, we will hit bottom and begin to climb up toward the congregation's future, through information gathering, making informed choices, problem solving, finding new purpose, reaffirming hope, moving toward anticipation and excitement. Right now most of us are still sorting out our feelings. It will be a little while before we can think straight.

I'm familiar with this roller coaster of change because I'm riding it, too. Since the possibility of my leaving became

a serious consideration about a month ago, my ride has been pretty bumpy and uncomfortable, very much up and down the emotional hills and valleys. One thing I found very useful during this period of decision making was talking to other people—in my case it was my minister friends and our resource people in the denominational organizations, the Metro New York District and the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA). Sharing thoughts and feelings with others has been comforting and clarifying for me, and I recommend it to you in the days to come.

Newcomers bring a unique perspective to our experience at this time. In fact, this is a very good time to be coming into the community and also a good time to join the congregation because you will be in on the next chapter, the beginning of what's going to be a momentous period of decision making and reaffirmation here. The Fourth Unitarian Society is going to reinvent itself one way or another, and everything is up for grabs.

We shall see how we handle ourselves when we are on the roller coaster of change. Whoever you are, however long

you've been here—whether you are brand new today or you've been here for forty years—stick around. Our learning curve is going to be steep over the next few months with many opportunities for personal and congregational growth. We might even have some fun in this amusement park, who knows?

Elizabeth Tarbox invites us to “the opportunities to love that present themselves in the turmoil of life” and urges us not to “defend ourselves against the discomfort of unruly emotion, nor seek to close down our hearts...” (“Prayer for Compassion, *Evening Tide*, 4) May each one of us remain open to our own feelings and remain curious about the experience of those around us. And may we seek to maintain a place of respect and safety here where each person can be accepted and embraced through our days of turmoil and change. Amen.

So, *why* is the minister leaving? Let me tell you a story.

Once upon a time there were three bears. They lived in a forest in a lovely well-furnished duplex cave—a Mama Bear, a Papa Bear, and a Baby Bear. One day the bears

were getting ready to have breakfast. Their porridge was set out on the table, but it was still too hot to eat, so the mama bear suggested that they all take an early morning walk together while the porridge cooled. The bears set off on their morning walk.

Then along came Goldilocks. You know the story. She tasted the porridge: one bowl was too hot. The next bowl was too cold. The third bowl was just right, and she gobbled it all up.

When she got to the bedrooms upstairs in the cave, it was the same story: the beds were too hard, too soft, and just right. Goldilocks climbed into the just-right bed and fell asleep. The bears came back. They woke her up, and she ran away into the forest, never to return.

Let's take a look at "just right." "Just right" is so good. And so rare, that sense that everything is just as it should be, just made for you, just right. You try things out, some of them don't work at all, some of them sort of work but they need a lot of tinkering, and just when you're wondering if you'll ever find a good fit, you do find it. The porridge is

exactly the right temperature, the bed is exactly the right size. Everything is just right.

That's the way our shared ministry has been for me in the past few years. We have learned each other, we have walked together through some big changes and some difficult times, and we have come to a place where, for me, it's been feeling just right. Somebody said in a committee meeting recently, things have finally settled down here. Yes. That's my experience, too.

You have so much to celebrate. So many accomplishments.

So much progress. Your hard work, persistence, and commitment have paid off, There's a lot going on here at 4th UU, many good projects in the works. Just right.

Of course there are some people for whom this ministry and the life of the congregation is not at all just right. But for many of us and from time to time, I think we have felt as if we were in a good place and doing good work here. If things weren't just right, well then they were pretty good, good enough.

So, why then, would a minister leave a congregation that felt just right? Soon after I made the decision to leave, my husband, who is entirely supportive, nevertheless looked at me across the breakfast table and said, "Are you crazy?" I'm not crazy, but I know what he was saying. Things are good. You've been happy. Why change?

I'm leaving because I have finished the work I was called here to do. Before I came here, for the first forty-six years of the congregation's life, the 4th Unitarian Society was entirely lay led. There was no minister here. The members did everything: organized and led the Sunday morning program, took care of each other, maintained the physical building and the institution. Then they decided they wanted to try having a minister.

Over the past seven years the congregation and I have been teaching each other what it means to have a minister here. We have crafted a shared ministry together. And it has been good.

And now it's done. We only have one more thing to learn from each other: what happens when the minister

leaves? That's the chapter we will be starting to write over the next few months.

Here's how I think our story ends: the minister leaves, a new minister comes, and the congregation rebounds, reaffirms itself and looks into its heart to see where it will be going next. The congregation goes on. Ministers come and go. The congregation lasts. You and I have done enough. We have, in fact, done everything there is for us to do.

I once had a spiritual advisor who said, "You do enough. You care enough. You are enough." It's important to have realistic expectations about what any one of us can do in our work, in our families, in our congregation, in the world. Sometimes the world can look like a huge black hole of neediness, and any one of us can feel as if we're the only one who can fix it. That's always a mistaken notion and a dangerous one.

On the other hand, we don't want to be indifferent slackers.

So what's enough? Where does enough live? What's going to be enough effort, enough caring, enough of a contribution from each of you over this time of change?

Howard Thurman asks a different question: Not what's enough, but "what makes you come alive?" Have you found a good life here at the fellowship? What more could there be for you here? How can you help each other become more alive?

In my experience this congregation is a caring community of people who share a desire to support each other and to be involved in meaningful ways in one another's lives. And this is good. Maybe it's not enough. Maybe it's not enough for the 4th Unitarian Society to just comfort and nourish the people who are members here. The world outside these meetinghouse walls is full of hunger and pain, full of violence and despair, full of people who desperately need what you give each other here. Maybe you can find a way to share more of what you have here out there in the world.

To do that, maybe you will need to grow. In the past seven years the number of 4th Unitarian members has increased by 27%, a real gain. We've gone from 59 to 75 members. Next week another group of folks will sign the book and become a part of this community, and these new members will take the congregation to an all-time high. So how many members is enough?

Maybe it's not enough for you to remain a small congregation with a small budget and small ambitions. Maybe this room could be overflowing with people—women and men, children and youth, gay and straight, black and white, liberal and conservative. Maybe you could really mix it up here, fill the place, knock down the walls and build out and build up. Maybe you could get so big you didn't know everybody's name and everybody's business. What would that be like?

For the last couple months the congregation has taken a special offering for Fred's Pantry, a new food pantry in Peekskill that offers hungry families the opportunity to select

the food they want from a wide array of choices. Some of you have volunteered your time at the pantry as well.

This is an excellent ministry, a way for the congregation to make a commitment to hungry people in our own community, an opportunity to get to know our neighbors, to look into their faces and take their hands and admire their children. It's a great beginning. And maybe it's not enough. Maybe you can find a way to make Fred's Pantry a line in your congregational budget instead of a once a month extra.

What will make this congregation come alive next year? It's an exciting question, and because your minister is leaving, it's a question you will be facing together.

This week marks the beginning of the congregation's pledge drive. Each of our members and friends will receive a letter from the Finance Committee asking you to make a pledge of financial support for the coming year. The committee is asking you to contribute your fair share. So what's enough?

The congregational budget has increased an astounding 146% in the past seven years. When I first came

here, the members had been running the place on a shoestring for a long time. It was a matter of pride. Money was not important. They did whatever needed to be done themselves. Sweat equity was big. Everybody pitched in. And this is a fine work ethic, but it will only take you so far.

Locating your fair share for the pledge drive can be a tricky business. What *is* your fair share? How can it be calculated? Well, one way would be to take the congregation's total expenditures and divide by the number of members. That's actually not a great idea, but it is one way to determine fair share. A couple of charts in the Finance Committee mailing will fill you in on the financial situation here at 4th UU. From the first chart you will learn that most of the money contributed to the congregation's budget comes from a small group of members. How fair is that? This is a question of justice.

Another way to figure out what your fair share is would be to find out what other congregations do and what the UUA recommends. So there's a chart in your mailing about that, too. It's a guideline developed to help members answer

the question: What should I be contributing? What's my fair share? The chart is published with a disclaimer that says it isn't intended to suggest you make a sudden change in your giving but rather to suggest a good direction for your planning.

I was talking to my Mom, who has spent her life in the Methodist church, about our upcoming pledge drive, and she asked me if we encourage people to tithe. Tithing is giving the church 10% of your income—a common practice in some Christian churches. The UUA chart doesn't suggest tithing, not even at the highest income levels, but imagine what your congregation's budget would be like if everybody tithed!

When you fill out your pledge form for next year, I encourage you to use your heart as well as your brain, and to ask yourself how much this congregation means to you and what you can do to support it financially. Maybe you can do more. Now would be the time.

You have so much to give. And right now, in this season of transition and change and turmoil and decision making and new directions, each one of you is needed.

As we all take our ride on the roller coaster of change, you will be making decisions that shape the direction of the congregation for years to come. Take the time that you need to sort things out. Listen to your heart, and then begin to take action. Ask questions and get the information you need. Attend the informal gatherings with Board members and the upcoming Town Meeting in May. Talk with others about your fears and wishes for the congregation. Fill out your pledge form before the April 25 due date and extend your promise of financial support for the year ahead. Be prepared to vote at the congregation's annual meeting on May 23.

What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life? I plan to do transition ministry with a new congregation. I want to take what you have taught me about sharing the ministry and pass it on. I want you to be stronger than you have ever been going into this change. And one

way is for each of you to give your fair share. To give what you can. And then to know that you have done enough.

So much is in bud.

Sangrey

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For the Fourth Unitarian Society of Westchester
In Mohegan Lake, New York
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