

What to Expect--Take 2©

Rev. Julie Forest

October 22, 2017

Have you ever seen those *What to Expect* books at the bookstore? Remember the bookstore? Once upon a time there were buildings with hard cover and paperback books in them including *What to Expect When You Are Expecting*.

When Maren was pregnant, we read that book religiously. Actually, I read it and underlined stuff. She just skimmed it. I learned a lot reading that book. I still remember being surprised by how busy the woman was building organs and stuff during those first few months and then the trivial yet surprising awareness that pregnancy is hard on the gums. But the best thing about the book, which quite frankly did not prepare me completely for what became my reality as a parent, ... because no book can do that ... was the comfort of reading it and getting some idea of the new life that was in store for me.

I think it's nice to have an idea of what to expect when you're not sure what comes next. Normally I would have done this kind of a sermon when I started in February, but this was in no way a normal interim ministry. For those of you who were here, cast your mind back. Rev. Marsh had died unexpectedly. This was a problem on several fronts. It is always shocking when a minister actively pastoring a congregation dies. There is no warning and the life of the congregation and what people feel they can expect in their worship life changes dramatically. It is also another reminder of life's impermanence.

In addition, Rev. Marsh was the only person who had the passwords to many church systems. She did the accounting and had check writing privileges. I'm still not sure about all of the particulars of this arrangement, and why anyone in the congregation thought this was a good idea or especially why Rev. Marsh did it. Even though no embezzlement occurred, it is not considered a good practice for the minister to be so intimately involved with so many aspects of church finances. The lack of backup systems added further trauma to the congregation. Part of my work when I got here was to address these financial concerns. This year part of my work with the Board is to examine all the policies and procedures that guide UUCOD to make sure that they are fair, transparent and appropriate.

Last Fall, after a tumultuous summer, the congregation regrouped and brought in an interim minister Leisa, hoping for some stability and healing. Just the opposite happened. She arrived in November, gave her notice after two weeks and left after two months. Yikes.

So when I arrived in February, neither you nor I knew what we would experience together. I found a congregation that had been tested to the limit. People were frightened and hurt. Some were angry and many were tired. How complicated and stressful is church life supposed to be? And yet... And yet.

And yet ... beleaguered as you were, you welcomed me into the life of this church. Neither one of us was sure what would happen. I wasn't sure that I could make a half time ministry 2 ½ to 3 hours away from my home, work. You weren't sure who I was and whether I would last more than two months. My contract was just for 6 months. That was not a time to make any more changes, rather it was a time to catch the collective breath, to grieve, to heal and to regroup. By the end of April, the Board of Trustees and I mutually decided to work together for one more year. So I will be with you until the end of June 2018 and then will go back to being semi retired and continue to develop my private practice.

You may remember that one of the first things I did when I got here was to host listening circles. Many of you participated. You took my breath away with your sharing, and your willingness to be vulnerable. You shared your questions, your hopes, fears and your dreams for this congregation. I took what you shared with me and have made it a cornerstone of my ministry with you.

You wanted financial transparency. The Board has responded by hiring both a professional payroll service as well as a professional bookkeeping firm. In addition, the Board agendas are posted on the website and the bulletin board and minutes are posted and shared via the weekly news briefing.

You shared your longing for more pastoral care and I am developing a wonderful lay pastoral care team to partner with me in responding to your joys and sorrows. You shared your longing for adult religious education and I am pleased that LeGrand and Chris are offering two *Building Your Own Theology* classes and I am offering the *Coming of Sage* class.

And there was a fear that UUCOD could not weather much more conflict, heartbreak, confusion or chaos and that this precious congregation might not make it.

I understand those fears and I believe that we have weathered those challenges with a congregation that grows stronger and stronger.

So that was last year. The new church year began in July. The Board and I started our work at a retreat in July. We shared ideas about the strengths, weaknesses and needs of UUCOD. We also looked at our own strengths and weaknesses which we took into consideration as we set our priorities and goals for the upcoming church year. This congregation is filled with amazing and talented folks so we have a lot to work with.

We are lucky that some members of the Board are passionate about creating an even playing field for the congregation. Part of how we do that is to make sure that there are policies and procedures that make sense and are useful. It is easy for the folks who have been around for a long time to get what they need and use the building for things that they are interested in. It is not easy for newer members. One of the core elements of Unitarian Universalism is community and the common good. It is not just important for a person to think for her or himself, it is also important for her or him to listen to others and prioritize the wellbeing of the community. When people or even advertisements say “you could be a Unitarian Universalist and not even know it”, I say wait a minute, let us turn to our third principle, *Acceptance of one another and encouragement to growth in our congregations*. In order to practice the faith of Unitarian Universalism, one needs to do so in community.

And knowing that life in community in reality means a multiplicity of opinions and needs, and that this multiplicity can lead to conflict and that conflict in and of itself isn't bad and can even be healthy and generative, means we recognize the need for training to develop safe ways for folks to engage in a healthy way in the inevitable conflicts that come up. I will begin this work with you, but this will be one of the important gifts that your next minister will have.

Speaking of your next minister, assisting the Board as they envision what the next few years will look like is one of my most important jobs this year. In early summer, I solicited information from the region about what kinds of ministry were available and what the time lines and requirements for each one was. We educated ourselves about contract, settled, interim and developmental ministry. In July we discussed our initial takes on the pros and cons of each. We then met two different times with regional staff to make sure that we understood all our options. Members of the congregation were invited to attend the Zoom meeting after worship on Sunday

September 10, to hear more about this directly and to ask any questions they might have.

The last time this congregation went into search there was conflict on the search team, the process was rushed and the congregation had not had an intentional interim ministry experience. All of these ingredients led to a ministry that was not as successful as it could have been. We are committed to doing things more deliberately with more input this time.

Having an interim minister and surviving the interim time is not always easy. There is a wonderful story in the Hebrew Bible about how upset the Israelites were after Moses led them out of slavery and through the desert toward the promise land.

Moses was a great if at first reluctant leader. He confronted and challenged the pharaoh and systems of injustice. He got the people out of a bad situation. He found food and water for them in the desert. But the people, we are told, did not really like the food. Despite the miraculousness of their experience, they did not feel confident in their god Elohim, and many began to experiment with the worship of Baal and other gods. Most especially, they really did not like all the walking and the wondering where their next meal was coming from and if it was coming. The grumbling and rumbling dissatisfaction bubbled just below the surface. Then it was given voice. I quote now from The book of Exodus, Chapter 16, “The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the stew pots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us into this wilderness to kill this whole assemble with hunger.”¹

This classic tale is about being in the neutral zone. It is like being in the wilderness. In this kind of wilderness, people are uncomfortable. They start to miss the old familiar way, even though. in the case of the Egyptians, the old way was the slave way. This may not seem to be a very rational way to feel, but it is very natural. The neutral zone can be a time when people’s anxiety rises and motivation falls. They may feel disoriented. People may feel resentful and self-protective. This disorientation and desire to protect oneself means that energy that is normally directed towards accomplishing tasks and goals is diverted and we are not able to get things done as quickly as we may have before.

¹ Exodus 16:2-3

And while these feelings of disorientation are normal, and this community was indeed floundering last year, I do *not* see much stuckness preventing us from getting important work done. This transition time that we are in is a time of ambiguity. We know what the old way looked like and how to survive and get our needs met. We are swimming in the changes of an interim minister and we long to know how things are going to work out and what the future is going to look and feel like. And we all want to know what place we will have as this new church unfolds.

Most of the time, people don't change unless they have to. It is so uncomfortable that folks rarely think, "Gee, I can't wait until the next major cataclysmic event happens in my life or community." But the gift of these cataclysmic events is that new possibilities become visible to us and we have much more motivation to change. When our equilibrium is disturbed we find that we grab at new things and ways to regain that equilibrium, ways that we might not have even dreamed of before. So the interim period requires us to be awake, alert and vigilant. I am pleased to say your Board of Trustees has all of these qualities.

In addition to change and flexibility what else can you expect from your interim minister. First you can expect honest diagnostics. I look at the church systems, the church leadership, the church conflicts, the church traditions and analyze how they contribute to health of the congregation and how they inhibit it. One of the gifts of being an interim minister is that I am "pre-fired". I mean several things by this. First, I bring my new eyes to every situation and I say why do you do things this way? Let's try something new. When conflict arises, I can engage with it without trying to protect my future. This is very freeing for the interim minister. I don't have a position or a job to protect. The next thing you can expect is a continuation of a quality worship experience on Sundays. In addition you can expect good pastoral care. If you reach out to me or one of our lay pastoral care team members, we will respond. And I will continue to be available to the Board as they move forward in choosing the next minister for this congregation.

As I mentioned, the Board has done a lot of research on the direction that UUCOD will be heading for and have decided to apply for a type of ministry known as developmental ministry. After our service today, First Vice President Shirley Lemaster and I will spend more time talking about what a developmental minister is and the time line that we are working on.

It is rare for a church to go from one settled minister to another, without an interim, and have that following ministry be a success. The interim comes as sort of

like a yoga instructor to bring and encourage more flexibility in the community so that the congregation becomes open to new ways of ministry being expressed. I will be doing some of this as well. This next year will be one of innovation and it will also sort of be like being pregnant or baking bread. We are putting the ingredients of our faith, our desires for love and justice, sprinkled with gratitude, fortitude and patience to co create a new reality and tend to it like rising bread.

And our spirits will rise like the best bread we've ever eaten. May it be so.

Blessed be. Amen.