

Let go of the Script

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org

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Rev. Paul Beckel

Life is a tragic mystery. We are pierced and driven by laws we only half-understand, we find that the lesson we learn again and again is that of accepting heroic helplessness. Some uncomprehended law holds us at a point of contradiction where we have no choice, where we do not like that which we love, where we—heart-broken and ecstatic, can only resolve the conflict by blindly taking it into our hearts. This used to be called being in the hands of God. Has anyone any better words to describe it?

Florida Scott-Maxwell

Bending over microscopes, one scientist to another: "Sometimes I wonder if there's more to life than unlocking the mysteries of the universe."

PRELUDE *When the First Star Lights*, by Becky Reardon, sung today by Calyx

GMAWTBUIRFB

Is this a dream? Sunshine and flowers! And a Sunday morning that's about to unfold with heartbreaking beauty! Is this a dream? No, if it were a dream I'd be up here in front of you with no script. And no clothes. So halleluia! This is real. We may not know what's going to happen next, but we have the opportunity in this moment to be in the world, to mindfully acknowledge and accept, without judgement, that this is what we have to work with. We can let go of some of the tension in our bodies. Let go of the tension that may be piling more distress upon our distress. The worry that the next 60 minutes are going to be barely tolerable. Let go of the barriers we're putting up between each other, and those between ourselves and the spirit of love, which is once again, as always, right here, right now.

GATHERING SONG *For All that is our Life* #128

CHILDREN'S FOCUS *Spirit of Life*

ERACISM MINUTE

No one was scheduled for this, so Courtney Lyons offered something on the spot — inviting us to forgive ourselves and each other when we're imperfect in our difficult conversations around race.

MILESTONES

SINGING TOGETHER *Lord of the Dance*

Intro by Lee Seaman, in honor of John Seaman

MESSAGE

I attended the Unitarian Universalist Association Western Region Assembly last weekend in Portland. The first day was for ministers and professional religious educators and musicians. We enjoyed a marvelous program led by a white UU minister known for her storytelling. And a black UU music director who works full time for a congregation in Ann Arbor Michigan.

I've always known the Ann Arbor congregation as a fortress of UU humanism and rationalism. I don't know their more recent history, but I'm going to guess that the congregation very intentionally pushed themselves off their comfortable course in hiring Glen Thomas Rideout — not because he's black — I mean it wouldn't have been that hard to hire a black musician who was devoted to white music (sprinkled with a little pepper). But the music that Glen Thomas helped us create at the workshop last weekend, the spirit he helped us to evoke, was clearly out of the African American worship tradition. Taught to us on the fly. No notes, no paper. We did not know how long we'd be singing... or when another song might erupt without notice. Except in a sense entirely *with* notice, because it was what was called for in the moment.

Now *this only worked* because Dr. Rideout is extraordinarily *talented and was well prepared*. Still, given that this was a UU setting, one might wonder if it would work only once or twice — as an experience of something exotic. But I'm confident that it will work again and again. It will work from here on out as we *invest* in the multiculturalism which is so obviously part of our principles — and yet so hard to put into practice. As we *invest*.

It worked because Dr. Glen Thomas Rideout and Rev. Erica Hewitt were each grounded in their own traditions *and* had obviously done their homework: to discover the magnificent crossover, the common threads and aspirations. And they were so beautifully in synch. They'd clearly spent many many hours to develop the respect, the rapport, the *relationship* needed to be able to teach together and to share with us an experience that was both very well organized and spontaneously responsive to moments of anxiety, and delight.

And let's be frank. It probably helped that Glen Thomas had a Ph.D. Maybe that was what he needed to get hired at a UU church near a big Midwestern university. Let's just tell the painful truth.

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After that first inspiring day, I had a dream. A vision for the future — is that what dreams are? Or projections onto the past? I'm not sure because this was a nighttime dream — stirred with passion and intention in quasi-consciousness.

Many of us have had the distressing dream of being thrust into a situation for which we're *supposed to be prepared*...but we're not. You can be sure that ministers have that dream. Naked, exposed, unable to meet expectations. Or worse, *finding that it is too late* to meet expectations.

It occurred to me as I was reflecting on the dream this week: why is it always (at least for me) why is it always a dream not of *failure* but *failing*? My horror, I realized, my horror is in finding myself not *in the middle* of catastrophe but pretty close to the end, which then drags on interminably. I'm always dropped into the drama at a point well past the time when I might be able to turn things around.

There seems only enough time left to feel the embarrassment, the weight of unmet expectations. Right there in my gut and pulling me down, down. Maybe there's some mad hopeless scramble to find the room where the test is taking place, or to catch the school bus, but it's that inexplicable *slow-motion panic* where there's nothing I can do but watch everything unravel.

Why can't my failure dreams *begin just a little earlier*, at a point where I can turn things around? Or *why not maybe a month afterwards*, when I have some perspective and can calmly, thoughtfully gently reflect back on what went wrong... and how I might do better next time? But no! I always seem to be flung into the most painful possible moment.

You get those dreams? For me, it's usually a Sunday morning, sometime between 10:15 and 10:45 a.m. when I realize that I haven't written a sermon. And I madly scramble to find something on my hard drive from long ago that might be apt. I desperately search through papers and digital documents realizing that I've preached every one of these sermons 4 or 5 times already this year. And no one is going to want to hear them again. Least of all me.

Then with the various printer malfunctions et cetera, everyone is checking their watches... and it's obviously too late... people are drifting away... the opportunity to recover is past.

It's weird that I still have this dream sometimes. Tho not as much as I used to. Maybe I've developed some immunity after 22 years of preaching without missing a Sunday for lack of preparation, or illness, or even snow days thru some pretty brutal Wisconsin winters.

I did come to the pulpit once with a black eye that I'd gotten the night before in my attempt to remove my preschooler from a birthday party. But the only real screw-up was probably 10 years ago when we planned a Sunday service (the church staff and I) we'd planned the whole service to be presented by a band called Unified Soul. We'd met the group at a community festival. They were making this fabulous rockin' music about peace and love and interracial harmony. So we arranged a date and advertised it throughout the community and arranged the sanctuary and the sound system with anticipation... and greeted church members, so many who had brought guests.... And we looked at each other nervously as the clock ticked...

And I was still pretty keyed up so I remained in denial. Because I could still hear their music in my head, which in turn set my body moving in synch with this interracial band singing about peace and harmony ... somewhere... somewhere pretty close, hopefully....

Then it was almost 10; then it was almost 10:30 and then it was after 10:30 so I just started the service with a song (a Cappella since we didn't have anyone other than the band scheduled on keyboard). Then I lit the chalice with warmth and gravitas, and at the point where the band was supposed to sing a special song for the kids, I called 'em up and did my best rendition of Shel Silverstein's *The Missing Piece meets the Big O*. Then sent them off to their classrooms, gradually admitting to myself that this was not a dream.

So we had an extended session of stump the minister. (I've done this once in a while, and know that many colleagues do too: we tell the congregation in advance to think of questions to ask —

not like, “why are you such an idiot?” but about my take on UU history or current UU matters of concern.) With a few songs thrown in the mix, we gradually realized that it could be ok. And it was ok. Still, it was not what anyone was expecting. So it was probably harder to appreciate what *did* happen because we were caught up in what *didn't* happen.

In addition to being embarrassed, I was disappointed because I'd been personally looking forward to this dynamic program which would demonstrate that UU Sunday services can be deeply inspiring and deeply grounded in our principles even when they are not arranged to follow the standard Puritan-Era order of service.

I'd also been eager for this demonstration *that the message of Peace and Unity was not unique to our isolated little Unitarian congregation...* but was a message through which we could connect with a growing number of allies we were discovering beyond our walls.

Only later did we find out that, no, we had not totally screwed up and booked the band for the wrong day... but that *the band promoting peace and harmony* had gotten into a bar fight late Saturday night... and were sitting that Sunday morning in jail. This is a true story!

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Getting back to my dream from last weekend — which stands out because it was *different from the usual* “I-forgot-to-prepare” dream. Or the “I-didn't-know-this-test-was-coming” dream. Instead in this dream I walked into the sanctuary and I *did* have my sermon folder. And the script was right where it was supposed to be, and it was the right one for the right day.

But... I couldn't read it. And not because the words were blurry. It was one of those dream-things I can't really explain. The words were on the paper, the congregation was paying attention. My voice was there, I think. But I couldn't read from the script.

I can only interpret this in retrospect: I think I was paralyzed because what I knew I needed to do was to let go of the script! And obviously I still do.

This story, I'm guessing, is not just about me. This is a dream, I think, about BUF and about Unitarian Universalism and our future. And beyond BUF and Unitarianism, this is about our cultural and economic and political futures, *and our personal everyday unfolding*.

Days and years into which we're going to have to dive, prepared or not, anxious and naked and sometimes alone. Days and years of which we know only this: they are not going to be like the past.

This is not only nerve-wracking, but makes me feel righteously indignant. Because c'mon: we who self-identify as hardworking and educated... well, *we have* prepared. We have schooled ourselves. We have done our homework and *we deserve* to have things turn out as planned.

We have our plans. We have our scripts. We did the work already. We've been good students. How dare the universe interfere with what we have prepared to accomplish? How dare the universe impose a test which isn't the one we studied for? And then not even tell us what day it

was going to take place, or in which room?

But you know what? The work of our lives, the work of our pluralistic religious movement, the creation of peace and unity, the commitment to environmental sustainability, and the joy of deep connection with all-that-is-and-was-and-ever-will-be... it turns out, somehow that all of this is not going to fit within our little white 60 minute boxes.

For this we need to let go of the script. Stop trying to keep everything in order. And forgive ourselves our imperfections. I'll start right now by retroactively changing the name of this service. Let's go instead with: "*Letting* go of the script." I don't want to present this as a command: "Let go of the script dammit." But more of an invitation, especially to myself, since, despite all my best intentions, once again today I couldn't bring myself to do it.

And let's be clear: sometimes a script is exactly what we need. And to be clear: I'm not suggesting that we don't need preparation. We absolutely need to prepare ourselves... without somehow expecting that yesterday's script is going to work today.

There are some really bad ways to let go of the script. I'm not advocating for just saying whatever dumbass thing that comes to mind. Or just tuning in to what people want to hear, and saying that... then the next day going to a different group and saying what we think *they* want to hear.

I'm not advocating for changing our mind from one day to the next when people are counting on us to make responsible decisions. I'm not suggesting that a breezy tone is more important than remembering the essential things we need to say.

No, I'm definitely not advocating for being unprepared. But rather, whenever possible, being *extra* prepared — by owning up to the fact that even GPS can lead us astray.

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One of the most important sermons in UU history was called *The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity*. It was preached in 1841 by Rev. Theodore Parker, who used it to make the timeless point that there is nothing sacred about *how* we do religion. The forms we use are transient. Our rituals and music and architecture and language are all transient. These will all change over time, even as our core principles endure.

This doesn't mean that the forms don't matter. They very much matter because they have to be responsive to the moment. They have to resonate with the people who are using them to evoke the ineffable spirit of Love. But the forms are not the spirit of Love. They are not in themselves sacred. So the forms need to adapt as our communities evolve and our perspective expands.

Social and organizational structures are going to change. Expectations are going to change. For Parker, even the name he gave to his religion has changed. He talked about the Transient and the Permanent *in Christianity*. Today the Unitarian Christianity *that he helped to found* honors Christianity *as one of many* sacred paths. I don't know if he foresaw what we've become. Would he think of this as a bad dream? Or just another step in the journey?

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So, obviously, even with the best of intentions, I did not find the wherewithal or the guts to let go of the script today. But I ask you to give me a little slack. Because I'm still a little shaken from the last time I tried it... and even tho the sermon itself went well.... See, this is what happened:

I was getting bored with myself and I wanted to do something creative. So I decided to preach about... surfing. And I told this to Jane and she rolled her eyes and said what do you know about surfing? That sounds so dumb. I'm not going.

But I did a lot of preparation, with stories and rich metaphor and everything in the service neatly tied together. But then at the last minute I too realized that preaching about surfing made no sense. So I set the script aside and gave a rip-roaring sermon about sex. The works. Broad and deep. People walked out of church with their eyes wide!

The next day, a church member runs into Jane in the grocery store. She says, "Wow. That was some sermon Paul gave Sunday. I had no idea that he was so *knowledgeable* on that topic." To which Jane replied, "Oh no, I hope he wasn't bragging again. I mean, he's only tried it twice. And both times he fell off."

It's scary to let go of what we know. Help me. I'll help you. It's scary to let go of what we know. Let's let go anyway.

MUSICAL MEDITATION

Anyway, words by Kent Keith, music by the Roches

People are often unreasonable, illogical , and self-centered.

Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish ulterior motives.

Be kind anyway. Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you may win some false friends and some true enemies.

Succeed anyway. Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you.

Be honest and frank anyway.

What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight.

Build anyway. Build anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, they may be jealous.

Be happy anyway.

The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow.

Do good anyway. Do good anyway.

Give the world the best you have. It may never be enough.

Give the world the best you've got anyway.

And you'll see, in the final analysis, it was never between you and them,

Anyway. Anyway. *Anyway.*

SHARING OUR GIFTS

SENDING SONG

Blue Boat Home #1064