

The First

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# Unitarian

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# An Engaged Congregation

by The Rev. Dr. Kendyl Gibbons, Senior Minister

The folks at the Gallup polling organization whose task it is to study religious institutions are curious about church growth. While documenting half a century in declining membership, attendance, and reported belief in the Catholic, Jewish and mainline Protestant establishments, they have also taken note of particular congregations and movements that seem to be countering the trend with growing memberships and vitality. Gallup has sought to answer statistically the question, what makes these groups different from the average? How comes it about that they are thriving when others in many ways like them are withering?

The term that the researchers have adopted to describe this distinction is Engagement. Congregations whose members are engaged, rather than merely connected or loyal, are likely to grow, and to be seen as highly important in their constituents' lives and in the larger community. What, then, constitutes engagement? According to Gallup, it boils down to this; that individuals understand the church as a place where they are expected to grow, and where someone is paying attention to whether or not they do.

The important element, the thing that makes engagement real, is not which dimension of growth individual members are pursuing, but that they feel that their church community cares about and tries to nurture that growth, and that all the other people there are trying to grow as well. In other words, engaged members have expectations, of themselves and of their fellow members. Such a congregation is truly a place where we are all in this together, and part of how I grow is by helping you to plan and reflect on your growth. And I never have to feel silly

or embarrassed or weird, because we are all here to work on something that will help us become more nearly the people we would like to be. Engagement, then, is a function of mutual expectations.

Which makes me curious; what, if any, expectations do we have of each other, here in this Society? What is it that our members can count on from the rest of us? What is it that we have committed ourselves to be accountable for?

Let me suggest that expectations may be either explicit or implicit, and I would claim that we have both, in this congregation.

So, what are our implicit expectations?

One possible one is the very antithesis of engagement, which would be that we expect to be left alone here. We expect not to have a common vocabulary that would make it possible for us to discuss anything like our spiritual journeys or the quality of our inner lives, and if anybody actually asked someone else about that dimension of experience, they would be violating the unspoken norms of FUS. The Gallup data would suggest that to the extent this is the case, we won't have the kind of engagement that enables a congregation to fly in the face of the cultural trends toward declining membership and vitality. If such silence really is part of our implicit expectations, I think we need to change it. In fact, I believe passionately that we have a unique potential for this moment in history precisely because Humanism offers the opportunity to have that conversation without all kinds of traditional mythical and theological prerequisites. That is the genius of our movement, and we should be eagerly making it available to the increasing numbers of people who want a place to grow and

Congregations whose members are engaged ... are likely to grow

## continued – An Engaged Congregation

discover their larger potential for goodness as human beings in this world without superstitious baggage attached.

At the same time, I think that another one of our implicit expectations remains essential, and that is our acceptance of those who are different from us, and the value of diversity. I don't see this as being itself the central message of our movement, but it is a key expectation. We do not expect everyone here to agree with any of our ideas or positions, and we are not required to agree with theirs. We are, however, entitled to expect patience, care, a fair share of polite attention, reasoned consideration, and respectful treatment when we share our thoughts or our feelings, even though they may be different from everyone else's. This is not an expectation that characterizes so many other places in our society; this mutual respect and acceptance is part of what lays the groundwork for our growth, and it is a gift that we give to one another as fellow members.

The one commonly named explicit expectation that most of our members seem to acknowledge is the need to contribute financial support to help fund the operation of FUS. Everyone seems to get that this is a shared obligation, and it will only work if each of us does what we can. That is actually a great thing; many congregations struggle with an implicit expectation that money should not be discussed in church; that it is somehow beneath the notice of people who have their minds on allegedly "higher" things. So good for us. Unfortunately, that's where our consensus appears to end.

But what would it look like if we took our mission statement, and the covenants that we recite from time to time, at child dedications, and new member celebrations, seriously? What if we each tried to unpack the implications of those promises for our real lives in the real world, and then talked about what might be different if you were to become more

thoughtful, compassionate, or ethical; how I would need to change in order to walk more surely in truth and freedom; how we might learn to access that power and goodness that we say is inside ourselves? What if somebody here knew you well enough to know your secret dread of leadership, your hunger for approval, your carefully subdued anger, your despair, your pride, your hidden exhaustion and indifference? What if someone knew your worst secret and still affirmed the power and goodness of your humanity?

What kind of difference could that make to your life? To the possibility that you could still grow and change and be more whole, maybe in ways that you had given up dreaming about? What if you held someone else's discouragement in your hands, and saw the power and the goodness of their humanity anyway, that they had lost sight of, and were able to turn the light of your compassionate attention on the hope that they needed in order to move forward? Would that be engaging enough to make it worth getting out of bed on Sunday morning?

This is what the world hungers for, I promise you; and any community that can drill down to that reality of our common human experience will be a vibrant force of life for its members and for all those whose lives it touches. This is the ministry that we share as a congregation, that we must do together, with and for each other. It is, as far as anyone seems to be able to tell, the ministry that makes religious community impervious to the diminishing historical trends; it is the heart of what has always been genuinely sacred and enduring in an engaged congregation.

What are  
our implicit  
expectations?

# The Religious Proposal: “Will you [be Church with] me?”

by Luke Stevens-Royer, Intern Minister

*I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear – from “Walden”*

In this excerpt, our religious ancestor Henry David Thoreau begs the question: what is a deliberate life? What does it mean to front the essential facts of life? This got me to wonder, what does it mean for religious communities to live deliberately? How do we engage with our most true selves, engage with our deepest joys and sorrows, as a community?

I find it interesting that the term “engagement” means both covenantal promise to be married as well as war or battle. This seems to add a nuanced wisdom to what it means to be an engaged religious community. I think it makes sense that engagement means promise, covenant, and struggle. We are a covenantal tradition: we promise ways of being with each other as the thread that ties us together. We can believe different things because our covenant is centered around relationship. When we truly and deliberately engage this covenant, when we uphold our promises to be with one another in love and honesty, it can be a struggle, an embattled engagement where feelings can be hurt, hopes can be let down; we sometimes have to struggle through what it means to stay in covenantal relationship.

Thoreau also said that our lives are “frittered away by detail...simplify, simplify, simplify!” Perhaps part of being an engaged community is about filtering through all the detail, finding the core of who we are and how we live in the world: what are the essential facts about FUS, what are the burning embers that kindle in all who gather here a sense of passion and belonging? Perhaps simply the act of reflecting on those questions is what it means to be an engaged community.

It is interesting to consider “engagement” in our state’s current political climate, with the upcoming ballot vote about defining marriage. The pro-marriage equality advocates are emphasizing the need to focus on relationships as compared to rights; that is, defining marriage as being about love, commitment, struggle, promise, covenant. As I sang in the Capitol dome with a gay Lutheran clergy friend of mine, hoping to have his Connecticut marriage one day recognized in his home state, we filtered through the details and simplified our message to the essential facts:

“engagement” means both covenantal promise to be married as well as war or battle.

*What the world needs now is love, sweet love.  
It’s the only thing that there’s just too little of  
What the world needs now is love, sweet love.  
No, not just for some, but for everyone.*

In a similar way, perhaps our religious communities can engage our core messages, and let us hope it is always grounded in love, in promise, in covenant.

# Engagement

by Diggitt McLaughlin, Intern Minister

During much of January, I will be missing in action from FUS. I will be in Chicago attending intensive classes at Meadville Lombard Theological School, the UU divinity school where I continue as a student even during my internship here. The split between my two focuses—as intern and as student—may seem to challenge my engagement in the work of either. But actually the engagement between the two enhances them both.

Even in its beginnings, Meadville Lombard represents engagement for UUs. Meadville Seminary in Pennsylvania was built during the first great westward movement of Unitarianism; Lombard College started as Illinois Liberal Institute and became a Universalist seminary in Chicago. The merger of the two schools came decades before the creation of Unitarian Universalism. Two separate and distinct populations recognized that their shared energy allowed them to build a future together.

Synergy between unlike elements represents, to me, a lot of what many of us find in Unitarian Universalism. Each of us follows our unique path, and yet we do this together. We support each other in the search even though we may find radically different beliefs at the end of the path. Our engagement in the question demands our engagement with each other. We find that we can honor the individual with whose comments we disagree, because even in disagreement we recognize their efforts to find a truth. In fact, we can find that as our paths cross, another person's questioning shines light on the answers we are seeking.

“Holy and beautiful the custom which brings us together” are opening words which have been used in our congregations for decades. Think of that: the custom which brings us together is what we honor. Not: the custom which binds us. Not: the custom which comforts us. Or: the custom which leads us. The tradition honored by UUs is the requirement that we engage together in our search. It is the engagement with each other that creates our congregational religion.

Engagement is not necessarily symmetrical. If you tried to chart the flows of energy within our congregation, arrows would point in every direction.

You may pour your heart into RE, yet find nourishment from the person sitting beside you who is dedicated to social action. You may sit alone, lost in the music one day, yet be a dynamo in another context. In the great engagement that is the First Unitarian Society, your energy goes into places you cannot imagine—each of us has more power than we know as we engage together.

And so the collective energies of FUS will be with me as I sit in class in Chicago. I am learning from you all: from things you have shown me as individuals; from the integrity of the second minister study and vote; from the models of leadership I see within the staff and among the members. It is teaching me more about ministry and informs how I engage with other UU theological students in Chicago. My coursework in congregational life, in religious education, and in creating the UU of tomorrow becomes the product of what you are creating here, together.

It is the engagement with each other that creates our congregational religion.

# Being Here Now and Then

by Laney Ohmans, Membership Coordinator

OK, I'll admit it: I send text messages when I'm driving. I talk on the phone while I'm biking. I check my email and my favorite blogs while I'm eating breakfast (and sometimes dinner). I've been known to talk on the phone while I'm checking my email or my favorite blogs and eating dinner.

I'm often distracted, to be honest.

Most of the time, when I'm multi-tasking, it's because I want to make whatever task I'm engaged in zip along a little more quickly. When I'm driving, I just want to speed the trip along with some gossip. When I'm talking on the phone, well, maybe there's not enough gossip, and I need to supplement with news from the blogosphere. Sometimes it's just such hard, dull work to be thinking with your whole brain about only one thing.

When this is limited to simultaneous eating and web-surfing, I guess I'm not that worried. What does trouble me is that I can see this mentality informing my commitment to being present to my faith community. I'm making the easy, entertaining choices, and not going for the long, slow haul. How many of us haven't felt this way at one time or another? It's fun to go to church for the service, where you'll be entertained by diverse readings, lovely music, chats with friends; where you can choose to attend or not based on the sermon title posted online. Where you can slip out before coffee hour if it's too hard to find someone to talk to.

What's hard is what requires you to be present to the needs of the community.

How carefully do you have to look to notice that a long-time member has been absent for a couple of months? To see the newcomer standing alone at coffee hour? Even more difficult is to see down to core of what the community needs. To realize that there's a call for a new social justice team member, or a new small group leader, demands full attention.

To look honestly at yourself and your talents and be fully aware of where they fit into the larger puzzle requires a singular focus.

I've committed myself to clearing away the distraction that keeps me from being fully engaged at church.

One of the tools I'm using is participation in a small group devoted to UU spiritual practice and theology. We meet every two weeks and devote a couple of hours to circle-based discussion and sharing. We work together to create a safe space for the kind of discussion that makes a gathering feel like a home. It's a challenge, but it's also a joy. When I leave our sessions I feel like I do when I've gone for a long run — tired but unknotted and loose.

Meeting with this diverse group of church members has inspired me to attempt to bring a bit of the same focus to the larger community — the community that made this small group experience possible for me. It's hard, and I'm not going to pretend that I often succeed, but the moments when I do feel fully engaged make it worth the effort.

“What's hard is what requires you to be present to the needs of the community.”

# Expectation

by Jan Devor, Director of Religious Education

The topic for this Unitarian is expectation. What do you as parents expect from FUS if you bring your children and youth here for our Religious Explorers Program? What will the kids get out of coming to our Religious Explorers Groups? What do we at FUS expect from our families? Let me take this one by one.

I have talked with a lot of parents over the years and I think I have a pretty good understanding of what parents want from our Religious Explorers Program. They want their children to be religiously literate. They want their children to understand what Unitarian Universalism is, and what other religions are about. They want their children to think about the ethical way to live and to develop their values and morals. They want their children to count their blessings and give back to others that are less fortunate. They want their children to widen their circle of friendship and to develop a group of liberally religious friends. As they get older they want them to delve into answering the big question: What is the nature of god? What does it mean to be human? What is the nature of death and loss? What is the divine? What is the nature of community? And, of course, UU is known to give an extensive sexuality education.

Children come because their parents tell them to. Youth come because their peers are here. But what they get when they do get here, is people who know them by name and care about them. Adults that are interested in how their week went. Group leaders who have prepared lessons that engage, educate and sometimes delight. Social action opportunities that

are at their developmental level. A knowledge that there is a religion that wants individuals to think and not just be indoctrinated. Their world is widened and supported here.

What does the staff at FUS expect of parents? Simply to put a priority on getting your kids here, to get up and out of the house on yet another

morning. To be engaged in religious conversation when it pops up. To understand your own religious thinking so that you can share it with your children and youth. To volunteer your time and talents to support our program in some way. To pledge so that RE has a full budget for its activities, and to be proud that you are a Unitarian Universalist.

High expectations. We have them of you, you have them of us, and the kids have them for

all of us. In one RE program year there are just 36 hours to fulfill all of our expectations. Let's not waste a minute of it.

In one RE program year there are just 36 hours to fulfill all of our expectations

# The Rules of Engagement — for Social Justice and Beyond

by Carol Koepp, Social Justice Coordinator

As we look ahead to a new legislative session beginning in Minnesota, we experience a collective shudder in reaction to the polemic political discourse we hear in our state and nation. We feel ourselves being drawn into it or just want to “tune out” altogether — neither choice being very satisfying.

The book *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* by Karen Armstrong includes a chapter entitled, “How Should We Speak to One Another?” This column contains many quotes from that chapter. (Thank you, Karen Armstrong.)

*Dialogue is one of the buzzwords of our time. There is widespread conviction that if only people would enter into dialogue, peace would break out. But there is very little Socratic dialogue in the world today. Our discourse tends to be aggressive, a tradition we inherited from the ancient Greeks. In the democratic assemblies of Athens, citizens learned to debate competitively, to marshal arguments logically and effectively, and to argue their case against one another in order to win. ... The object was to defeat one's opponent: nobody was expected to change his mind, be converted to the other side, or enter empathically into the rival viewpoint. Sound familiar?*

Socrates didn't like that style, so he devised a “more gentle and more proper” manner of discussion. *It was a spiritual exercise designed to produce a profound psychological change in the participants, and because its purpose was that each person should understand the depth of his ignorance, there was no way that anybody could win.*

*In our highly contentious world, we need to develop a twenty-first-century form of Socrates' compassionate discourse. ... We should make a point of asking ourselves whether we want to win the argument or seek the truth, whether we are ready to change our views if the evidence is sufficiently compelling, and whether we are making 'place for the other' in our minds in the Socratic manner. Above all, we need to listen. ... We should make an effort to hear the pain or fear that surfaces in body language, tone of voice, and choice of imagery.*

*To take just one example: every fundamentalist movement that I have studied in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is rooted in a profound fear of annihilation; and each one began with what was perceived to be an assault by the liberal or secular establishment. ... Instead of ridiculing fundamentalist mythology, we should reflect seriously on the fact that it often expresses anxieties that no society can safely ignore. ... We have seen what happens when fundamentalist fear hardens into rage.*

*Armstrong goes on to say, when making an effort to understand something strange and alien to you, it is important to assume that the speaker shares the same human nature as yourself and that, even though your belief*

*systems may differ, you both have the same idea of what constitutes truth. ... In this way, we can broaden our perspective and 'make place for the other.'*

In making a place for the other, Armstrong is clear about the importance of not becoming *passive and supine in the face of injustice, cruelty, and discrimination, ... but (we) should feel an increasing*

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# The Rules of Engagement Continued

*sense of responsibility for the suffering of others and form a resolve to do everything we can to free them from their pain ... but not with hatred and contempt.*

*After a contentious discussion, conduct a post-mortem with yourself: Can you really back up everything you said in the heat of the moment? Did you want to inflict pain? Did you really know what you were talking about, or were you depending on hearsay? And before you embark on an argument or a debate, ask yourself honestly if you are ready to change your mind.*

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