

Hope Within History
Rev. Marcus Hartlief
UU Congregation of Marin
September 15, 2019

Last Spring we held a series of conversations held in people's homes, gathering in living rooms with six or eight or ten of us. I asked you to share stories of your histories with this congregation, and your hopes for the future.

Each gathering began with this chalice lighting, words from Penny Hackett-Evans:

Each of us brings a separate truth here...
We don't come as empty vessels, but as full people,
each with our own story and our own truth.
We seek to add to our truths and add to our stories.
This room is rich with truth, rich with experience.
All manner of people are here: needy...joyful...frightened...anxious...bored...
We all bring our truth with us.
May we all recognize the truth and the story in other lives than our own.
And may we hear and honor the truths that we all bring as we gather together.
Together we have truths.
Together we have a story.
Together we are a community.

One purpose of these conversations was for me to do what Rev. John Buehrens calls the "archeological work" of developmental ministry. I think of it as getting to know the congregational DNA. I asked you to describe what you first noticed when you came here. To share stories you had heard about things that had happened here before your time. To think about the moments you have been disappointed or even heartbroken by this community, and the times you were amazed and inspired here. So I'm going to share some of the stories I've heard, some you told me in our Hopes and Histories meetings, some you shared with me one-on-one or in committee meetings, some I read in notes or reports.

Once upon a time, the story goes, three young dads who commuted together on a greyhound bus from here in Marin to San Francisco for work, got to talking about their dreams for their children. A few months and many conversations later, 20 people gathered in the home of Gordon and Adina Robinson. Tucked into the membership book in my office are the sheets ripped from a legal pad at that first meeting, the signatures of the founding members of what was then the Marin Fellowship of Unitarians. We'll celebrate the 70th anniversary of that day next January, I know many of you are already planning on generous special gifts the congregation for the occasion.

Once upon a time, a man named Mr. Rose, an introverted disheveled member of the congregation, died and left what he had to the congregation. As members sorted through his disorganized estate, it was

discovered he had amassed a modest fortune, and suddenly the Marin Fellowship of Unitarians had an endowment.

Once upon a time, in fact, time and time again it seems, outdoor activities were organized here, families and individuals gathering for hikes and camping trips. Photos revealing a community of all ages finding holiness in the hills, in the woods, on the coast, in the water.

Once upon a time when the struggle for racial justice was at the forefront of the public consciousness, a young black woman was accused of murder and more because she had purchased the guns used by the Soledad Brothers in the bloody Marin courthouse tragedy that left them and several others dead. While Edgar Hoover and Richard Nixon demonized Angela Davis as a terrorist, this community worked to stand in solidarity, offering Angela Davis and other prominent Black leaders a pulpit to speak from, the only white community in the county to do so.

Once upon a time when affordable housing was a crisis, this congregation worked to found the Ecumenical Association for Housing, a member here serving as its first Executive Director.

Once upon a time a group of teachers and teenagers piloted a project that would be come to be known as About Your Sexuality, and now Our Whole Lives. I don't know who those early adopters were, or if they could have imagined the curriculum they piloted would become a nationally acclaimed values-based approach to offering empowering sexuality education.

Once upon a time, around 1965 when this building was completed, the membership of the congregation was recorded at 450. I'm still not sure how they dealt with the parking lot.

Once upon a time, I heard from many of you, sometimes with giggles or hushed tones to accompany, there were the nude massage classes. Taking a cue from places like the Esalon Institute in Big Sur, in the 60's and 70's many Unitarian Universalists, especially here on the West Coast, lived out the sexuality revolution. Our communities celebrated the liberation of bodies, we had our first openly gay ministers and we saw ourselves on the forming edge of evolution, swept up in the heady spiritual awakenings of the times. Nude massage classes were offered at our UU seminary in Berkeley, Starr King, as well as here, and I imagine other congregations. Traditional assumptions about sexuality and relationships were thrown aside in the quest for liberation.

Now I need to digress from my storytelling to share a couple of observations.

Being there for one another is central to the DNA of this congregation. Dinners for Eight, Care Rings and other small group ministries, a community of families, the history of this congregation is the history of building a village in a city.

The role of the minister in this village is not entirely clear. Certainly your origins, like the origins of most UU congregations, were nothing like the parable we tell about Thomas Potter and John Murray. It

was not a building and a preacher that made this congregation, but people dreaming of community for themselves and their children. The emphasis I heard in the history of this community is on the resiliency and vibrancy of the community through many ministerial transitions, about the strength and capability of lay leaders. As with many congregations that started without ministers in the period called the “fellowship movement,” roughly the 50s into the 60s, you are inheritors of an important wisdom: That a minister is not necessary to have a meaningful religious community.

And yet as I asked about your histories in this community, every conversation began with a discussion of the challenges experienced with one minister or another. I heard about two beloved ministers who died young and unexpectedly. I heard about troubled endings, conflict between minister and Board, minister and congregation, minister and staff. I heard about happy ministries that lasted two years or less, and unhappy ministries that lasted more than two years. I heard about negotiated resignations—our euphemistic way of saying *firing a minister*—negotiated resignations of 4 of the last 6 settled ministers. I heard about beloved interims, bringing care and stability after a period of conflict, and I noticed that this often inhibited the typical interim work of providing a period of challenge and transformation. I heard about ministerial misconduct. Misconduct with staff supervision and finances in the not too distant past, and in the 60’s and 70’s there were some instances of relational misconduct as appropriate boundaries were crossed. I heard about feelings hurt to the core, about spiritual wounds reopened, about being disappointed by Boards, by the district, by the denomination. I heard wishing for ministers to own up better to their shortcomings, I heard wishing to protect ministers from the congregation, or to protect ministers from accountability. I heard longings for repair and closure, I heard longings to stop talking about all of this and move on.

Here’s another observation: as far as I can tell, the last settled ministry—that is, a minister who was found through an open search process, and called to serve by a vote of the whole congregation—the last settled ministry that did not end in conflict or tragedy was your first settled minister, Sam Wright, in 1961. And I know at least some of you have some feelings about that. It’s hard. It’s a heavy history. It is a history that keen observers pick up on the first time they walk the hallway of our building and see the long line of minister’s faces who have served this congregation in it’s relatively short history. And as your 20th minister in 65 years of ministers—that’s 3.25 years of average service, for those doing the math—I have to acknowledge I’m acutely aware of the footsteps I walk in.

But the challenging question of the role of the minister is not your burden to bear alone. Another story...

Once upon a time a stunning technological innovation propelled sweeping changes in every dimension of society. This new technology gave widespread access to incredible amounts of information, and suddenly barriers of class and other social locations were significantly lowered. The gatekeepers of authority, particularly religious authority found themselves adrift in a chaotic new world.

Because when the printing press was invented, and the Bible was printed for the first time in mass quantities, translated into many languages, a cascade of religious and cultural transformations ensued, among them dramatic changes in the role of the Priest.

Here's the idea: when people could read the word of God themselves, some people thought, well maybe we don't have to rely on the Priest to be an intermediary at all. Maybe anyone can have direct experience of God, of that which is ultimate. Eventually this dangerous logic brought a group calling themselves Unitarian Universalists to declare lofty beliefs in the free and responsible search for truth and meaning and the right of conscience. But along the way, religious communities fractured over and over again, as they debated theology and the role of clergy. Many communities determined that once the Priest no longer had an intermediary function, they were no longer needed to perform sacraments, the Eucharist or Baptism and so on. Along the way, some traditions, like ours, did away the idea of sacraments all together. Our close religious cousins in the radical wing of the reformation, the Quakers, took this logic to its inevitable conclusion and decided there was no need for clergy at all.

But we, we who certainly have no use for an intermediary between anyone and God or any other conception of ultimate reality, we who count amongst our spiritual ancestors such free-thinkers as the transcendentalists and humanists, we held onto the office of minister. One explanation is that we have a need for a learned ministry. Until a few decades ago, Unitarian ministers did not wear stoles like this, which are historically the symbol of being able to perform sacraments, but instead only black robes, an acknowledgement not of religious stature per se, but actually Geneva robes, academic robes of the university, denoting not the minister's closeness to God but accomplishment in study.

And once upon a time, not too long ago, the learned ministry began to seem somewhat insufficient as people looked for more emotional presence and spiritual leadership from their ministers. A colleague several decades ago was once asked how he possibly had enough time to accomplish all the study along with the other tasks of ministry and he responded that he limited himself to only taking on "one neurotic case" each year. We have come to expect more of our ministers, and that's a good thing.

But this changing role of the minister has been messy. And it's especially messy when misconduct has taken place. Those who study congregations from a systems perspective report that the impact of clergy misconduct can ripple through a congregation past even the time when anyone who experienced the misconduct is still around.

So here's my hope: that taking honest stock of history allows us to move forward neither stuck in stories of the past nor blindly shoving them aside. The history of this congregation is rich and textured, like each of our own histories and family histories, like all histories, includes moments of greatness, of incredible accomplishment, of beauty and wonder. And it includes times of struggle and strife, of heartbreak and disappointment. Our DNA has within it strength and frailty, power and vulnerability.

And as we move forward, we will continue to wrestle with this question of the role of the minister. Those who study churches sometimes open this question by asking, "Who does the congregation

belong to?" The minister? The membership? That is, the current membership? Or is it the founding members? Or perhaps it should be the next 200 members?

Many conclude that the most satisfying answer is none of the above. The congregation belongs to something greater than the personalities who inhabit it. The congregation belongs to its calling, to its mission.

The title of the service today came from the title of a book by theologian Walter Brueggemann. In it, he talks about moving beyond the inward-focused therapeutic model of church to turn outward and transform our personal stories and our faith into a powerful voice in the public square. He looks at Biblical stories, particularly the Exodus narrative, and finds the resources for what he calls a "hope within history. A hope that challenges hopelessness and despair." Brueggemann finds in these old stories a narrative that intentionally shatters all old descriptions of reality and invites one into a different reality. And he says this is a process we do in community over and over again. There are three stages of faith development in this powerful transformation.

The first is what Brueggemann calls a critique of ideology. He says that theology emerges from life and shapes behavior; that there is a relationship between human choices and religious ideas. Therefore when religious ideas become oppressive, they must be critiqued. In order to free ourselves from oppression these interpretations, this theology, must be critiqued. We UUs pride ourselves on doing this first step almost in our sleep.

The second stage is the public processing of pain. Here, self-disclosure and storytelling break silence around an unmentionable issue and point the way forward for others to do their own work of truth-telling and healing.

The third stage of faith development is that the public outcry and processing of pain leads to the release of new social imagination. This outcry takes the lid off our hope-filled imagination. "And the question," he writes, "the question always asked of the ones liberated in their pain is, what will you do with your time?" What will we do with our time? What will we do with our one wild and precious life? "Juices are set free which enable those who have not hoped for a long time to hope, those who have not imagined for a long time to imagine." This is the transformation that is possible every Sunday morning, and every day, when we take risks to speak our truths and tell our stories in a way that will liberate our imaginations and give us the courage to raise our voice in the public square.

Critique of oppressive theology, public processing of pain, the release of new social imagination. When I asked about your hopes and dreams for this congregation I heard you describe a congregation that does just that. You want to keep being there for one another, to be a part of a congregation where care is palpable. You want to be part of a thriving village, a unique place of all ages and many kinds of people in a culture that is more and more segregated by life stages. Where people trust one another enough to be vulnerable with the hard truths of our lives. Where people come to be nourished and renewed. And then you want to have a bigger bolder voice in our wider community.

You want a place where we inspire joy and justice in an imperfect world. Where we share life's journey, the good parts and the bad parts too. Where we celebrate many paths, even ones we don't understand or cannot relate to. Where all this sharing and celebrating and inspiring leads us to the release of a new social imagination, brimming with joy and justice, and from that place, we act together to make a difference.