

“What Is It Worth to You?”  
January 22, 2012

The Reading

The reading is from the “Introduction” of the classic book by biblical scholar Gerhard Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*. The reading is from the opening section of the “Introduction,” titled “The Problem.”

Here begins the reading.

No one would be able to live even for a single day without incurring appreciable harm if [a person] could not be guided by wide practical experience. This experience teaches [a person] to understand events in [one’s] surroundings, to foresee the reactions of [others], to apply [one’s] own resources at the right point, to distinguish the normal from the unique and much more besides . . . . But experiences without preparation do not exist. By and large [a person] creates the experiences which [she or] he expects and for which, on the basis of the idea which [she or] he has formed of the world around [one, that person] is ready. Experience presupposes a prior knowledge of [oneself]; indeed it can become experience only if [a person] can fit it into the existing context of [one’s] understanding of [oneself] and of the world. Thus it can even be that [a person] misses possible experiences offered to [one], that [the person] lacks the capacity to register them, because [the person] is incapable of fitting them into the limits of [one’s] understanding (pg. 3).

Here ends the reading.

“What Is It Worth to You?”  
By  
The Reverend William Haney  
January 22, 2012

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation  
Amado, Arizona

About this time eight years ago I got an e-mail from my then 14-year-old granddaughter. In the message was an enthusiasm for her engagement in her church and the larger liberal religious movement. She was attending First Unitarian Church in Oklahoma City with her mother. She didn't put the message directly in terms of her church engagement or being a part of a larger tradition. That message came across in her excitement about the youth group and possibly going to the Unitarian Universalist Association's General Assembly. She wanted me to take her to Long Beach, the site of that year's event. That didn't come about, but she did attend the General Assembly in Ft. Worth with me and had a blast. Little did I know when nearly 50 years ago, joining my first Unitarian Universalist church that I began three generations of Unitarian Universalists. It is with supreme gratitude my granddaughter is enthusiastic about her relationship with her church.

Nearly fifty years ago I never suspected that my encounter with this challenging and rewarding religious movement would lead my life along a path of religious growth and spiritual self-care. I had no idea in that journey I would encounter some of the most brilliant and challenging people. Nor did I know that in my then-chosen vocation of architecture, any people skills I learned would come wholly from my engagement in church life, and not from my professional life. I had no idea I would someday be the President of a church, President of a District, or the Chairperson of a Search Committee charged with selecting a candidate for the congregation to call its first minister. I didn't know then 20 years later I would begin to prepare myself for the ministry. All of these lay before me. All of this was unknown and unsuspected. How is it I became immersed in this liberal religious tradition? Why did I accept the various and many challenges presented before me?

There are many reasons, known and unknown to those questions. One stands out. I was, and still am, captured by the vision the movement, this faith tradition, this church offers to me, to each of you, to the world. The vision of being honest and open about one's faith stance, when so many must hide their real values when in a religious community is part of that reason. Another reason is the vision of being on a religious and spiritual quest, which is of greater value than having answers fixed and rigid. There is the vision of being open to other and diverse values and expressions of meaning, rather than shunning and dismissing those who are different. Then there is the vision of being willing to address injustice and oppression as it occurs in our own larger community, and not pretend it is of no consequence to our own well being. Finally, there is the vision of nurturing our children to be open and accepting of those with whom they encounter, instead of narrowing their selection to only those with whom they agree. These visions and more beckoning to the goodness that can emerge in a broken world and giving people hope and promise for a fulfilling and meaningful life are what captured me those nearly 50 years ago. My

“practical experience,” as Gerhard Von Rad puts it in the reading gave me the strength to follow my path.

Since the beginning of last October, each of you were introduced to a path intended to express your “practical experience.” Through the untiring efforts of the Transition Team appointed by the Board of Directors, a path was set for each member and associate member of this congregation. The Transition Team was appointed to aid me in pursuing two specific ministerial tasks identified as the work of an interim minister. The Team deserves your recognition and gratitude. The members of the Team are David Hawthorne as Team Leader, Bev Barney, Barbara Brusstar, Barbara Clark and Jean Richon. By way of phone calls every member and associate member was contacted. Through that untiring effort of Team members, 75% of the congregation was able to participate in the process of being in touch with each one’s “practical experience.” As said in the reading, “This experience teaches [a person] to understand events in [one’s] surroundings, to foresee the reactions of [others], to apply [one’s] own resources at the right point, to distinguish the normal from the unique and much more besides . . . .” For those willing and able to attend a Listening Circle, there were 12 separate sessions that ended just one week ago. Questionnaires were sent to those unable to attend. The Team and I will be issuing a full report to the Board and to the congregation shortly. Then plans will be underway for the next phase of the process later in the spring.

There was a specific interim ministry task addressed by this process. It was to get a sense of your perceptions and experiences of congregational life. These experiences came under four headings: congregational identity, its strengths, needs and challenges. As would be expected, many experiences were all over the map. As Von Rad indicates in the reading, “By and large [a person] creates the experiences which [she or] he expects and for which, on the basis of the idea which [she or] he has formed of the world around [one, that person] is ready.” You were ready to express your thoughts and feelings openly and honestly.

The questions posed were intended to gain an inventory of thoughts and feelings about how things are currently going in congregational life. Much information was gathered and will be shared in more detail later. While there was diversity in responses, certain consistent themes appeared from one session to the next. There was widespread consistency in matters of identity. Feelings of welcoming, diversity and accepting were expressed. Some of the strengths expressed included strong support for social justice activities, a sense of community and high level of volunteer energy when called upon. The music contribution to the Sunday service has very high appeal and support. The needs and challenges tended to overlap in the experiences expressed in the sessions. Along with the need and challenge of membership growth, there was also high concern for stable and sustainable financial health. There were also expressions of how to better deal with differences of views and desires. The single-most interesting response was to the question, “Do you want a minister?” The overwhelming response was “yes”; nearly unanimous from all of the sessions and the returned questionnaires. There will need to be follow-up questions later as to what form of ministry is desired and felt needed. Another important issue is affordability: how strongly is there a commitment to having professional ministry present in your congregational life?

Now there is a documented sense of where you as a congregation stand at this time. Based upon your varied experiences, there are nuances and even differences. The next step in my interim ministry work is to bring all this together with your help. In the meantime you will be challenged with a Stewardship Campaign. This Campaign will prepare you for the next fiscal year of congregational life. That fiscal year begins on the first of July of this year. It will extend to the end of June, 2013. I hope that some of the information gleaned from the Listening Circle sessions and questionnaires will assist the messages of the Stewardship Campaign. Many desires and aspirations were expressed. To what extent these are in accord with the recently adopted Long Range Plan need to be tested. That Plan itself may need to be looked at, as well as the Mission and Covenant. All will be aimed in the next step of the process toward a vision for you and the future. That process of establishing a consensus vision is the second charge given to me and my interim ministry by the Board of Directors. The Transition Team and I will organize the second step of establishing a vision for the early spring. This effort will be coordinated with the Stewardship Campaign.

What was heard, what was spoken in good faith cannot be put aside. Anytime the work of a group, committee, ministry of this congregation is put forward and affirmed, the work must be honored and implemented. Using the democratic process of achieving consent, a course is set, a path found for future action. Since nothing in our Free Church tradition is portrayed as a final “truth,” re-visiting decisions is necessary. Even in one’s personal religious, spiritual or ethical values, doubt is a vital part of faith. As Unitarian Universalist theologian and ethicist James Luther Adams puts it, “An unexamined faith is not worth having.” So, what is the vibrant, healthy life of this congregation worth having for and by you?

In the following few months remaining for me to serve the interim ministry process, there will be opportunities for each of you to extend and test your relationship with this congregation and for its future. What is unpredictable to each of you is how your life may be transformed by your unselfish engagement in the life of this congregation. What is known will be the measure of your engagement. That amount will reveal the value you will receive from this congregation. I found that to be the revelation of my religious and spiritual life beginning when I committed myself to the Unitarian Universalist movement and tradition. As the years unfolded and the vision became more explicit and meaningful for me, the clarity of my religious life became manifest. Now, today, directly and indirectly my granddaughter will reap the harvest of a meaningful religious journey that would not have occurred for her if I had not found myself firmly committed to this abundantly meaningful tradition. What resides in the future for those who will follow you is up to you in the few months ahead. In taking each step forward, the question must remain: “What is it worth to you?”

There will be choices to be made; some fairly apparent and easy, others more complex and with considerable effort and stress. You will be asked to ponder the deepest depths of your commitment to this congregation in order for a meaningful vision to be underway toward realization. Your experiences in listening to each other in the Listening Circle sessions hopefully will be of some help. As Von Rad points out in the reading;

Experience presupposes a prior knowledge of [oneself]; indeed it can become experience only if [a person] can fit it into the existing context of [one’s] understanding of [oneself]

and of the world. Thus it can even be that [a person] misses possible experiences offered to [one], that [the person] lacks the capacity to register them, because [the person] is incapable of fitting them into the limits of [one's] understanding

It is the hope of the ability to really listen to each other that the “limits of [one's] understanding” will be transcended.

The next step toward fulfilling the charge given to me by the Board will require as much participation as experienced in the Listening Circle process just completed. We will be engaged in reviewing your vision that was adopted last spring. Included in that review will be many of the thoughts and feelings brought out in the Listening Circle sessions and questionnaires. There will be the need to strengthen your stewardship for the future. This effort is not only about finances, but about the totality of the care for congregational life. Simply put, where do you go from here? More importantly, how are you going to follow the path you will be setting. The outcome of the last step to begin this spring is to discern your common understanding of your future. It is to strengthen your care for each other and of your religious community. You must be mindful of your strengths and where you need keen attention to support the healthy congregation you can achieve. As Von Rad points out in the reading, “No one would be able to live even for a single day without incurring appreciable harm if [a person] could not be guided by wide practical experience.” You have that “wide practical experience” in your grasp. With the results of the Listening Circle sessions you have identified what your experience speaks to in gaining a fruitful and fulfilling future. You have ample opportunities to live out your experiences and to gain even more. Each step will require choices and decisions aimed at the best interest of the community. It is for the sake of the community that you must ask, “What is it worth to you?” I know you will have the courage to ask that. I know you will venture upon a path of a bright and fulfilling future for you, and particularly for those who will follow you.

Amen.