

SERMON – Welcoming Vision

©Rev. Sara LaWall delivered at Boise UU Fellowship Sunday, September 17, 2017

There is a popular urban legend about Earnest Hemingway from the 1920's. Or, could also be the 30's or 40's or even the 50's . . .it is an urban legend after all. But there is a reason why urban legends take hold in our culture. They become touchstones for our lives; useful tools to move us through life's sticky moments or just bring us some joyful reverie.

Anyway, as the legend goes Hemingway is in a bar (where else would he be) with some writer friends discussing the narrative form, wondering together how short a story can be before it is no longer a story.¹ Then someone throws down a challenge! A friendly wager. Can Hemingway write a story in six words. Of course he takes the challenge. He grabs a napkin, writes his story and claims his winnings.

His six-word story reads, "For Sale. Baby Shoes. Never Worn."

Those six words make a pretty profound story. It doesn't matter if this legend is true or not. It is a good parable about the power of story. And, this form has taken off as a valuable and fun tool exercise in English classrooms, boardrooms, family gatherings, seminaries, and churches. I have encountered this exercise a dozen or so times over the years. When I began seminary in 2009 during our new student convocation we were asked to answer this question in six words, "Who loved you into this place." In the span of a few minutes I was able to scribble down several different six-word answers.

Just this past year, we used this exercise with our Coming of Age youth. We asked them to write their autobiography in six words, to write about a significant spiritual moment in six words and ultimately to write out their faith statement in six words.

Think creatively by expressing thoughts beyond.

Don't judge people on their appearance.

And just last month the board and our strategic planning task force members gathered together for a conversation and upon hearing this same Hemingway story, tossed out their own six-word visions for this congregation.

Six words is simple, quick and clear. The mechanism forces us to clarify what is important to us. To choose our words carefully. The Hemingway legend teaches us that any good story or vision for our lives can be captured in six words. And in the age of increased information access, six words is something that can make an impression, that people will remember.

I suspect some of you are already scribbling down six word stories on your OOS. I know I would be if I were listening to this sermon. I am the kind of person that likes to take notes for myself during worship (and did this even before I became a minister).

So how would you tell your story in six words? What would be your six-word autobiography? And what is your vision for your future self or for your family in the next 3 to 5 years, can you capture that in six words? How do the two short stories connect? How are they different? What about a six-word vision for our world? What about one for the future of this congregation?

For any organization, compelling storytelling is vital to its health and its ability to adapt and thrive through the fast-paced changes of our time. Churches are no exception. A 2015 Pew research study on the religious landscape of this country found that regular church attendance in the mainline protestant churches—the tradition from which we were born—has significantly declined over the past several decades a certainly since church going its peak in the 50's and 60's. And the number of adults who consider themselves religiously unaffiliated, spiritual but not religious, the “nones” is on the rise; especially within the millennial generation. So the story we tell about how we are and who we wish to be matters. It could have a real impact on the future growth of this community.

This weekend, we officially kicked-off our strategic planning process aimed to help us chart a course for our near future. Thank you to those of you who joined our consultant, Kay, for small group conversations. I am excited to hear Kay's reflections after services today—I hope you all will be able to join us.

Over the last several years, since you began your search process before I even got here, this congregation has generated a lot of grand ideas and provocative proposals (I love that term). And this throughout this weekend I heard some of those ideas lifted up again and some new, exciting ideas shared. While a strategic plan is meant to help us prioritize which ideas to pursue first and what steps we need to take to get there, we first need a shared vision for our destination.

A strategic plan is like a good trail map for an adventure in the wilderness. In this case, we get to be both the map makers and then become the map users. And our vision is not the map itself, it is the reason we picked up the map in the first place. The vision is our mountain top, our compass points, telling us where we want to go and keeping us veering too far off course. Our vision becomes the destination fueled by a sense of adventure, possibility, and transformation. Without those elements, it isn't much of a vision, it is just work.

Perhaps you've heard the parable of the three brick layers:

Once there were 3 bricklayers. Each one of them was asked what they were doing. The first one answered gruffly, 'I'm laying bricks.'

The second one replied, 'I'm putting up a wall.'

But the third one said enthusiastically and with pride, 'I'm building a cathedral!'

The first bricklayer describes the task like work, gruff and crank about doing it. The second bricklayer describes a piece of the project—very functional. The third bricklayer shares a grand vision, the big picture; in a manner that conveys possibility, hope, and excitement. The bricklayer is telling the story of her task to keep herself invested and motivated and excited about the work ahead.

Building a cathedral of love where all are welcome and we change the world.
(That may be 14 words, but it still short and tells a compelling story).

The great Unitarian and Transcendentalist writer, Henry David Thoreau, wrote, "It's not enough to be busy, so are the ants. The question is, what are we busy about?"

So what is this Fellowship busy about? And why? What is our cathedral? I don't mean a literal cathedral per se, but what is that vision for who we are and who we wish to be that will inspire our work for the coming years? What is our calling in these times? Who do we serve? Why do we exist?

Easy questions, right? No problem! No, these are deep, existential questions that invite us to get in touch with matters most to us, in this particular moment in time. Because what matters most to us changes over time as we grow and evolve, as we deepen our spiritual lives and respond to the world around us.

Often when we pick up a map, we do so because we are going somewhere we have not been before and we need some guidance for the terrain ahead. We need some suggestions about where to start, where we might pause along the way for supplies, water, shelter, rest. And a good map also includes information about the terrain and topography. What is the landscape of our journey? Who is with us and who is not? What is happening around us that might influence our journey? What is the context of our vision? The context of our vision is as important as the vision itself, because if we don't understand the terrain, we may never get to the top of the mountain.

A lot has changed in our country in the past year. I believe there is a vital need for the communities and the voices of our liberal religious tradition in these times. We cannot exist for ourselves alone—and we never have, really. Our Unitarian and Universalist heritage has always been connected to the ideals of serving the greater good, the other, the vulnerable; the ideals of reaching within to examine our own spiritual selves while also reaching out beyond our walls. And always with an eye toward building the kingdom of heaven here on earth.

The language of our 7 principles also asks us to think beyond ourselves to the impact we have on the whole of humanity and the whole of our planet—the inherent worth of **all** people; justice, equity, and compassion in human relations; spiritual growth in ourselves, in others and in our congregations; world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all; our interdependent web. As UUs, I believe our world, our communities in which we are situated, must be part of our cathedral.

As we begin to cast that vision for our future , to shape the story of who we are and who we wish to be, and create the map for our journey, I invite all of us to begin like that third bricklayer, with enthusiasm and creative possibilities; with innovation and joy; seeing puzzles rather than problems. ***This is a helpful perspective for our individual spiritual lives as well.*** As leadership visionary Meg Wheatly writes: “Ask what’s possible, not what’s wrong”. How we tell our story matters. What is the story people show up for?

When you were in search for a new minister your search committee had to put together pages of material telling the story of this fellowship and imagining who you could be with a new minister. There was one section that spoke to me so deeply and has stuck with me over the years because it expresses your aspirations and your ideals in poetic language that speaks to the heart. And I think it still rings true today. It was written by own Debra Smith who many of us know has a stunning gift for language. Here it is:

“We want our children to sing hymns in the shower and to speak bravely in history class. We want them to see adults make coffee and policy. We want them to watch elders cede power and be honored. We want our children to hear adult voices that quaver and grope at the margins of understanding.

We want them to hear adults talking about sermons from the pulpit: both the lofty philosophies, and the mundane dilemmas that crowd our days. We want to hear the voices of our children as they try out new ideas and identities.

We want to become known as a “gentle, angry people,” who will hold accountable all those in power who would denigrate any vulnerable people. We want tentative seekers who come to us to feel welcomed and needed, or welcomed and comforted. We want new and old to feel an up-welling of the life-affirming urge to grow, to lead, to minister.”

Those words still move to tears today. There are many themes expressed there that I heard expressed during the conversations yesterday and that I have heard over the last two years when we step back from the grind of life and the work of church to imagine what is possible. Now, who will take the bet to try and say that in six words?

This is our work to do together, as a beloved community, with a wide variety of passions and dreams and ideas. Our goal then is to choose a few things that will help us more fully embody our vision in the next several years. In this endeavor, we are all leaders of our vision. So may we heed the blessing for leaders from our earlier ritual:

*May you have a mind that loves frontiers
So that you can evoke the bright fields
That lie beyond the view of the regular eye
May leadership be a true adventure of growth.ⁱⁱ*

May it be so. Amen.

SILENCE

CLOSING HYMN #298 “Wake Now My Senses”

BENEDICTION

May our vision of ministry be clear and our path bright
May we share in the calling of this fellowship and this faith
With a love that embraces
And a power to create wholeness, healing, and transformation
For ourselves, this community and the world.

As we extinguish the flame of our chalice, we carry with us the light of possibility for all that we can be and do together.

Go in peace.

ⁱ Wright, F. A. (2014), The Short Story Just Got Shorter: Hemingway, Narrative, and the Six-Word Urban Legend. *J Pop Cult*, 47: 327–340.

ⁱⁱ O'Donohue, John. "Blessing for Leaders," *To Bless The Space Between Us*.