

“Give Me Your Hand,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill  
on March 28, 2010

Have you ever heard those jokes about church folks and changing a light bulb? They point out some of the funny differences between different denominations. One that always makes me laugh is one that could apply to almost any tradition: how many church folks does it take to change a light bulb? “Change? Change? What do you mean, change?”

The truth is, change is hard, both for people and for institutions. And the truth is, change happens. Change is inevitable. Some of the wisest words I ever heard about parenting came from one of the nurses in the hospital when our first child was born. She told us, “Sometimes you’ll be in a great place with your child, but then you’ll go through a period that feels like hell. The thing to remember is that whether things are good or bad, that time will pass.” My experience of parenting, especially when our children were little, was that just about the time we were getting used to a particular phase, thinking, “Hey, we’ve got it!” we’d realize that our child had moved on to a new phase. Change happens.

One of the best books about dealing with change is called *Transitions*, by William Bridges. He says there are three phases in any transition. It starts when something ends. Sometimes you seek this out; sometimes an ending is forced upon you. And of course a transition also involves a new beginning. But Bridges says we often miss the most important part of any change, that place and time between an ending and a new beginning, what he calls the neutral zone. When something ends, we often want to rush on to some new thing, to fill the empty space--in our heart, in our schedule, in our lives. But how we spend our time in that neutral zone can make all the difference.

Four years ago, this church was in the middle of a big transition. The previous ministry had ended abruptly and things were in turmoil here. This happens in churches sometimes, and it is always painful. Communities like this are built on faith and trust, and when people in a church stop trusting each other, unhappy times are sure to follow.

But you who were here in some difficult days did some good things. You hired an interim minister who was clear that you needed to do your own work. You hired her for two years, realizing that you were going to be in that neutral zone for a while. And you hung in here, even when it might have been easier to leave. One of the best things you did during that interim period was engage in a process called appreciative inquiry. It’s a way to step back and take a look at the church system, with a focus on what is working and what is going well. It’s in our nature to focus on what is not working, on what we don’t like, and the idea behind appreciative inquiry is do it differently. One

expert describes it this way: "We are not saying to deny or ignore problems. What we are saying is that if you want to transform a situation, a relationship, an organization, or community, focusing on strengths is much more effective than focusing on problems."<sup>1</sup>

It's clear to me that the turning point in this congregation, when the decline in membership, in Sunday attendance, in pledging and in hope began to turn around, was almost exactly three years ago, when you undertook that appreciative inquiry process. You began to imagine a brighter future, which is the first step toward making it real. What you identified as the strengths and challenges of this congregation were expressed in fifteen statements which articulated your hopes and ideas for the future. This was a list of what you were looking for and hoping for. It was not a description of where you were at or of what you had already achieved, but where you wanted to go. Listen to these statements, which came out of that appreciative inquiry process three years ago:

- We are an outgoing, inclusive and welcoming church with a diverse intergenerational membership.
- Our membership is getting what they need from the church community so that they are better able to support the community at large.
- We have Sunday services filled to capacity. We enjoy being with each other and have many joyful, fun events.
- The church provides lots of opportunities to explore our spiritual journeys in small groups.
- We have a thriving membership and have enough people to provide for all functions of church.
- Our membership feels like family. A place where everyone has a chance to get to know one another and new friends or members are immediately welcomed and made familiar to the church and community.
- The congregation is excited, energetic, enthusiastic about church and projects and actively engaged in church activities.
- We put our UU principles into action, making them real and a guide to our social action; We value diversity and feel a strong commitment and responsibility to address social issues.

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<sup>1</sup> The Power of Appreciative Inquiry: A Practical Guide to Positive Change, by Diana Whitney

- We are a self-led congregation supported by a dynamic leader. Our church looks like hub of community; congregation is healthy, and can deal with conflict in healthy ways.
- The minister and trustees welcome diversity in ideas and approaches.
- We have thriving, well organized, active involvement in all our church committees.
- We have a “Spirit of Abundance” and have established a strong financial base with financial security and continued growth.
- We have a vibrant choir and an improved music program.
- Members are able to grow and converse spiritually. We are spiritually fulfilled and have varied opportunities for spiritual development through adult education.
- We stand up for what we believe. We recognize problems early and deal with them. We treat each other and everyone’s ideas with respect.

At the start of the church year the Board of Trustees take a retreat day getting to know one another and identifying hopes and goals for the upcoming year. Last fall we spent some time with this list, and discussed each item. What we discovered was that some of these are works in progress, and that many, most even, have already been accomplished. As I read them off just now, we could have said “check” after many of them. Steadily, quietly, this church has transformed itself over the past three years. And this is really something to celebrate. We have a compelling story here. It’s a story of things falling apart, but then, being put back together, stronger and healthier than before.

So if you, in your life, you are in a place of change and dislocation, take heart. I know it’s not any easy place or a comfortable place, but it may be the place you need to be right now. This congregation is an example of the fact that people and institutions can change and grow, can learn new ways of being together, can imagine a new and brighter future and then set about making it real.

Some of you have given me credit for the good things that are happening here. We are a good match for one another, and I am so happy and grateful to be here and to be your minister. My response is to say that those good things were beginning to happening before I ever arrived. You folks did the work that made it possible for me to come here and do my part, which is to be a catalyst, a guide; to help you be in touch with, as the Methodist minister Ted Loder says, “who you are, and who God is, and who your sisters and brothers are.” Reflecting on our accomplishments doesn’t mean I think we have arrived. No, we have only started. Later this spring we will engage in a new round of appreciative inquiry, which will help us to look toward the future, imagine the possibilities, and then start working toward making them real.

On this day when we welcome the newest members of our congregation, I'm grateful for those of you who have come here over the past couple of years, for the vitality and spirit you have brought to this congregation. I'm grateful for anyone who crosses the threshold of a church for the first time. It takes some courage to do that, and I hope you know how glad we are that you are here. Today I'm especially grateful for those of you who have decided to join the church--for your faith in this community and your desire to be part of its story. You remind me of these words from the poet Adrienne Rich:

My heart is moved by all I cannot save:  
so much has been destroyed  
I have to cast my lot with those  
who age after age, perversely,  
with no extraordinary power,  
reconstitute the world.

As you join us, you are casting your lot with people who are trying to reconstitute the world. You've come to understand, as one of you said to me this week, that religion is not a spectator sport--that the invitation is to join with others, to become part of something larger than our individual selves. The writer Anne Lamott, describing why she makes her son go to church, says,

"Most of the people I know who have what I want—which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy—are people with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people in community, who pray, or practice their faith; they are Buddhists, Jews, Christians—people banding together to work on themselves and for human rights. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful. I saw something once from The Jewish Theological Seminary that said, 'A human life is like a single letter of the alphabet. It can be meaningless. Or it can be a part of a great meaning.'"

There's a Celtic tune that I love, called "Give Me Your Hand." It goes like this...<sup>2</sup>

It's a dance tune, a waltz. You know, it's been said that some of the bravest words one can ever speak are these: "May I have this dance?" We are here, in this church on this earth, to dance. To reach out to one another, to be blessed by these connections and encounters, and to bless others with our particular gifts. To be part of a great meaning. Give me your hand, and I will give you mine. Let us be thankful and let us be glad that we are part of this great and glorious dance.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> At this point the tune was played on a fiddle. To hear this tune, go to [www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQ3EPE4cLzo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQ3EPE4cLzo)