



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Learning to Fly,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on September 22, 2013

This book, called *Learning to Fly*, the source of our reading today¹, came to me as a gift, over a decade ago. My wife Tracey was at a choral workshop in western Massachusetts, and its author, Sam Keen, happened to be there too, leading a workshop on the flying trapeze. Tracey met Sam and bought his book; she told him I was in the middle of this life transition toward ministry, but I was struggling to find my way. So he inscribed the book to me this way--he wrote: “For Frank--it’s time to fly.”

In those days, I wasn’t sure about this call to ministry; was afraid of where I might be going, and what I might have to leave behind.

Do you know what I’m talking about? Can you remember a time in your life when the future seemed uncertain? Did you feel anxious and afraid, or excited and hopeful, or maybe, all of these things? Is there an image that comes to mind from that unsettled time?

For me, it was like being on the edge of some dark woods. I knew I needed to head in there, into that unknown place, but I was afraid--you could get lost in there!

Now this book was a thoughtful gift. But there was something about it that irritated me, particularly, Sam’s admonition, “It’s time to fly.” What if I’m not ready? You can’t make me! I don’t have to read your book! I can put it on a shelf. And that’s what I did, where it sat for a long time.

There is something in our human nature that resists change and growth, isn’t there? Even when it’s good for us. We’re naturally reluctant to let go of what is familiar. There’s a cartoon friends shared with us, as our children went off to college. It’s in two panels--the first is titled “first day of school,” and it shows a child clinging to a tree as the school bus approaches, with the parent

¹ The reading today, from Sam Keen’s *Learning to Fly*:

The real leap of faith comes when the flyer attempts the first release trick... the flyer swings out to the highest point of the pendulum, waits until the catcher shouts, “Hep,” releases the trapeze, and flies.

The gap between two pairs of outstretched arms is only a few feet that could be traversed in a millisecond. But between the “Hep” and the catch there is a journey across an abyss. No footbridge leads from reason to faith, from doubt to trust. Prior to the leap, fear seems more justified than trust, isolation more fundamental than communion, and the flight of the spirit an impossibility.

The short leap from the trapeze to the catcher is a flight from primal fear to basic trust, from I to thou, from autonomy to communion, that can only be made by a total commitment of the self. Flying, like faith, hope, and love, is an existential act that cannot be accomplished by a spectator. Without the mutual trust and action of flyer and catcher, there is no trick, no art, no transcendence of individuality and isolation.

trying to pry him away. The second panel is the first day of college, but this time, it's the parent clinging to the teenager, as he tries to break free.

Twelve years ago, when I took the leap and landed in divinity school, I was startled to discover how much I loved it, how happy I was there. I had no idea what blessings this journey would bring. By leaving home, so to speak, I found new homes, including this one.

I share this story because I want to encourage you to take your own leaps of faith. But I don't take this change stuff lightly. It can be scary and unsettling. But it's worth it. And, it's what we're made for. Life does beckon us onward.

And I sense that we as a congregation are ready too--ready to leap, and to fly. To paraphrase Captain James T. Kirk of the starship Enterprise, "to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life, to boldly go where we have not gone before!"

I love the traditions of the church. I love our old building, and the hymns Claudia plays on our wonderful organ. And I love the songs in our new teal hymnal, played on the piano. It's great, isn't it, when we have violin and cello in worship? And when we have drums and electric guitar and saxophone too! We inhabit this blessed space that reminds us we are inheritors of a rich tradition--Jewish and Christian scriptures, the words and deeds of prophetic women and men--and we can hold this tradition lightly. Ours is a living tradition, we say "revelation is not sealed," that is, what is holy, good and true is being revealed in every generation in new and fresh ways, if we will have ears to hear and eyes to see.

Are we, in this congregation, ready to take a leap of faith? Are we ready to fly? I ask you because that is what we have been invited to do.

Last year our church was asked to participate in a program called "Leap of Faith," which matches up mentoring and aspiring congregations. We were invited as an aspiring congregation, but this doesn't mean our district leaders see us as deficient or in need of remedial work. Quite the opposite--the congregations they invited were ones they identified as already healthy and vital. It was an honor to be asked, and our Board enthusiastically and unanimously said "Yes!"

Board member Abbe Wertz says that even before she fully understood what Leap of Faith involved, she was ready to do the work necessary to help our church continue to grow and thrive. Abbe says,

"It was comforting to me to realize that UUCH was picked to be a part of the Leap of Faith not because we are having difficulties but because we are doing things right. We are already a thriving community in so many ways. We welcome people of all walks of life, from all backgrounds, ages and denominations. We welcome people because they are different and because they are the same. We are able to help people within the congregation and in the greater community because of the strengths we have as a congregation. I love that about this church. I know we are going in the right direction. I don't feel that we need to change, but because we are human we do change and I believe that the work of Leap of Faith is helping us to grow and

change and love ourselves for whomever we turn out to be - as a congregation and as individuals.”

Our travel team, whom you met and blessed this morning, attended the Leap of Faith launch conference in the middle of August. We introduced ourselves to the other congregations through a video we created, which you can see today at noon. We heard from district staff that we’d been chosen because they have hope and faith in us, they are investing time and resources in us, because they see us as a church with so much potential. We had deep and extensive conversations with our new friends from our mentoring congregation, All Souls in New London, Connecticut. We told them stories of this church--what it’s like here--the stuff we are proud of and the struggles we’ve gone through. With their help, we identified three areas we want to focus on this year.

The first is to strengthen our sense of identity. To become really clear about who are we as a congregation. This is not about spending a year wordsmithing yet another mission statement, but about sharing our passions with one another, listening for the common threads, naming our hopes and aspirations, so when someone says, “Tell me about your church” we can answer them, with clarity and passion.

The second challenge is to redeem and reclaim our past. As some of you know, a conflict divided this congregation eight years ago. We have done a lot of good work since then, as individuals and as a community. If there are any ghosts from that hard time still in our midst, it’s time to wish them well and send them off. To let what is in the past rest in peace. We’re going to find good and helpful ways to do this.

The third and final challenge we identified is to get better at getting things done around here. To work on structures and communications, to examine our assumptions and perspectives, and see what needs to change. So we become more transparent in our governance, more effective in our ministries, and have more fun in the process!

Your Board of Trustees talked about these things at their retreat last weekend. You can see the notes they posted under each item, and a quote we identified with each challenge, on the big doors in the Murray Room.

In two weeks our travel team will spend the weekend with our partners in New London, and in November, they will visit us here. We’re still putting together our home team, the people who will work on these three challenges. If you want to be part of this, we welcome you--just let me, or any other member of the team, know.

It would be easy enough to stand here today and offer some platitudes about leaping, about risking, about sticking your neck out, and how I commend this to you. And you might be inspired, for a while, but then you would probably go out thinking, “That was nice, but some of us need to live in the real world.”

Here’s the truth--this is the real world I’m talking about. People and institutions, if they want to thrive, must always be changing, growing, adapting. We are not meant to live in stasis. Nothing

does for long. The church was never supposed to be the guardian of the status quo. Yes, we offer a sanctuary, a place to be renewed and refreshed. But not a place to hide, from others or from ourselves. If we come here to be inspired, that is, filled with the Spirit, and encouraged, filled with courage, it is so that we can live more fully, more courageously, more gladly these lives we have been given.

I am not a particularly courageous person. But as the great song by Sam Cooke puts it, “But I’m trying to be.” There’s chapter in *Learning to Fly* called “Becoming a Connoisseur of Fear.” Sam Keen says we each have practical fears, like fear of falling, of getting hurt, of failing, of looking foolish. And we have, he says, a deeper, primal fear, which is “the fear of extinction, of the void, of nothingness, of death.”²

His chapter on facing these fears is powerful, and I commend it to you. How do you become a connoisseur of fear? Sam says you do it, not by pushing your fears away, but by getting to know them. “Every day,” he says, “befriend a single fear.” And if you do this, he says, “the miscellaneous terrors of being human will never join together to... rule your live from the shadows of unconsciousness. We learn to fly,” Sam Keen asserts, “not by becoming fearless, but by the daily practice of courage.”

We have this invitation, this opportunity. Every day: to stick our necks out, to stretch and grow, to take a leap of faith. We have this invitation, as individuals, and as a church community. To learn to fly.

And so I ask you: are you ready? Who knows how far we might fly? Will you come and go with us, toward that land, of liberation and commitment, of joy and justice? Will you come and go with us toward that land, where we’re bound?

Amen.

² Sam Keen, *Learning to Fly* (New York: Broadway Books, 1999).