

"Expectations"  
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Unitarian Fellowship of London

Have you ever had an experience where you expected something to happen, and things ended up quite differently -- actually *better* than you expected them to? This theme of unexpected turns is probably a very human story.

I know it has been for me. You see, I never expected to become a minister. Things weren't going so badly in my life at all: I was making a decent living as a violinist and a teacher living up in Thunder Bay, Ontario. Larry and I had been married a year. I happily went to the Scotia Festival in Halifax, thinking I would improve my auditioning skills and be able to get into a bigger orchestra. Oddly enough, I found I was spending more time reading books about theology in the Dalhousie Library than sitting in a practice room the way I had planned. I was spending time walking on the beach thinking about the direction of my life. Something was definitely wrong with this picture!

Oh, I had previously thought about going to theological school, perhaps after retiring early. My model back then was your own Rev. Jane Bramadat, who had previously served part-time in Thunder Bay before you stole her from us (!) Jane had a second career in ministry, and I thought I could surely do the same...perhaps waiting to retire from the symphony when I turned age 55 or so. *Then* it would all work out in a logical way. But instead, I heard that "still, small voice" inside of me asked one dawn just as I was awakening in that beautiful town of Halifax, "Why...Not...NOW?" Why *not* now? The more I thought about that possibility, and the more I talked with the right people who guided me, the more this very illogical idea actually made perfect sense.

Although there are many challenges, I don't resent this decision to go into professional ministry for a minute. No matter what the struggles, I just get so *passionate* about church communities and congregational life. I get excited when people come and realize that *this* is what they had been looking for all along! I get excited when different generations of people all look forward to being together week after week. I get excited when congregations grow.

Of course the word "growth" encompasses much more than just numbers. Numerical growth means very little if it is not accompanied by developing the *quality* of the relationships that we have with and among each another, and numerical growth means very little if it is not accompanied by personal spiritual growth and deepening.

I have to say that the one thing that really drew me here this year to be your Interim Minister was your magnificent Covenant of Right Relations! In fact, when I was reading over your materials, it was when I was on a minister's retreat along with several other ministers from other denominations. When I mentioned this covenant, can you believe

that every single one of them wanted a copy of it – right away? So I went and photocopied it for them, feeling so proud of a group that I hadn't even met yet, for creating something that *all* religious communities long for.

You see, your Covenant of Right Relations sets up *expectations*. It says in explicit language how we are to be together. I think we're all familiar with *implicit* expectations: like the kind of wondering one does when one meets our soon-to-be in-law's for the first time. Implicit expectations make life rather uncomfortable! In that situation, we ask ourselves: How do they expect me to behave? Well, walking in to the Unitarian Fellowship of London should not be uncomfortable. We know this is a safe space. That each person will be respected, treated with dignity and worth. That if someone disagrees with you, that they will tell you directly, not tell someone else who will then wonder if they are to tell you, and so on with the process of "triangulation".

So everyone is surely to encounter expectations, as new acquaintances are blended with long-time friends of many years. Being in relationship naturally brings with it expectations, both explicit and implicit.

When I was living recently in the United States, I remember being handed a little slip of paper by a bank teller after completing a transaction. "Am I meeting your expectations?" the question asks at the bottom of the slip. I think that most people would agree that it's much better to be *explicit* about what we expect from each other. That's probably why job descriptions were invented, for example. We need to *know* what we're expected to do when we work for someone. It's much easier to choose to *meet* those expectations -- or *not* -- if we first of all know what they are!

I think it's good when a congregation clearly defines the commitment that one makes upon becoming a member, and that's what I'd like to specifically address today.

Since we are not a creedal faith, we don't give anyone a test on a particular creed or set of beliefs. Yet, there are expectations when we join. I think these need to be made at least a bit more explicit. Of course there is the commitment to living in the spirit of the Unitarian Universalist Principles.

But I'm talking about something more specific than our Principles. Here's something I learned from one of our congregations simply called "the four P's" -- four words that begin with the letter P. Let's see if these make sense to you.

They are: **Presence, Participation, Pledge, and Practice.**

The first is *presence*. People are expected to simply show up on Sundays. We are expected to be a part of the worshipping community, and to not just be another name in the Fellowship directory. We support one another when we are *with* one another. By our presence we show that we care, even when we don't particularly feel that we need to "get

anything out of" the service at a particular time. I heard that some people don't want to list the sermon titles and description of the topics in the newsletter, although I like to do that. Hopefully people will come to Sunday services anyway – even if the topic is not the most interesting in the world! You must have heard the expression which says that some people just come to church to get "hatched, matched and dispatched"...

Well, hopefully not too many of you think that way! I like Philip Hewett's assertion that worship is a "shared act of celebration expressing our love for things of worth -- those values by which and for which we live."

Although I've only been here a short while, I've come to really appreciate the people who show up almost all of the time. There is a great deal of very dedicated service to the congregation taking place -- on Sundays and throughout the week! It's reassuring to know that there are so many dependable people around here, who care so much about their congregation.

This brings us to the second in this list of "P's". It is *participation*. Are *you* involved in some way in congregational life? Even doing a small volunteer job helps a lot, and brings everyone into a sense of community. Now participation need not necessarily be to join a committee right away -- don't worry, I'm not going to scare you off -- but simply to participate in activities which you truly enjoy doing -- those which bring you joy. It could perhaps be attending a class as I promise they will begin next month, or attending one of the soon-to-start chalice circles, or helping to teach a Sunday school class, or joining in with one or more of the volunteer opportunities you read in the announcements or a social action project. One of the things I would like to make sure that all of you newcomers and long-time members alike find out what *really* interests you here, or perhaps form your *own* group around doing something new that is not currently offered. Congregational life really means a whole lot more to people who participate.

The third of these 4 P's is *pledge*. Of course, your annual canvass will not come until the spring. But there is the Services Auction coming up in early November, when everyone gets a chance to offer something and the money goes to the Fellowship. Then there will be a fund-raising concert put on by me on violin and another Unitarian, Boyd McDonald, who is a superb pianist and composer. I just emailed a few people this week to say I hope people at UFL will rally behind us to raise money specifically for paying the musicians on Sunday mornings. When I think about Sundays without live music, my heart sinks, and I know that together we will have a great time at Aeolian Hall raising money for something of such integral importance. When we really think about it, we find that money is in no way separate from our spiritual lives. We find that we want to give our money to things that we really believe in and really want to support and see thrive. There will be ample opportunity to share your dreams and aspirations for this Unitarian community with the canvass person who comes to visit with you. Look forward to this exciting time.

Finally, the fourth "P" is for *practice*. People are expected to give their religious spiritual life serious thought. This could take many possible forms: I already mentioned our adult education classes. Some people take courses at a university, or even at a seminary. Others find that private reading, writing, journaling, or meditation works best for them. In any case, the practice of being on your *own* spiritual journey is essentially what the church wants to inspire in each individual. For me personally, this is probably the most important reason why I joined a Unitarian Universalist congregation. The practice of a religion answers the question of "how". *How* do I find a way to engage in an active spiritual life, one which is constantly developing and evolving? The most essential reason for the existence of a church is to explore my spirituality *in community*. I no longer have to do it alone. Along with fellow seekers, I discover that I may have many of the same aspirations as others. As Barbara Rohde asserts in the 2<sup>nd</sup> reading we heard today, "the source of religious authority resides within the center of our own personalities, our own deepest selves." Most importantly, in this or in any religious community, you've got to care for your soul.

Presence, participation, pledge, and practice. I think this is a healthy way to think about true religious community.

And you're probably wondering, after hearing what the congregation expects from each individual, what about *each person's* expectations of the congregation? Often, when people leave churches, they say that going there didn't do much for them. Well, since the congregation or fellowship is what we *make* it collectively, there are ways in which we can *all* engage in active dialogue about what goes on and what our experiences are. Remember, you can always let a Board member, staff member or myself know how you feel about something. It's all a work-in-progress. It's all very dynamic, rather than static.

As far as expectations from the minister go, there was a time some years back that I came to realize that some people are quite unaware of when they could talk to me. I was advised to write a newsletter column about this, and so you'll be getting my latest version of this in the October issue of the *Chalice*. The times when you can call me are when, for example, you are sick, or you are about to go into the hospital, or when you are thinking about getting a divorce, or when you are having a baby, or when your child is having a serious problem, or when you are trying to seek reconciliation with a friend or family member. Between a member of the congregation and the minister, it's a unique kind of relationship. In fact, I once read a newsletter column written by a colleague of mine that was entitled "Your Minister is Not Your Friend". What a strange title, I thought! By that phrase he meant that as a minister he had a *special* relationship to each person in the church. That relationship was not like one with a friend, where someone would talk to him about their problems, and then he would tell them about his problems, and it would go back and forth. Instead, it is a relationship where the minister's personal life doesn't get in the way of the interaction, and where you can expect clear boundaries and confidentiality.

I was thinking just last night, when I heard an absolutely outstanding performance at the Grand River Blues Festival by Watermelon Slim, whose real name is Bill Homans. Bill, his former wife and his daughter used to occasionally attend the first church I ever served, down in a small town called Stillwater, Oklahoma. His daughter was in our Sunday school. Without going into any detail and breaking confidentiality, I'll just say that the Homans family, like any other, had their share of struggles. Yet, as a family they all performed one year for our Candlelight service, on a Christmas Eve. It was a beautiful service! It is amazing for me to think back on that now that Bill, a.k.a. Watermelon Slim, has become so famous on the Blues circuit.

So as a Minister, I get to see some of the greatest human struggles, as well as some of the greatest joys.

There also are the countless numbers of ways in which you each minister to each other. The Caring Network is the most recent manifestation of this -- people looking after the needs of those going through a difficult time in their lives.

And sometimes, not all expectations can be met. I always try to tell new members that if for whatever reason you decide to leave the congregation, to simply let us know. You are as free to leave as you are free to join.

More than once I have told someone, "I am just unable to be the exact kind of Minister that you expect me to be". And that's okay too.

Whatever our expectations are, one thing is certain: We *can* expect to be surprised! Expect the unexpected, as the expression goes.

John Buehrens illustrates in the book "A Chosen Faith" how the major holidays of the Jewish and Christian traditions don't just simply celebrate cycles of time. What they actually do is to tell stories about unexpected turns in human history. Some very familiar examples are the stories of Hanukkah, Christmas, Easter, and Passover. These stories all express a form of faith that dares to reflect on human expectations being upset.

These stories probably wouldn't have been written down, had it not been for the fact that expectations in life tend to be overturned. And what often happens is the inbreaking of grace.

We all have expectations. John Buehrens – a Unitarian Universalist minister and former President of the UUA – says that

Many of our problems with religion and life come from confusions about love, human and divine. We expect from finite, conditioned human beings an unconditional love. But even our loved ones cannot always respond unconditionally. They are not divine. They are only our spouses, partners, friends, children, or parents. By the same token, our culture's tradition of thinking

of God as a parent can lead us into thinking that if we please God, lead a good life, avoid temptations, then God will reward us. But the truth is that this is only an *image* of God -- and a conditioned one at that. The real God is unconditioned, transcendent, and sends sunlight and rain on the just and the unjust alike. Within all life's changes and upsets we may discover something gracious, something very much like love. But it is a hard and enduring love, indiscriminate in overturning our more personal, temporary, and narrow expectations.

Buehrens ends his thought-provoking essay by saying that "we are constantly being challenged, therefore, to *become* more inclusive, more mature, and more enduring in our love".

All who enter in to our churches, congregations and fellowships may not find *all* that they expect. Your religious community will not always fill your every desire. On the other hand, you may perhaps find, almost certainly in unexpected ways, something of what you truly *need*.

I am reminded of what Canadian religious writer Tom Harpur wrote about Unitarians in his 2005 article in the *Toronto Star*. He said, "I have one strong suggestion for Unitarians. There are hundreds of thousands of Canadians currently looking for a spiritual home. But they're not looking for just a debating society or for membership in a group of do-gooder, would-be intellectuals. They want, in the midst of all the other good things you have to offer, a truly living experience of God. They want *meaning* now and a future hope."

I'll say more about this hot topic – what I hear Harpur saying when he uses the “g-word”, God – on another Sunday. Why I quoted him today as we are examining the idea of expectations is this: People are seeking a place to explore something greater than themselves. There's a real hunger out there.

I say, let's strive to meet their expectations. Those who have yet to hear about us. Those who are starving for a depth of meaning. For those who join us on the pilgrimage of faith we have chosen and come to love, let us commit ourselves to presence, participation, pledge and practice. For,

*We are called forth to join our energies, our talents, our skills, our strength, to join our spirits, our souls in the life work of building this Beloved Community.*

*Right here,*

*Right now,*

*Every day.*

*We are called to be chalices, flaming chalices burning with passion and compassion, chalices wide and deep enough to receive the pain and joy of all who hear and feel and respond to our call.*

*We are called to meet one another face to face, to tell the truth of our lives and to listen to theirs.<sup>1</sup>*

Amen and blessed be.

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<sup>1</sup> Lee Reid (Evensong 2, 42)