

The Unitarian Church of Barnstable, UU – May 5, 2019
“So May It Be” – Rev. Tracy Johnson

I am thinking that we all do this, right? I certainly do! There are the January promises about diet and exercise; gym memberships peak during the month and then wane as the warmer seasons appear. We make vows with one another when we marry; take vows if that is of our tradition and calling; or vow never to do thus and such again. People enter into twelve-step fellowships, intent on recovery; sign leases and mortgage papers. When I began my work in the community here on the Cape, the organization asked for a commitment of three to five years and I haven't forgotten that request or my indication that I could honor it.

These are the every day commitments that we almost forget about. They happen as a matter of course. Committing, it appears, holds a high place in our culture. And I am not here today so much to question that, or to answer the associated which came first, the chicken or the egg question evoked when we think about commitment and movement. But I am interested in this idea that I came upon in my reading; the notion of commitment as a catalyst; the thing that enables a further action or change. A catalyst is a constant, remaining unchanged itself, but fostering change in something else.

William Hutchison Murray, the Scottish mountaineer and writer, is credited with saying this. “Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamt would have come his way.”

For Murray, the act of commitment is the game changer. Until there is real commitment you can always turn back or never even get started for that matter. But once you commit it seems that there is a sudden realignment in the Universe. In that instant there is a shift and a positive one, he says, that acts in your favor and acts upon events and circumstances in such a way as to keep the momentum going, the results beyond one's imagination. It sounds so easy – just commit and off we go! Like jumping off the platform on a zipline course! None of the examples I began with this morning, however, have ever been set in stone for an individual. Our resolutions fall by the wayside, we break our vows, intentions are no guarantee and life happens. The unknowns of the future cross our paths, slow our stride or put up barriers that require us to begin again.

Does this mean that we are casual committers as opposed to serious ones? Or maybe this points to our resilience as a species. Like the hermit crab we leap in again and again, rebelling against all that conspires to hold us back. Perhaps it is resilience that serves as a catalyst for recommitment! We gain perspective, make decisions and commit in response to what we have learned. What really matters guides us if we are paying attention for it, rather than letting the small stuff gum up the works. Recently we had a workshop in our mentoring program that was all about putting the big rocks first. The visual says it all, but essentially, if you fill a container with the sand (the really small stuff of life) and then the pebbles (the things of moderate importance) and then try to squeeze in the most important parts of life (the big rocks) it doesn't all fit. But if you put the big rocks in first, prioritizing what really matters, and then pour in the sand and pebbles all around them, somehow it all makes it in. When we commit to the things of true value, those of lesser importance which might otherwise get in the way, have no hold over us. They are kept in their rightful place.

For one of our readings this morning I chose the section of the Unitarian Universalist Association By-Laws that covers our Principles and Purposes as member congregations. I wanted us to read them through with the prologue attached, because I think we tend to take them one at a time, out of context, and apply them like band-aids on the wounds of our existence. They are about commitment; the promises we make to one another in this covenantal faith tradition. We say we will affirm them and promote them, individually and as a whole; recognizing the sources from which we draw our living tradition. The section ends with gratitude for our enriching and ennobling religious pluralism and the inspiration we receive from it. We enter freely into this covenant, it says, making promises to one another of our mutual trust and support. Because the Principles themselves are aspirational and we will need each other to really live this way. We need others who are similarly committed on the journey. I have this picture in my mind of a huge wave of principled living washing over the world; our separate commitments joined; a catalyst for a time to come when the beloved community we talk about is a reality. I tend to dream big!

So we said these UUA Principles out loud like we do every week with the affirmation here; a covenant of our own, relatively unique to this particular church. We do so because naming things carries with it the power of speaking them into existence. Putting it down on paper is one way to do it, but saying it takes it to another level and then doing so in the company of others, a third. The #me too movement comes to mind; the naming of injustices wrought against our bodies; our souls. The naming here gives the power back to the individual. Recently a woman shared about an exercise of writing down the words she hears her inner critic saying; an exercise that she thought would serve no purpose for her. But seeing them there on the paper; just words; ink on paper, took away their power over her. And then the opportunity to share those words in the safety of community and be supported with new words; new ways of naming the critique in response was incredibly healing.

Eve Ensler writes that she believes in the power and mystery of naming things, saying that language has the capacity to transform our cells, rearrange our learned patterns of behavior and redirect our thinking. There is value in naming what's right in front of us because that is often what is most invisible; one person's declaration sparking another and then another, breaking the isolation of silence.

It was not that many years ago now when I made a commitment to myself, at first, and then I started giving voice to it; a commitment about healthier living. It came in response to a diagnosis I had received; that perhaps a catalyst for my decision. I committed to a change in diet recommended by a nutritionist I saw and to regular exercise of all kinds to strengthen my muscles and bones. Over time as I have learned more of the associated science, I have made additional changes. I no longer enjoy a glass of wine with dinner, knowing that it interferes in a competitive way with my medication. More and more I choose a plant based or vegetarian option. My Reiki practice arose out of an understanding of the complimentary healing properties ascribed to the use of touch and intention combined and most recently I have begun a meditation routine which offers me quiet and allows my stressors to drain from my mind's eye. The point is that it all began with that first step; that there have been a series of steps since then; that I expect that to continue as I hold the commitment out before me, naming it from time to time and feeling the power of doing so in the moment.

When we name our commitments; voicing them into the safety of space and relationship we share here at the Unitarian Church of Barnstable, something powerful happens. In our naming; our committing, we are bound together. We come affirming the encouragement of one another to spiritual growth, the Principles say. Our seeking together is a form of commitment. It means that we believe that there is

always more to know and understand; to feel and to experience in this life. I remember a time in my previous career when my husband called the office to find that I was in a training of some kind. “Nooooo!” he exclaimed to the admin person, “Get her out of there. Her head is too full and if you try to add anything else it will explode!” The truth is though, that our heads and our hearts are nowhere near at capacity and this seeking we do individually and collectively is a powerful commitment toward creating the world we hope for.

We have just come through a month of commitment here at the Unitarian Church of Barnstable; commitment to the financial well-being of this congregation; commitment to its sustainability; commitment to the staff. We began with naming the things we hope for here and saying out loud what we value about this place and its people. And then each of us made a commitment, first in the privacy of our minds and hearts and then on paper or over the phone or by email; a commitment to support what we hope for and value with our treasure; with some amount that is do-able for us – perhaps even stretches us a little – but none the less an amount that we plan to offer and that the finance committee can work into a budget for the coming year. Voting on that budget together is another step in the commitment process.

This is an example of the good that Murray was talking about; the domino effect of commitment. We have made decisions which have caused a shift in the Universe! And now new doors will open, new opportunities will issue forth that we might not have otherwise imagined. And I am not just talking about the material aspects of our commitments, important as they are. I believe that in this naming and commitment process something deeper has begun to open itself. There is a new awareness in our minds that has touched our hearts; opening them wider to one another; to the work of this church; to the value of our faith in this time and place. We feel the interconnectedness of thought and word and action in our midst. It is an exciting time here!

Often as the close of a sermon my final words are, “So may it be.” I came to professional ministry in part because of a realization that I had something to say about our living and loving in this world which I believed Unitarian Universalism had offered me an authentic platform for. My sermons are a way of naming something that I find as useful to myself and hopefully others in making a commitment to their faith and way of being. May you find in this community of seekers many opportunities to commit to one another and to the greater good we strive for. May you engage this practice of commitment and naming in powerful ways as you go about your days.

So may it be!