

## **Embracing Chaos, Risk, and Possibility in our Congregations**

Keynote Address delivered at Mid-South District RE Summit, January 29, 2011

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Last Fall at the Healthy Congregations conference, I told the story of how life began from primordial soup. Oxygen and hydrogen bumped into one another in the presence of high temperatures. Water- actually steam- was born. Carbon molecules which had traveled from distant stars bumped together in the whirling, swirling seas of earth and eventually became living bacteria. And the bacteria led to cells, and colonies of cells, and ever more complex life forms. And there was danger along the way. And there was chaos. And there was cooperation and creativity. We are born of that motion and energy and chaos and danger and cooperation. And it is with us still, in our bodies and in our communities. And it is with us still, even in our churches.

Motion and energy, chaos and danger, even in our own churches. The old models no longer serve us. Gone are the days when every Sunday church-going was a ritual part of our cultural and social fabric. Gone are the days when we could count on largely female volunteer labor to keep our churches running smoothly. Gone are the days when the curriculum was set and the moral lessons to be imparted from the pulpit and in the church school were straight-forward, and clear. Gone are the days when churches could blithely operate with a monocultural mindset, worshipping and governing using tried and true structures and systems, habitually separating generations one from another.

What do we have instead? Our adults, children, youth, and families live in a world of choices- a world that leaves them overloaded with information, overfilled with activity options, overburdened with how-to advice, and overwhelmed by the sense that they – and they alone- are responsible for the success of their lives and their families. We live in a world where the predominant myth is one that says if you work hard enough and make the right choices, all will be well- economically, socially, spiritually. And that myth has failed us. Hard work and good choices do not guarantee that all will be well- and, truth be told, they never really did. We live in a world where communities are being defined and redefined on a daily basis, where we create and sever relationships at the touch of a computer keyboard- or a smart phone. We live in a world where violence horrifies, but does not surprise. We live in a world where what is most important is not “where shall I find the answer to my question?” but rather “which answer to my question is trustworthy? What sources of information and guidance are the right ones?” We live in a post-modern world where truth itself can often seem situational, a tool for marketing a product, an idea, or a person. Chaos reigns.

We live in a world where we long for stability, for a road map to successful living, while we still claim the right to create and navigate our own pathways.. It is a world of chaos and danger, motion and energy, creativity and possibility. But we know from biology, from history, and from our own lives that times of chaos and danger create liminal spaces, transitional space, borderland space- where new ways take root, and sometimes flourish.

Liminal. That's an interesting word. It is a word that I heard for the first time in a divinity school class. It comes from a Latin word meaning threshold, and it describes a state of being in-between or on the border of what is established and known. A liminal state or space is not safe space or predictable space. It is characterized by ambiguity, openness, and indeterminacy. It is also a place where growth and learning and creativity abound. Liminal spaces and places are good place for people of faith to hang out, because there are the places where transformation happens, where we experience change of heart and renewal of life. Liminal spaces are where God can be found.

The ancient Hebrews were on to something when they told their religious stories and wrote down their scriptures. The God of their scriptures is not one to be pinned down or to play it safe. There is a God who blesses and works with imperfect people in imperfect circumstances, meeting them in the midst of chaos and danger, in liminal spaces. There is the God of the burning bush, who says its name is "I AM."

Liminal space is not just a theme of the Jewish scriptural tradition. It is the basis of life on earth, the cornerstone of evolutionary biology. Where does biological evolution happen? Along the edges, along the margins, in the places where life is stressed and needs to adapt. Liminal spaces.

Liminal spaces are also part of our individual development. We learn and change best when we are off balance, disoriented, between one thing and the next. We know that there have been times in our lives when we have been thrown off balance, facing stress

and danger. Aren't those the times when we are apt to experience creativity, new relationships, new possibilities, new life? Has anyone here ever known a two-year old- or been one? Has anyone ever experienced a significant loss- of a loved one, a job, a relationship, or a cherished plan? How many people here made their way to a UU congregation at just such a time- a liminal time, a threshold time in your life? (pause after each question for people to reflect).

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People are predictable when confronted with liminal spaces, threshold spaces, spaces and times at the border between one thing and the next. We want to get out of those places and get to someplace safe and familiar. Even at our own peril. The Israelites worried and complained about food and water in the wilderness- and longed to go back to the known state of slavery in Egypt. The child who begins a new challenge may well cling to the familiar safety of the parent. An adult may simply refuse to acknowledge that which upends or confuses their identity or view of the world. A parent may want to protect a teen and keep them from danger and change, sometimes offering limits and guidance that are suitable for someone younger.

The history of my own state, Massachusetts, has a stunning example of this. In the 1850s, when our state was fully engulfed in the chaos of economic change, debates over the abolition movement, women's call for a voice and a vote, and a steady influx of Roman Catholic Irish workers for the textile mills, the white men of Massachusetts became obsessed with the founding of the United States, with naming and claiming our "founding fathers." The front pages of 1850s era newspapers regularly featured a story on what life

was like in Colonial times- and how important those colonial values were. The “Know Nothing” Party- anti immigrant and anti-Catholic- developed a strong following, so strong that “Know Nothing” party members controlled the legislature and the governorship of Massachusetts after the 1855 election. “Get me out of this liminal space, this chaos,” the white Anglo-Saxon male electorate was saying. “I don’t want to deal with all this change.

A human response. A turning-away response that gets in the way of creativity, renewal, new life. Do you recognize it? Not only in our nation- but in your own life? Have you ever faced a time of chaos and change- a liminal time- and done everything in your power to get back to a safer place? I invite you to take a moment or two in silence to consider those times, and as you feel comfortable, I invite you to take a few minutes and share your story with a neighbor (five - six minutes).

It is my belief that we need one another to help us navigate times chaos and change- and we need our faith more than ever. Our Unitarian Universalist faith tells us that revelation is not sealed, that there is always more truth to be discovered. We religious liberals pride ourselves on our open minds and open hearts, open to new ideas, new experiences, new ways of understanding what it means to be human. But we dare not forget that human beings do not easily embrace liminal times, border times, threshold times. Not at all. Bring to mind for a moment your favorite angel story- not the sweet cherub of popular culture but the Biblical angel. Angels tend to appear at those liminal, threshold moments- and what do they always say first? Be not afraid. Fear not. I know you are having this

completely human response to this moment pregnant with chaos, danger, and possibility, and I urge you to not be afraid, and to open yourself to what comes next.

Our UU faith does not traffic much in angels- except for those wearing glittery wire halos and cardboard wings in the Christmas pageant! But we need to hold people of all ages with the angel's message: Fear not. Be not afraid. Open yourself to what comes next. Our free faith, our open minded and open hearted faith, provides us with the tools and the pathway for embracing the motion and energy and chaos and danger- and the possibility- don't forget the possibility- of the present moment. But we have to take it seriously. We need to say "Fear not!" one to another, in worship and meetings, and potlucks, and small groups, and every place we gather. Welcome to the liminal place. It's where people of faith like to hang out. It's where we grow our souls. It's where God is- and where the creative possibilities of our own time abound.

Sometimes the role of our faith community is to help us respond to what comes our way- to not turn away from that which challenges, disturbs – or even terrifies – us. What challenges us can be something as simple – and as complex- as the need for new ways of doing things in our congregations- perhaps rethinking long-accepted ways of interacting and being church. What challenges or disturbs us can be something in the world outside or in our communities, such as a need to respond with compassion to disaster, or violence, and to not turn away from those who need help. What challenges us might be embracing the multiple generations and perspectives present in our faith community- and cultivating the spiritual practices of hospitality and kindness to one another and to those

who have yet to discover Unitarian Universalism. What challenges us can be anything that unsettles our way of understanding ourselves and our role in congregation, family, and community. And we need one another to say “Fear not!” when those challenges come our way.

But “Fear not!” doesn’t really work unless there is a faith foundation upon which we stand. We don’t easily let go of our fears and embrace what comes next. Remember Massachusetts and the Know Nothing party of the 1850s? Remember those Israelites in the Wilderness? They had experienced a miraculous escape from slavery- and still they were afraid. The scribe of the book of Exodus tells us:

*The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”*

What our congregations can do and must do is to offer a place where we can *practice* resilience, *practice* embracing new experiences and new revelation, *practice* being open to that which grows our souls, *practice* hanging out in those liminal spaces where we encounter the Divine, *practice* not being afraid.

Universalist religious educator (and twentieth century giant in our movement) Angus MacLean used a story from his childhood to explain something of what we religious liberals do when we are at our best, the practice of facing that which is to see what revelation comes our way. He says:

*My father sent me up from the root cellar to see about the wind. He was rechecking the winter's potatoes to remove all signs of rot and was planning on setting out some fresh nets for cod later on. Was there a steady breeze, he wanted to know. Yes, there was. "Now face it," he said, "so that the wind sings in both ears. Then tell me where your nose points to."*

In his groundbreaking book entitled *The Wind in Both Ears*, MacLean went on to explain how the liberal tradition calls us not to turn away, not to shelter ourselves from the winds of change, but rather to face it so that the wind sings in both ears.

How do we do that? How do we learn how welcome and embrace those liminal experiences and allow them to change us and transform our congregations? How do we muster the courage to let the wind whistle in both our ears? How do we help one another to fulfill the promise of our free and open faith, the promise of renewal and transformation in times and spaces of challenge and chaos and possibility? We need to build our people. We need to build one another's spiritual capacities. Our people – people of all ages- need the spiritual tools and tradition to help them build a deep faith, one that will equip them to face the world as it is, to tell the story of their own spiritual journey- and to figure what it is they are called to do to make the world a better place . One important way to build this spiritual toolkit is to engage with the stories of our tradition- and in the intersection between those stories and our own lived experience- no matter what our age. Let me explain this a bit more. (Show and explain Venn diagram- and explain that this is what Tapestry of Faith is all about).

A couple of examples here:

In the junior youth program *Heeding the Call*, youth develop skills and qualities of a justice maker. They bring their own experiences, discover the qualities and stories of justice makers from their own congregation and from our tradition, and explore together via such creative activities as a tea party about environmental justice, making an immigration web of yarn to cultivate empathy, and learning about steps to forgiveness by creating a forgiveness recipe. (Point out the ways in which this involves all three parts of the Venn diagram- and ways in which this might be a multigenerational program).

In the New UU program, participants bring their own stories of their religious past, of working for justice, of belonging to communities. They encounter stories from our UU tradition and from the local congregation, as well as having the opportunity to hear faith stories of congregational leaders of all kinds (including youth and young adults). As the program unfolds, it supports people who have newly chosen to make Unitarian Universalism their spiritual pathway.

In multigenerational programs, such as a Hebrew scriptures one that I am currently co-writing with Rev. Tom Schade, people of all ages are invited to encounter biblical text together and to retell the story dramatically in order to access ways in which their own experiences connect with those of the people in the story. In smaller groups, people of all ages explore the story in a variety of ways- discussion, art, drama, games, cooking, and crafts- before rejoining the large group to co-create a closing worship service.

If we are to build our people, strengthen them and deepen them, help them to build spiritual toolkits that will provide what they need to meet challenges of today and of tomorrow, we need to engage people in the art and practice of theological reflection- people of all ages, whether they be five, fifteen, or fifty-five or eighty five. Theological reflection that is not just engaged with words and conversation, but also through art, music, games, drama, and the creation of multigenerational worship. And we must not limit theological reflection to structured learning experiences, such as children's classes or adult programming. Remember, chaos reigns. The old models need renewal, revisioning, or sometimes just to be replaced. We are in liminal space. Let's not turn away from the opportunities that abound for creativity and imagination. Let's turn so that the wind is in both ears. Let's see what lies ahead.

If we open our hearts and minds to what is present in our congregations and in our communities, we will see opportunities abound to grow Unitarian Universalists in spirit and in practice, to strengthen our congregations, and to renew our living tradition. Sometimes opportunity for transformation arrives in an unexpected way.

A number of years ago, the parish council of a congregation I served received a request from a parent. She wanted to use some religious education space for a weekly Cub Scout meeting. Concerned about discriminatory policies articulated by the national Boy Scout organization, leaders wondered whether hosting such a group would signal support for- or at least tolerance of- those policies. After a heated discussion, the Parish council was

split as to how to respond to the request. People on all sides of the debate relied on their understanding of our Unitarian Universalist principles and values to back up their positions. The parent, thinking that she had made a routine request for space usage, was hurt and embarrassed by the debate and chose to withdraw her request.

The conversation could have ended right there. But the depth of feeling uncovered, and the ambivalence shared by many, presented a wonderful opportunity for multigenerational conversation and for growing and deepening our faith as individuals and as a community.

There were stories to tell, and it was important to create the opportunity to tell them. We convened a listening circle and specifically invited people to come and talk with one another. The listening circle had no authority to make a decision; indeed, there was no decision to make. The circle simply created a safe place, a container, for people to speak from their own experience and to truly listen to one another. What made it extraordinary was that the circle was multigenerational. The issue was one that concerned children and youth in the congregation, and they were specifically invited to be part of it. They were welcomed into a sacred circle where people of all ages shared different perspectives and confessed ambivalence. Children were able to be part of the process by which people brought their Unitarian Universalist faith to real-life dilemmas. Adults had the rare opportunity to truly listen to what children had to say, and what youth had to say. Elders learned from middle-aged people, and vice versa. There were people of different genders, ages, and geographical origin, and they had vastly different opinions about the pleasures and challenges of- *camping*.

Something extraordinary happened in that circle! There was a deep multigenerational sharing around an issue of meaning. And in the end, what could have been a debate became instead an opportunity for people to examine a question in the light of their religious values and to acknowledge that there was, indeed, more than one way for faithful people to respond to the question at hand. We were in liminal space, pushing the borders of our faith tradition and working with one another to create new understanding. We were hanging out where the Divine can be found, and where people grow in faith.

What a rare and precious thing it is for people across generations to engage together in the business of meaning making! In a culture where we are all too often separated into our generational cohorts, congregational life offers a chance to be together in authentic multigenerational community. Sometimes that means imagining a program or a worship service or a social project that will engage people of all ages and life stages. Sometimes it means just recognizing and lifting up opportunities for multigenerational story-telling and sharing that arise organically in the life of the congregation. I have witnessed adults and youth as young as twelve and thirteen speaking together from their hearts and from their faith about the moral issues presented by the flooding and destruction in New Orleans, by the inauguration of the country's first African American president, and by concerns regarding a local newspaper attack upon the fledgling Gay Straight Alliance at the local high school. I have been privileged to watch as people across generations experienced the wonder of being alive on this earth- gazing at stars through a telescope, singing together outside the window of someone recovering from surgery, hiking through a muddy bog, playing peekaboo with an infant. Liminal spaces, all. Threshold spaces,

border spaces. Places where there can be risk and danger, but places where growth is possible.

Danger and risk? You might say. Playing with an infant? Hiking in the bog? Singing together outside a window? It is my contention that, yes, there is danger and risk in building intentional multigenerational communities, and that it is accompanied by possibility, by creativity, by the spark of something divine. I believe that to bring generations in true contact with one another is an excellent way to create liminal space, rather than waiting for it to come to you.

Let's go back to evolutionary biology for a moment, to that primordial soup. In our early evolution, things took a very long time to happen- thousands of millions of years. Connections and linkages happened between hydrogen and oxygen and between carbon molecules- and our existence on earth is living proof that those connections were viable. But how many failed connections were there along the way? How many potential beginnings for life were there that did not yield just the right combination? We will never know. Later on, as life began to evolve and become more complex – and colonies of cells evolved in creatures and plants, the number and variety of expressions of the life force exploded. But those new expressions of life always came about on the edges or the margins- in liminal space. Darwin's theory of evolution tells us that- that natural selection was fraught with risk and danger for individual creatures, but offered a chance for renewal and survival for life in the broadest sense. A creature that was well adapted to its surroundings was well equipped to pass on its genes, and did just that. It was

creatures on the margins, threatened by their environment, that had a tougher time. It was there that evolution happened. A genetic change or mutation might make an individual creature better able to function in its environment, so the offspring carrying that mutation had a better chance of surviving, and passing on their genetic inheritance. Think of Darwin's finches- all of the fourteen or fifteen different species Darwin identified on the Galapagos Islands, each with a bill uniquely suited to eating the particular kind of seed most available to it. But those finches would not have evolved had life in the Galapagos offered no challenge and no risk.

A little side track here. I want to note that some of our forbears looked at this evolutionary inheritance and drew the wrong lesson from it. As detailed in Mark Harris' extraordinary little book, *Elite*, some of our forbears leapt to the conclusion that social Darwinism, survival of the fittest in society, was in line with our evolutionary inheritance. It led them to support eugenics, among other horribly mistaken notions. Along with misunderstanding the nature of a social structures that granted privileges to some and denied them to others, they missed the central wisdom lesson of evolutionary biology- that what is most important happens on the margins. That the sources of renewal, change, transformation- are always on the edges, in the liminal spaces, in the places where there is danger, risk, and chaos. That's where what is important happens- and we must never forget that. The voices on the margins are MOST vital to the health and well-being of our society and our faith community. To get ourselves into liminal spaces- if we are not already there- we need to develop the humility to listen to voices of those on the margins of our congregations and of our society. That might include

children and youth, elders, people of color, those with physical, cognitive, and emotional disabilities, those who are struggling economically, those who are in pain. It is in those voices that we encounter the burning bush, the wilderness journey, the wonder of primordial soup, the wind in both ears.

So, what I'm saying is that we need to intentionally create liminal spaces, spaces on the margins and at the borders. Places to invite creativity, imagination, chaos, innovation, renewal – and God- in. And an important way to do that is to intentionally create opportunities for building relationships where people bring different perspectives and different experiences and learn to listen to- and perhaps be changed by- one another. Create MULTI opportunities- multigenerational and multicultural. Bring our own experiences to help us define our Unitarian Universalist faith, of course. But also pay attention to voices from the margins, and to the wisdom at the margins of stories from the sources of our living tradition. (Back to that theological reflection Venn diagram!)

How do we move from noticing and supporting those moments of multigenerational story telling that organically present themselves – like the conversation about Boy Scouts- to intentionally creating conditions that encourage those moments to happen? How do we share wonder and awe across generations and cultures? How do we tell our stories to one another? How do we treat one another as fellow travelers on a faith journey? How do we open wide the doors of our congregations to welcome more people, more perspectives, more stories?

Intentionally creating conditions for listening to voices from the margins is what the Tapestry of Faith program *Building the World We Dream About* is all about. The program is deep and requires a couple of years for a congregation to really engage with it. In the program, people begin by telling their own stories and by practicing the art of deep listening so that they might truly hear the stories of others, especially Unitarian Universalists who identify as people of color. The program pushes people into liminal space as it invites them to view their own lives by examining the role privilege has played for them. It deliberately creates a space which participants perceive to be risky and urges them not to turn away. The “Fear Not!” angel comes in the form of an intentional process that creates a way for people to stay in the room with one another and not to turn away (remember those Israelites in the wilderness who wanted to go back to safety?) It also offers practice with cultural competency skills that invite participants over time to engage with people on the margins, not only in the congregations, but in the broader community. It is a program that invites spiritual growth and deepening, and pushes us to where we need to be. A toolkit for Building the World We Dream About. And an added bonus: We live in a world where the millennial generation- those born since 1980- view multiracial, multiethnic, multicultural communities as the norm – and want no part of monocultural institutions and communities, so Building the World We Dream About is an important way of hearing the voices of younger people as well as the voices of people of color.

Although all of the Tapestry of Faith programs for children, youth, adults, and multigenerational groups do offer ways to put people in touch with voices and

perspectives outside of their own experience, you don't need a particular curriculum to create those liminal, borderland spaces in congregational life. You can use published curricula as a resource, but what is really needed is a mindset- a way of thinking about congregational life and about growth that keeps the related practices of creating liminal spaces, listening to voices from the margins, and engaging multiple perspectives – multigenerational, multicultural, and I'm going to add theologically multi-lingual to the multi list- a mindset that keeps those practices at the center of congregational life. How do we remake our congregations so that they are incubators for faith development?

First, think multigenerational. Always. Does your congregation include elders, and baby Boomers, and Gen Xers and young adults, and youth and children? Are they all part of the life of the congregation? Are your children and youth an integral part of your spiritual community, viewed as people with spiritual lives and with agency of their own? Do you view them as people with moral, ethical, and spiritual challenges and gifts *right now*, rather than adults-in-waiting who are receiving moral lessons to be applied at some future date? Does your community worship service make room for the voices of people representing several generations? Does it deepen the faith of all those present- no matter what their age?

OK. A pet peeve here. The usual pattern for children's participation in community worship is that they are present for some kind of story a few Sundays a month, with the occasional "intergenerational" service thrown in. The pattern of inviting children forward for a story that is just another way of getting in something that pertains to the

sermon (which children will not be present for) does not honor them as spiritual beings. The whole service might be crafted to include that story- but does the children's time in worship have coherence? Does it engage them in theological reflection? Does their experience even have a beginning, a middle and an end? Does it invite them into liminal space?

On the other hand, intergenerational worship. Does the way your congregation does intergenerational worship have coherence for those who are neither children nor parents? Does it offer depth and spiritual growth for those who are not actively parenting children? Does it invite them into liminal space? It certainly can do that, because there are opportunities there for listening to voices at the margins- but does it? Are children and adults viewed as fellow travelers on a spiritual path, with opportunities to help one another experience the spiritual growth and renewal that is possible in liminal spaces? To create intergenerational worship that does this requires care, attention, and time- and a mindset that looks to create liminal spaces and opportunities for the presence of transformation and renewal, creativity- and God (if you find that language important or useful.) Because it requires so much care and attention, creation of multigenerational worship might be the most important thing your congregation does, especially if your congregation is small in size. Multigenerational worship done well might be the primary means you have of supporting spiritual growth in people of all ages. It takes energy and people power to offer an RE program and a worship service on Sunday. If your people resources are limited, put them into multigenerational worship.

Perhaps at this point you are thinking of all the risks, dangers, and chaos that might ensue if we were to create truly multigenerational communities. And the possibilities. What are they- let's name them out loud. Because of the technology here, I'm going to invite you to turn to three or four neighbors and talk for ten minutes about what you see as the risks and the possibilities of multigenerational communities. And then, I invite your little group to write down one risk and one possibility and pass it forward so someone can read the lists aloud (allow 10 minutes or so- then five for reading the lists). [*Note: We skipped this activity because of time*].

So let's be fearless in facing the risks and moving into the chaos- in search of all of those possibilities for transformation and renewal. Let's make it a spiritual practice in our congregations to let the wind whistle in both our ears. Our congregations can and should be counter-cultural in bringing together people across generations for worship, for social justice work, for community activities, and for theological reflection. Today's families are scattered, with each person in their age-appropriate settings, doing their own age-appropriate special interest activities. It is a big deal for children to have genuine conversations and relationships with elders and adults who are not their parents or teachers. It is big deal to be known and to have a name. I remember a time a number of years ago when there was a series of teen suicide attempts, some successful, in the town where the congregation I served was located. I invited all the teens and all their parents to come to church for a conversation and a special worship service. We had a Samaritans guest there as well. What became clear to me as the morning unfolded was that while the school had had special programs for middle schoolers and high schoolers and special

community meetings for distraught parents, *no one* had invited the youth and their parents to talk together, to talk to each other. My eyes filled as I heard youth express their fears and concerns for themselves and their friends, and I wept as one dad moved to the front of the room, lit a candle, and said, “I love you all and I just want you to be safe.”

Think Multi, multi, multi. Multigenerational. Multicultural. Theologically multilingual. Embrace chaos. Embrace liminal spaces. Keep theological reflection and spiritual growth at the very center. Be bold as we carry forward that of our faith which is timeless, which is precious, and create new systems and new containers for people to grow in faith and act from that faith to bring more love, more justice, more beauty, and more kindness into the world. It is holy and sacred work that calls out for our minds, hearts, hands, and spirits – may we together have the courage to meet the challenge.