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Together

Every Sunday morning we say our mission, values and covenant. Several years ago these words were honed in a congregation-wide process. Then they were adopted by a vote of all us who were members.

The words are not perfect for all of us as individuals. That would be impossible. But they are a truthful expression of all of us as a religious community.

Still, if we mouth the words by rote without reflection, they become vacuous, like when I was in first grade reciting the pledge of allegiance without understanding “allegiance,” “republic” or “indivisible.”

So this morning, as we begin a new church year, let’s reflect on our mission.

To do this let’s consider an alternative mission statement: “I pull myself together to be what I want to be and get some respite from the world.”

Let’s read these words together – they’re in your order of service. As we say them, see what they evoke in you:

*I pull myself together...
to be what I want to be...
and get some respite from the world.*

What strikes you about this version?

...

Pull Myself Together

I wrote it as a sympathetic opposite of our mission statement. There is probably some truth in the opposite of anything we say.

To pull ourselves together is not a bad thing. Our lives get scattered with work, family, community, the world and shuffling from event to event. Taking responsibility to pull ourselves together is good. I meditate by myself for an hour or so every morning. I go off for several weeks a year to meditate alone. I value this time as a way of pulling myself together.

And I also value community. I value a place where we can be in connection with one another even when we are stressed, grumpy or coming apart at the seams. One of the great gifts we can give each other as fellow humans is to truly welcome one another when we are feeling shaky or don’t have ourselves together.

So our actual mission statement begins “We come together” with no pre-conditions. “Come as you are,” is more important than “Come as you think you should be” or “Come as you think we think you ought to be.” And the verb is “come.” The most important part is walking in the door: simply getting ourselves here. Whomever you are and whatever is going on in your life, you are welcome.

We are not perfect in this welcome. A mission statement is not a goal we can achieve. It’s a direction we want to travel. It says what we aspire to be – our deepest, most honest intentions. And these intentions start with all of us coming together as we truly are.

To Be What I Want

The second phrase of the alternative mission is “to be what I want to be.”

Our country’s mythology values rugged individual and the self-made man [sic]. Many Unitarian Universalists value doing their own thing, believing what they want to believe and being who they want to be.

In fact, one of the most common misunderstandings of Unitarian Universalism is the belief that we can be what we want to be.

All my life I’ve wanted to be able to fly. I would like to be a Kung Fu master, poet laureate, astronaut and billionaire. But I am none of these and never will be – probably.

Unitarian Universalism does not put its faith in what we want. That’s narcissism. That’s ego driven compulsion.

Unitarian Universalism puts its faith in what we already are deep inside. It puts its faith in the goodness and wellbeing that is already with us. It puts its faith in discovering these hidden depths.

So the second line of our mission statement is not “be what we want to be.” It is “deepen our lives.” One of our primary purposes is to help one another deepen. Sometimes this means comforting and supporting each other. Sometimes it means mirroring back what we see reflected in each other – we can be the last ones to recognize our own gifts. Sometimes it means challenging each other – “that doesn’t resonate for me.”

It does not mean telling one another who we should be or who we are. But it does mean supporting one another in mutual journeys of discovery. As T. S. Elliot put it:

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

Respite from the World

The third phrase of the alternative mission is “get some respite from the world.” We all need that, don’t we?

Several years ago some people scanned thousands of Hollywood scripts to find the most common phrases. Want to guess what the most used phrase was? ...

The line most common in movies is, “Let’s get out of here.” Part of the American tradition is getting away, finding a new place to begin again: “Go west, young man. Get out of here.”

We live on the West coast so “go west” poses difficulties for us. But even on the East Coast, the interdependent web means we can’t really get away. We’re all in this together.

Unitarian Universalism has never been about getting away from the world. We’re not looking for salvation in the next life. We’re looking for doing the best possible with this life.

So instead of getting respite from the world, our actual mission statement says, “be a force for healing in the world.”

Notice that this is the third line. First we come together – wounds and all. We find ways to comfort and support one another. Then we help one another stretch and grow and deepen. Then we take it back out to the larger world.

Something deeply human in us all wants to help. We aren’t complete unless we are playing our part.

Several years ago, an earlier version of our mission said, “We come together

to deepen our lives and heal the world.” It received a majority vote of the congregation amongst several alternatives. But it was only a 60 or 65% majority. That felt a little tepid for a mission statement.

So we kept talking. People expressed two hesitations. One was that “healing the world” seemed halfhearted for our activists. The other hesitation was it seemed arrogant – as if we had the power to heal the world. Our deeper aspiration is doing what we can to be a force for change. We realize we aren’t in charge. Still we want to play our part.

So the next year we offered the phrase, “be a force for healing,” and it got overwhelming support from the congregation.

So, while there is some truth in wanting to “pull ourselves together to be what we want to be and get some respite from the world,” a deeper, truer, core aspiration is “we come together to deepen our lives and be a force for healing in the world.”

Embodied Aspiration

It’s not enough to just think these words. So let’s embody them with some simple gestures.

First let’s see how we might embody the alternative mission statement. Try this:

I pull myself together...
< Cross arms and pull arms >

to be what I want to be...
<One fist on hip. On hand points to chest >

and get some respite from the world.
<One hand pillows head. Other holds off the world >

It feels a little claustrophobic and contracted.

Now let’s embody our mission statement. Some of you know these motions. They are new to others. We’ll do them several times saying the words, then do them silently or singing “alleluia.”

We come together...
< Arms swing up and out into wide embrace >

... to deepen our lives ...
<Palms press together in front of heart >

... and be a force ...
<Arms swing up and out as fists form and come down by the side to take a powerful stand >

... for healing in the world.
<Hands come up through heart center and fold out to reach out open handed into the world >



*Ingathering Water
Ceremony:
Together*

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