

Learnings From Sabbatical – Part 1
UU Church of Vancouver
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Reflection on the Theme by Deborah Willoughby

I'm happy to be here to welcome Rev. Kathryn back from her sabbatical. And I'm so glad she was able to take the time for renewal. It's a powerful concept: renewal.

I worked for newspapers for decades and then at a social services agency for 13 years. And I had a side gig as a proofreader for those 13 years. My work was meaningful, and I enjoyed it. A boss once referred to me as a workhorse, which was a fair assessment.

When the pandemic began, my workplace expanded to serve as a COVID helpline. We more than doubled our staff, and shifted to a remote model for hiring, training and operations. It was challenging, in a good way, to provide an essential service during the pandemic. But, like many of my coworkers, I was working all the time, for months.

As HR manager, I talked to people about self care. Reminded them about the toll of stress and burnout. I told myself that I was being mindful and wouldn't experience burnout because, well, I don't know why I thought I was immune.

By the summer of 2021, I was drained. My dad had died the previous winter, and I was planning a memorial service in my California hometown. I had done the same after my mother and brother died a few years earlier, but the pandemic made everything so much more difficult. I finally was able to go south for the memorial service. I sold my parents' cabin in a remote town up in the hills, with the closing occurring on a day when half of the town was under an evacuation order because of wildfires. And I finalized the purchase of a house here in

Vancouver and moved in, despite record hot weather. That all occurred over the course of nine days in August.

Weeks passed, and I continued to drown in work. One day a coworker I was close with called in because she, her spouse, and their young children all had Covid. I offered to drop off groceries; she couldn't focus well enough to put together a shopping list. As I pulled into the grocery store parking lot, my mind was filled with work that had to be done that day, as well as what I should take to my coworker. Orange juice? Dark roast coffee? What cereal do the kids eat? Should I buy milk? Skim, 1%, 2%, 4%, soy, almond, oat? And then I drove into a parked car. I felt like destiny was tapping on my shoulder. Hmmm.

Not long after that, I was feeling disengaged during a zoom meeting at work. I just kinda wandered over to the social security website. And I found myself filling out my application during the meeting. I hadn't been planning to retire at age 63, but once I started the process, I just knew it was right. And I absolutely love being retired.

I never had a sabbatical, but I deeply felt the need for renewal. I needed rest, exploration, time with my loved ones, the luxury of play and unplanned experiences. I'm serving my community in different ways now while also paying a lot of attention to how I fill my days.

I recognize the incredible privilege of having time off work to focus on personal well being. I wish everyone had the opportunity for freedom, rest and growth through sabbaticals, long vacations and retirement. And I'm grateful that our congregation supports, and benefits from, our minister's time for renewal.

Learnings from Sabbatical – Part 1 © Rev. Kathryn Bert

Here in reverence now we gather. Thank you, choir, for that song, for welcoming me back, for calling us on. It is so good to be back with you all. Thank you for the gift of this sabbatical and more importantly, thank you for welcoming back.

I was in a little bit of a panic a week ago yesterday when I realized I'd have to preach this morning and I had only done that once in the last five months! What was I going to say? I knew I wanted to talk about my learnings – or my remembering – from sabbatical, but I didn't know how to begin. I didn't know how to begin because I haven't been with you for the last five months- I hardly know what's going on here. And I remembered how hard it was to preach when I first began as your minister. I didn't know what your concerns were, where your heart was, or your theology. I had learned to preach in the context of a relationship with a congregation and absent the development of that relationship, I didn't know what to say. I felt like I was starting all over again. Only this time, I've had a sabbatical. When I began with you in 2017, I didn't get a break. I went directly from saying farewell to a congregation I loved, to moving across the country, living with cousins while seeking housing, breaking my wrist at a family reunion, and then the day I began this job, was the day we moved into our new home. It was a lot and it was stressful. This time, as I begin working with you again, I've had a good rest.

So, because I realized I missed you and didn't know what was going on here, I spent that Saturday listening to recent worship services that are recorded online. If you didn't know you can listen to the sermons online, you should know that. Poke around on our church website to find that function. Anyway, I listened to reflections by the Worship Associates, sermons by ministers, including our former intern, Jennifer, and lay people. It helped ground me a bit in what has been going on here, so that I could then share with you what has been going on with me while I've been away.

I was particularly struck by the Very Hungry Caterpillar metaphor that Rev. Monica Jacobson Tennison used over Memorial Day weekend when she talked about change. You know, the Eric Carle children's book about the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly? She quoted

humorist Shannon Curtin who wrote, “I would like to check myself into The Very Hungry Caterpillar clinic where you eat your feelings for 6 days, have a nice salad cleanse, take a two-week nap, and then emerge both beautiful and newly skilled.” That quote struck me because it sort of reminds me of what I hoped sabbatical would be. I already knew how to eat my feelings, so I started with the salad cleanse. If you were unfortunate enough to have asked me in February what I would be doing on sabbatical, I probably replied that I planned to sleep the entire month of March. I virtually did. And I do think I fully intended to emerge both beautiful and newly skilled! But I mostly related to her discussion of what really happens to the caterpillar as she becomes a butterfly – that liquification and goop guided by imaginal cells. And Rev. Monica’s statement that living in this country at this time can feel – well liquid and goopy before the imaginal cells begin reassembly. I love that image and the accuracy of the metaphor.

In fact, that metaphor describes why it was so hard to explain how church works to an intern last year. Because church has seemed so liquid and goopy, when Jennifer would ask me how one does X, Y, or Z at church, I would inevitably reply, well, I know how you did that before the pandemic, but now I’m not sure how X, Y, or Z is done at church anymore. The pandemic liquified our understanding of church and the imaginal cells had not yet begun reassembly.

So, suffice it to say, that when I left on sabbatical March 1 of this year, I felt thoroughly liquified and goopy. I knew I needed to change, but I didn’t know what those changes were or how I was going to find those imaginal cells to get going. I only knew that I needed rest, so I did begin with a lot of sleeping. Though I was joking about sleeping the entire month of March, it is not a joke that sleep deprivation raises our risk of chronic health problems. It can affect how we think, react, work, learn, and get along with others. It affects our heart, circulatory system, metabolism, respiratory and immune systems. I knew that sleep was key to my recovery – and yes, I’ve been recovering from a stressful period of leadership during liquified times. In fact, in the one sermon I did preach in the last five months, I said that the way I would now frame what

it is we do together – that is, what church is all about – is that we work toward healing a traumatized people and world.

I told the Lansing congregation where I returned to preach over Memorial day weekend that:

“I think we are all due some congratulations for surviving quite a bit of change these last several years. Our colleagues, religious professionals of all sorts, are retiring in unprecedented numbers and congregations are shrinking – and we are still here. We have survived – the closing of our doors, the leap into online ministry and the digital age, the re-opening, and dual platform ministry. We are here. Exhausted, but still here. We are resilient, and I believe we should be proud of that resiliency. For what we do together matters.

“I have never been as sure about that statement as I am now, following the shutdown and reopening, in the midst of this climate crisis and racial reckoning, as our democracy is under constant attack. What we do here matters. The way I would now frame what it is we do together is that we work toward healing a traumatized people and world.”

And so much of what I was focused on during my sabbatical was healing my own traumatization. “Physician, heal thyself.” Alexis almost quoted the Bible last week when they said, “Heal yourself to heal the world.” They said, “taking the time to learn about my own history, my own trauma – both personal and generational – and my biases helped me understand how the unexamined and unhealed parts of myself affect my interactions with others.” One of the books I read along my healing journey was *The Myth of Normal* by Gabor Maté in which he talks about getting kicked out of his own healing retreat by the shamans he hired to facilitate it who noted appropriately that he was stressed out and traumatized and absorbing the trauma of others. Only when we take good care of ourselves, can we successfully support the healing of others.

Which takes me back to the gift of this sabbatical and the reading this morning. “The more something is shared the greater its value becomes” writes Robin Wall Kimmerer. “Indigenous people understood the value of the gift to be based in reciprocity and would be affronted if the gifts did not circulate back to them.” My hope is that the gift you shared with me will circulate back into this community. Someone asked me recently what the difference between a sabbatical and a vacation is, and I’m afraid my answer wasn’t very articulate. But I’ve been thinking about the question. The term vacation comes from the root, vacate or the Latin root unoccupied – and came to us when wealthy families in New York talked about “vacating” their city homes for their lakeside summer retreats –the term vacation replacing the British term, “holiday.” In the 2006 movie, *The Holiday*, which is a romantic comedy built on the premise of going on vacation or holiday - one of the leading ladies – I’m not sure which – talks about “vacating her life” – that that is what you are supposed to do on a vacation. And that makes sense – we get away from the routines of our normal life and try something different. We leave the confines and boundaries of the everyday and try something new. And there was a little of that on sabbatical, but instead of vacating my normal life, sabbatical was a time for me to re-imagine how I inhabit my normal life, including my work. So while I didn’t spend time worrying about the congregation, I did think a lot about congregational life and how it is we help heal the world, or how we can help heal the world. Which brings me back to relationships and Alexis’ reflection from last week. Not only did taking the time to learn about their own history and trauma help them understand parts of themselves, but it helped them understand their dad and his trauma and biases. And it explains why I had a hard time beginning to write this sermon, as I had absented myself from this relationship for the last five months. [photo of me leaving the sanctuary]

I gave my theology a name in seminary – an embodied theology of relation. Because we are related. Relationships matter. We don’t exist in isolation. We exist in relationship with other beings. I don’t know what to preach if I’m not in relationship with a congregation.

But since I did spend part of last Saturday listening to what's been going on for you, let me tell you that the highlight of my last five months had to be attending the wedding of my son [photo of a wedding] as he took on a whole new "bundle of responsibilities." Now, don't get me wrong, I am not suggesting that his new responsibilities are any greater than his new wife's – as they were joined in the covenant of marriage, they both increased their bundle of responsibilities. [photo of Theo and Marie] Love is a gift, and "the currency of a gift economy," writes Robin Wall Kimmerer, is reciprocity. "The essence of the gift is that it creates a set of relationships." [photo of Marie's family at wedding] Theo now has this new set of relationships, as does Marie: [photo of Theo's family]

What our reading this morning highlights is that with relationships, come responsibilities, and that is a good thing. Love is a gift, and "the currency of a gift economy," writes Robin Wall Kimmerer, is reciprocal relationships. Her lesson in this aspect of the differences between indigenous culture and colonial culture reminds me why nurturing church community and creating the beloved community, is so hard for us. [photo of a round, empty table]

We are steeped in notions of private property, and thus attend to our "bundle of rights" more than our "bundle of responsibilities". We forget that we belong to one another and must nurture our relationships as we nurture our own wellbeing. They are interrelated – our wellbeing is tied to the wellbeing of others, and as we heal ourselves, we improve our relationships. In a different part of the book, Robin Wall Kimmerer says, "We are showered everyday with gifts, but they are not meant for us to keep. Their life is in their movement, the inhale and the exhale of our shared breath. Our work and our joy is to pass along the gift and to trust that what we put into the universe will always come back."

It's messy work. To trust that what we put out there will come back can be difficult, can be a hard road to follow, especially in these goopy, liquified times. [strange photo of liquid being poured into a glass] While the liquification make the roads muddy and rough, we can become the imaginal cells that take the journey to help transform and heal the world. (Notice how this

image resembles a liquid chalice?) I see in it those imaginal cells – us- we who persist, multiply, and connect with each other.

That's what I've been pondering the last five months, and I'll share more with you as time goes on. But for now, will you join me in singing?