

Changing Lens

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
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Reflection on the Theme by Deborah Willoughby

This month we are thinking about vision, which is a topic that has always interested me. How do we envision our life's journey? I think there may be people—and maybe you're one of them—who envisioned a plan for their lives, set a series of goals, and followed a straight path to where they wanted to be.

Maybe it's possible. If you are a student of history, or family systems theory, you know that there are factors that influence actions we tend to think were our own unique choices. But there's also serendipity.

I don't know if I ever had much of a life plan, but I certainly have meandered quite a lot. The Grateful Dead had a message for me in a record that I've been listening to for the past 50 or so years. "Walk out of any doorway," they sang in "Box of Rain." "Maybe you'll find direction around some corner where it's been waiting to meet you." Sometimes, I have found direction around unexpected corners.

When I was 24 and living in my California hometown, I felt like it was time to see the world. A friend and I were ready to seek our fortune, but where? San Francisco was too close, New York was too big, Los Angeles had the Dodgers. But one of my favorite books was *A Confederacy of Dunces*, which is set in New Orleans. We had just gone to hear a zydeco band. So, based on those factors, we quit our jobs, loaded up my Ford Fiesta, and moved to New Orleans. Many adventures ensued.

Being open to new directions has brought me joy in less dramatic ways, too. One day in maybe 2009 or so, I was asked to coordinate this church's Change for the World program with Donna Shaver. We didn't know each other, but we hit it off immediately, and we had a delightful and meaningful decade in that role. During that time, I attended a Religious Education Committee meeting to share information about a Change for the World project. It was a warm and welcoming group, and we had a good conversation. When I was done, someone said, "You don't have to leave." Soon, I was a member of that committee too.

I'm not saying that volunteering for a church committee will change your life—or that it's always a joy—but I do treasure all of those friendships. You really never know when you're going to go around some corner where good things are waiting to meet you.

Changing Lens© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

Vision is our theme this month, which we defined last week as the ability to make plans with imagination and wisdom. But I don't know about you, but I need to be in a good place emotionally in order to make plans with imagination and wisdom. Sometimes, I'm lucky to just get through the day.

*Life is short and the world
is at least half terrible, and for every kind
stranger, there is one who would break you,
though I keep this from my children,* writes Maggie Smith.

And it's true, of course. The world is at least half terrible, if we choose to pay attention to the tragedies unfolding around us, wars, poverty, environmental crises, racial violence and homophobia and transphobia, hunger, homelessness, disease, isolation and loneliness – once we get going, the list is rather endless, isn't it? The world is at least half terrible.

Sometimes, the knowledge that the world is at least half terrible, discourages, disheartens, makes us less brave. And sometimes, the knowledge that the world is at least half terrible, exposes the good bones and helps us envision the possibilities it offers. This place could be beautiful, right? You could make this place beautiful.

I wanted to know why. Why is it that the same information, the same story can elicit in us at different times such different responses? And how do we get to the place where we can envision the possibilities rather than wallow in the discouragement?

Like so many, I got curious about our human response to trauma when we were experiencing this global pandemic of covid 19 – especially at the beginning when so much was unclear and changing constantly, and then the racial reckoning and worldwide response to the murder of George Floyd. Books such as *The Body Keeps the Score* and *My Grandmother's Hands* were exploring our human response to trauma, but it wasn't until I read Deb Dana's article from which our reading was taken and looked at some of her books, that I began to appreciate the importance of this work.

Our lens change – the way we view the world. The situation might remain the same, but our perspective changes, causing us to see new things. Changing lens can even help us make plans with imagination and wisdom.

Deb Dana, from whom we took the reading this morning, has been translating the polyvagal theory by Dr. Stephen Porges, into everyday language so that non-scientists can understand his work. So you understand why it needs to be translated, let me just read you the first sentence of the abstract of one of his articles on the polyvagal theory.

It begins: *The polyvagal theory describes an autonomic nervous system that is influenced by the central nervous system, sensitive to afferent influences, characterized by an adaptive reactivity dependent on the phylogeny of the neural circuits, and interactive with source nuclei in the brainstem regulating the striated muscles of the face and head.* That's just the first sentence.

I'm grateful for the translations of this theory by authors such as Deb Dana, Resmaa Menakem, and Bessel Van Der Kolk, because I'm not sure otherwise I would be able to slog through the scientific terminology to understand how this impacts me at all. But it does. Greatly. As it impacts you and others of our species.

This theory posits a biological hierarchy of human response in experience. I like that Dana calls the autonomic nervous system our "personal surveillance system," protecting us by sensing safety and risk. What's so mysterious is that this listening happens below our awareness, like the breathing and

heartrate. And just like both those automatic systems, we can learn to become aware of this hierarchy of response. To become aware of it is the first step toward learning to control our response.

The oldest pathway of response is called the dorsal vagal pathway – and I find these terms hard to keep straight - but it is the immobilization that happens when we shut down to survive. If you've ever suffered from depression, you understand this state.

Next to develop is the mobilized sympathetic nervous system – this is that warning system that tell us that there is danger – we are mobilized to fight or flee, our heart rate speeds up and breath is short and shallow. We're ready to take action! And, as I've always told myself, the most anxious among us survived – because we saw the danger and avoided it. But the legacy, of course, is ongoing anxiety.

Newest part of our autonomic nervous system to develop is the social engagement system – the ventral vagal pathway of the parasympathetic branch. This state is when our heart rate is regulated, our breath is full, we can engage fully with others and tune out distractions. We see the big picture – aha, this is where Vision happens. In the other two states, our bodies are in such a protective state that we can't envision something beautiful.

Clearly, we'd all like to live with our eyes open for joy, in this place where we can engage fully with others and feel calm and attentive, alert and open. But the truth is our emotional state is changing throughout the day and throughout our lives. We move up and down the autonomic ladder – that comfortable, social ventral vagal state, to the sympathetic state of alertness and readiness for danger, down to the dorsal vagal state of depression and isolation, and up again, hopefully. Of course, what happened for many in the pandemic, was that the trip down the ladder became habitual and moving up to the social, calm state was harder – without interacting with others who can help us regulate our heartrate and breath, and without social fun.

As a society, it feels that we are in a state of constant reactivity. This was happening before. In fact, when I first began as your minister, the board of this church was reading a book entitled *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times* by congregational consultant Peter Steinke. So, we knew society was getting anxious over all in 2017, well 2006 is when Steinke wrote the book. But by 2017, more of us understood the regression society was undergoing, with the election of Donald Trump. I'm not going to apologize for that statement or walk it back. I had, along with many, underestimated his power of influence. To my embarrassment, I compared him in a sermon in January of 2016 to a figure that only Mark Twain could invent, never seriously believing he could be elected. We know better now. And I am convinced this is due to the anxious times that Peter Steinke was referring to in 2006 - this trip down the autonomic ladder into that sympathetic state of alertness and danger. Trumps' misogyny and racism tapped into a deep fear that many people had that the danger was from those "not like them." His outrageous statements – beloved by those who liked that he didn't try to be politically correct or even polite. Those statements allowed for avowed racists and white supremacists to come out into the open such that Derek Chauvin thought he could get away with murder and if it hadn't been for Darnella Frazier filming the killing, he might have.

Here's what's important to understand about our bodies and this polyvagal theory. Our first thoughts come through our body. Our heart rate quickens and then we try to figure out why. Our minds find a story that makes sense, and if it fits what we're feeling, we think it's true. It's a simple as that, and as scary as that. Our minds find a story that makes sense, and if it fits what we're feeling, we think it's true.

So, in order to create a vision, it is important that our bodies are in that ventral vagal safe and social state.

This is where the song I Will Survive by Gloria Gaynor comes in. I dance to it in my Zumba class, so it's been on my mind. But it has this beautiful emotional arc which describes these states we all pass through, sometimes in a single day:

*At first I was afraid, I was petrified
Kept thinking I could never live without you by my side*

That describes the shut-down, immobilized parasympathetic dorsal vagal state. Then, she sings:

*But then I spent so many nights thinking how you did me wrong
And I grew strong
And I learned how to get along*

She's moving up the ladder – activated, in that mobilized sympathetic state, singing

*Go on now, go, walk out the door
Just turn around now
'Cause you're not welcome anymore*

Taking action still in that sympathetic state until she reaches:

*I've got all my life to live
And I've got all my love to give and I'll survive
I will survive
I will survive*

She gets to that safe and social state saying *As long as I know how to love, I know I'll stay alive.*

It's really hard to love when we're looking over our shoulder for trouble, or when we're immobilized completely and just trying to take our next breath. It's really hard to envision a better future in those states as well.

I was so glad Elise shared her story of growing up in a UU church, and especially her discovery of its flaws and messiness. I knew I wanted to become a minister in high school, but I didn't do it, because I knew how flawed and messy UU congregations could get, having parents who were founding members and lay leaders in the congregations I attended. I didn't think I had the skills to deal with the messiness, and so put off my dream of becoming a minister until I was mired in conflict in a school setting as a teacher and realized I was already dealing with another flawed system.

I have a colleague who tells all the new members of her church that they don't really become full members of the community until after they've first been disappointed. Because churches are human communities, with the flaws and messiness that come with being human. And our membership into a community tends to happen when re-enter the community after our first disappointment, after decide to engage and, to quote the children's affirmation, "make the world a better place."

Sometimes the flaws and messiness, the anxiety and reactivity, in a human community, can prevent it from seeing a greater Vision. We react instead of envision. We respond instead of create.

One of the reasons we come to church is to feel social and safe, to regulate our heartrate, sing together which requires breathing together, and connect to the wider world and the people in it. When we come to worship God, I hear that language as being about the connection to things greater than our individual concerns. We come to connect, and when church is at its best, it can provide that feeling and connect us to something greater, by whatever name.

This is the stuff of religion. Even this polyvagal theory. It is no wonder Resmaa Menakam calls the vagus nerve, the soul nerve. Because it gets to the essence of our being.

This need to connect – whether it be to the soul nerve, with other people, or God, this need is at its greatest even as church attendance overall is on the decline. (not this church, I mean church in general) I had an experience over the summer. I was still on sabbatical, and instead of watching church online, I went to Orange Theory – it’s an exercise class. I do this multiple times a week, but had never gone on a Sunday. The class was packed. There were more people and more young people in the class than I had ever seen. I thought – that’s where all the young people are on Sunday mornings! And do you know what you do at Orange Theory? You watch your heart rate go up as you row or run (or power walk), and notice it go down as you rest. You listen to music that regulates the timing of your movements, and you share the experience with other people. I totally understand why people who don’t go to church would go to Orange Theory on Sunday mornings. I’m sad, of course, that many of them don’t find church where we can go deeper with one another, as Deborah described in her reflection, but I’m glad they have something.

Because our society, our world, needs oxygen, to use the airline metaphor.

If there is a loss of cabin pressure, please place the oxygen mask over your own face before assisting others.

Some claim this is as a good metaphor for self-care, and others find it lacking. Those who don’t like it object because by the time we put on the oxygen mask in the airplane the emergency has taken place. We need to take care of ourselves before the crisis begins. I got curious as I read all this and looked up why a cabin might lose pressure in the first place, and read this:

There are various reasons an aircraft might experience depressurization, including structural malfunctions to windows, doors or sealed pressure vessels, as well as incorrectly activating the cabin's pressurization controls or structural malfunctions to the aircraft's overall system.

And I just think about all the structural malfunctions in our society and the incorrect activation of controls. The metaphor holds.

We need more than just oxygen, of course. We need vision. And in order to have a vision, we need to regulate our systems so that we are open to visioning, open to the view, to the prospect, to making plans with imagination and wisdom. Whether our vision is to make the world a better place, heal the structural malfunctions of society, activate the correct controls, heal the world (tikkun olam), or build the beloved community, it begins with each one of us. We need each other to begin.

Harry Belafonte first performed our next hymn when he appeared as the guest host of the Muppet Show in 1977. In his introduction to it, Belafonte said: " I discovered that song in Africa. I was in a country called Guinea; I went deep into the interior of the country and in a little village, I met with a storyteller.

And that storyteller went way back into African tradition and African mythology and began to tell the story about the fire, which means the sun, and about the water and about the earth and that he pointed out that all these things put together turn the world around. And that all of us are here for a very, very short time and in that time when we're here, there really isn't any difference in any of us if we take time out to understand each other. And the question is, do I know who you are, do you know who I am, and do we care about each other? Cause if we do, together, we can turn the world around." Indeed, we can. Will you please rise in body or in voice to sing together?