"What's Possible?"

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
September 16, 2018

"Stay together," Margaret Wheatley, counsels. [poem: "Turning to One Another"]

Well, it seems that this is preaching to, well, the all of you! Because here you are! Just by being here today, you've already shown a level of commitment to 'staying together' and being in community. And, if this is your first time here, I suspect showing up signals some kind of longing to be a part of a community like this.

From one viewpoint, a community gathered here seems ordinary and expected. As our sign out front and your order of service proudly proclaim, there's been a group gathering together since 1640! That's a lot of Sundays. Many of you here today have been showing up for years or decades or even your entire life.

And yet, even as gathering here can feel so familiar and comforting, from another point of view, it's kind of remarkable that we *are* here. As you may know, in the U.S. attendance at religious services has been declining fairly significantly in recent years. This is especially true for younger adults—those in the 20s and 30s—who may believe in God but question the need for organized religion. For many, showing up at a religious service is simply not a given.

But, I'm drifting into territory Wheatley cautions against. *Ask what's possible. Not what's wrong.*

What *is* possible?

Imagining the possible can set a vision for where we want to be. This is true not only for an institution, but also for individuals. Developing a vision for where we want to be in 5, 10, or 25 years can shape our choices today.

But, when you think about your life today, are you where you thought you would be five, ten, twenty-five, or fifty years ago?

My 25th college reunion is in a couple weeks. As a new college grad, I did not even know what Unitarian Universalism was! However, I did have a strong interest in being a minister. I just didn't know there was a religious tradition that would accept a woman who liked to question everything—especially sacred text and theological tradition. Nor did I know that I

© Stephanie May 2018

would become a divorced, single mom, spend most of my adult life living a thousand miles from my extended family, or proudly adore my gay son. And, I did not know that I would be on food stamps five years after graduation. Nor did I know that I'd live in an affluent community beside historic Concord and Walden Pond 25 years later.

I suspect that I'm not alone in being surprised by how my life unfolded. In an essay entitled, "The Betrayal of Expectations: Coping When Life Doesn't Go to Plan," Teresa Shimogawa shares her story of learning to cope after the sudden death of her husband left her a widow with three young children. Shimogawa writes:

> I expected to get into college. I expected to have a career after a lot of hard work, and that one day I'd meet a nice man and we would get married. We would buy our first house together and start a family, picking out a crib and the baby's "going home" outfit and organizing a drawer full of diapers. We'd have more babies and go on vacations and grow old together.
>
> I expected that one day I'd take care of him until he took his last breath, and then I'd join a travel group with other retired women. My adult children would come over for dinner, and we'd take a family vacation with the grandchildren every year. That's how it all played out in my mind.
>
> I had a linear view of life. You go to point A, B, C, and so on. You do what you're supposed to do and you work hard. It was very simple, life with these expectations. Follow the recipe and then eat your dessert.
>
> Spoiler alert: Life was only that simple until the universe pulled the rug out from beneath my feet.

I wonder what story of expectations each of us would tell. What did you expect of your life? What story did you imagine for who you would become, for how your narrative would unfold? Perhaps not all of us had the rug pulled out from under us by dramatic—or traumatic—events . . . although I know that some of you have had just this kind of trauma arrive unexpected and unwanted in your lives. Yet, even when our expectations are not shattered in a moment, I suspect many of us at some point discover that life is not as simple as our earliest expectations.

Shinogawa continues her essay by talking about the grief of losing not only her husband, but grief over losing the life she expected. The pictures in her head of her future would not come to be and this was a real loss. I find real wisdom in this—not only for those who are grieving a death, but also for those who are divorced as well as for those coming to terms

© Stephanie May 2018

with parents or a childhood that fell short of their needs. Losing the pictures in our head of what we expect to be *is* a loss that merits our grief.

They are a loss because these pictures so often orient our sense of who we are. Our memories of where we have been, the people with whom we have been in relationship, and the places we have called home feature in the narratives we tell and the images of who we know ourselves to be. If these pictures of the past tell us who we are, then the pictures we draw of the future shape who we expect to become.

Indeed, coaches will tell us to imagine ourselves making contact with the ball. Inspirational speakers advise us to imagine ourselves closing the deal or walking across the stage with diploma in hand. Such images of the future can inspire and motivate us to take actions today. Imagining what could be allows us to take steps towards making the image a reality.

This is why we at First Parish have a vision statement—it draws a picture of who we want to be. It names values such as being vibrant, multigenerational, diverse, and committed to helping others. These values and these images orient our actions today. For example, they challenge us to value the many different generations already here and to consider whether we could do more to welcome even more people of different ages into our community.

By inviting us to name our values and describe our hopes, vision statements can serve an important purpose in shaping who we are today and who we become. They can provide direction that enables decisions about which way to go when faced with choices about where to place one's time, money, and energy. This is as true for First Parish as it can be for each of us as individuals.

But, how do we reconcile this important role of holding a vision with the complex reality of knowing life does not always conform to these pictures in our head? I wonder if there is a difference between expectations of the future and a vision for the future.

In Shinogawa's account, her expectations of the future suggest not only a simple, linear view of life, but also a somewhat unreflective account. In many ways, her expectations reflected a set of societal norms or, at least, ideals. This is not intended to criticize her—we all carry with us social norms and ideals that shape our understanding of how to be. For some of us, they help us to conform and for others…perhaps to rebel! I think expectations often function this way. They are the everyday, 'normal' way that things are 'supposed' to go. And some expectations are really rather wonderful—like expecting gravity to keep us from flying off. We would be exhausted if everything around us was unpredictable. Expectations can help us move through the world with a degree of certainty.

© Stephanie May 2018

And yet, expectations can also numb us from seeing what is novel. They can narrow our vision and limit our imagination. Although sometimes we would gladly exclude the unimaginable traumas from our experience of life. At other times, imagining what is possible awakens us to novel paths and new pictures for what the future could be . . . for what we could be.

Reflecting on what she learned from the betrayal of her expectations, Shimogawa writes,

> Eighteen months later, I'm a different person than who I was before my husband died. It's not the life that I initially chose, but in many ways I am living a more intentional life with a lot more choice. There is some degree of excitement in what I call my "renaissance." There are no rules. You just live as authentically as you can, with what you have, doing the best you can, and that's it. No secrets.

We live, as Shimogawa also says, in "a world full of uncontrollable circumstances." We may find ourselves betrayed by our expectations of what our life will be. *And* in the unexpected, we may also find an invitation to consider what's possible now? What new and different vision for the future is possible? When the simple, linear path is disrupted, we may find, like Shimogawa, an opportunity to live with more intention, more choice, more freedom from the rules of what you are 'supposed' to be or do.

As a congregation, I wonder what expectations may be numbing us to what is possible? What would it be like to follow Margaret Wheatley's counsel and ask only "what's possible" not what's wrong? What would it look like to intentionally reorganize our structures and programs around what we care about? Would it be possible to go to coffee hour and "start a conversation that matters"—with someone you already know or with someone you do not? And, what would be possible if we more fully trusted that "meaningful conversations can change your world"?

Wheatley's words paint a picture of what it looks like to be an intentional community that stays together. Today, we are here, a congregation with a vision to be a vibrant, multigenerational community that embraces diverse beliefs and commits to caring for each other and our planet. In a world of uncontrollable circumstances where belonging to religious community is not always an expectation, it matters that we are here and it matters who we are and how we are together.

As we enter into this new program year with its unexpected weeks ahead, may we also consider Wheatley's counsel to stay together, consider what's possible, and to notice what we care about as we learn more about one another.

So may it be. Amen.

© Stephanie May 2018