

On Sundays that Drew is not with us, sometimes we are fortunate to have members who are willing and able to write a sermon for us such as Guy Newland or Joyce Henricks; other times, we use Soul Matters, a subscription service that provides worship service materials. The sermon today comes from Soul Matters.

Drawing on the Wide Side of the Brain

Rev. Rod Richards

Unitarian Universalists San Luis Obispo

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Draw the circle wide.

It's never been easy for me to draw a circle freehand. I mean a real circle.

For one thing, I'm left-handed. I know; that's no excuse. And I don't mean to offend left-handers who are supremely competent circle-drawers. But if you're left-handed, you may know how pencil markings can smear as your hand moves across the page. So I remember a lot of smeared circles in grade school.

Plus, I don't happen to be very good at drawing in general. And I just can't figure this out, except for the fact that I have put absolutely no effort or time into getting better at it. But I remember when I was asked to draw circles as a child in school, they always came out as sad little ovals...*circle-like*, perhaps, but not circles; not *real* circles.

And then I used a compass, and I remember that it seemed quite magical to me. Even though I may have ripped the paper with the sharp point—I'll blame it on the fact that I am left-handed, as illogical as that may be—but I remember watching this shape form: *finally* a proper circle; a perfect circle—all points equidistant from the center.

And I thought, well, I can do that. And I tried it freehand. All points equidistant from the center, I thought, all points equidistant....Well, not on my circles. They just didn't come out right.

And we Unitarian Universalists like to get things right, don't we? We *humans* like to get things right. There is that part of our brain, perhaps—and believe me, I am no neuroscientist; do not call on me for circle-drawing or brain surgery—but I know there is that part of us that yearns to *get things right*. We have a picture in our head of what we are after, and we are deeply satisfied when we achieve it...and deeply dissatisfied if we don't...

If we are going to draw a circle, by gosh, we are going to draw a circle, and we know what a circle is supposed to look like. And if we are to *draw the circle wider*? Well...

Well, it made me wonder. If we are going to draw the circle *wider*, wouldn't we also have to draw it *longer* in order for it to remain a circle? All points equidistant and all that...

(And I see the puzzled looks and the shaking heads: I think this guy has missed the point. It's a metaphor, right? Aren't ministers supposed to understand metaphor?)

But bear with me for just a few moments: what I'm saying is that drawing the circle wider is something of a messy proposition; unpleasant, even, *if we are stuck* on making *the perfect circle*.

Have you ever seen the reorganization that takes place when we've gathered together in a circle—let's say a congregational group or gathering of some sort—we've gathered in a circle and then realize we have more people attending than the circle holds? We scooch our

chairs and add chairs and realize that we now have a curvy, chaotic configuration that does not quite meet the circle standards because we can't all see each other—we are maybe in a straight line that curves at the edges, and sometimes a wavy line, or a *real* wavy line (like if you end up having someone sitting behind you, you know you are not in a circle), so we scooch some more, and maybe have to move a table to spread out a little further, and might end up realizing that the room will not lend itself to a perfect circle so we need to just make it good enough, to make do, to make the less than perfect circle to hold the people who are present...

But *how* do we do it? *How* do we go about drawing the circle wider? Do we sigh in frustration as we look at the new oblong configuration that was once our beautiful circle? Do we harrumph as we skid the table across the floor? Do we *resent* this *interruption* of the scheduled activities; are we visibly *flabbergasted* by this *delay*? Are we visibly upset when, returning to the chair we were sitting in, we find it now occupied by a newcomer, and, damn, the only reason that was open was because we were nice enough to get up and set out more chairs and now we have to look for a new seat on one of those chairs we don't like sitting in, and, sure enough, we end up actually sitting *behind* someone in this now-deeply-imperfect circle...

How do we go about drawing the circle wider?

I have probably been guilty of engaging that task with something less than graciousness at times, feeling all those things I just mentioned and letting it show, as I sought to get back to the matters at hand.

But let me tell you: This—making room, rearranging, drawing the circle wider--this is not an interruption or delay of the work at hand. This *is* the work.

Draw the circle wider. Or longer. Have it snake around immovable objects, travel up and down over risers, and find the shape it needs to take. Do whatever you need to do to allow more people to be included. Don't get hung up on the perfect circle. It's made up of people, after all. Focus on the joy of welcoming, not the frustration of rearranging.

And *prepare* for the work.

Annette shared with us through the words of Lesley Hazleton in the reading that the *ensō* in Zen practice, the circle hand-drawn in a single fluid brushstroke, is often incomplete, left slightly open as though in invitation to everything beyond it.

We can cut down some of that frustration of rearranging if we prepare for the work. Any circle we make should have an opening. Sometimes we inadvertently, unintentionally close that opening, delighting in the construction of a perfect circle. But we're not looking for perfection. We're looking for *inclusion*. *Invitation*.

Draw the circle wide was the theme of the Pacific Southwest District Assembly in 2016 at the Unitarian Society of Santa Barbara and I took a few notes from that gathering.

Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray--now President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, then a Presidential candidate—asked, “How are we accountable to the people who haven't found us yet?”

Rev. Alison Miller, who was also running for President of the Association, asked, “How must we adapt and change to welcome people who thirst for our healing message?”

This faith--said Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt, President of Starr King School for the Ministry—this faith saves lives. *Saves lives.* “I want to save our lives as citizens and human beings,” she said.

I want to save our lives as citizens and human beings. That clear purpose has only grown more urgent over these past three years.

We have something precious to offer in that endeavor. This faith—I have seen it—saves lives. *So how are we accountable to the people who haven't found us yet? How must we adapt and change to welcome people who thirst for our healing message?*

Draw the circle wide. Draw it wider still.

We need to leave an opening in our circle, right? Taking a lesson from the *ensō* in Zen practice. That came to mind with our opening hymn this morning.

*Here we have gathered, gathered side by side;
circle of kinship, come and step inside!*

And just picturing that in my mind, I thought, how does one step inside a circle? When I *imagine* a circle, it is closed: the end of the line meets the point where it begins. But the circle we are talking about is different. It is, indeed, more of an *ensō*. If someone is to *step inside*, there must be an opening, which also means the circle can be described as perpetually *incomplete* which—for those of us who want to make sure we get things *right*—can lead to great anxiety. But what promise it holds! What promise, if we are willing to adapt and change in order to welcome people who thirst for our healing message! What promise if we leave an opening in our circle; set out an open chair (or two, or three); even *give up our choice seat* and find another place

along the new, imperfect curves of inclusion we have created, so that all have a place

As we prepare to host the District Assembly of Unitarian Universalist congregations of the Pacific Southwest District this April, *making room* will be a challenge. Space is an issue. There are all sorts of creative ideas floating about at this point about how we use outdoor areas, possibly the park building, other locations, field trips...But the real challenge is not only *that* we make room, but *how* we make room. How we open this place, so dear to us, to those who will come. How we open ourselves to welcoming others.

I have watched people enter a room and encounter a closed circle. And even though people graciously scooch and make room and provide a chair, there is an uncomfortable, unintentional message that “we didn’t expect you would be here, and now we must move, must open up the circle, must be inconvenienced in order to accommodate your unexpected arrival.” That initial moment—and the feelings it carries—can never be reclaimed. We could have prepared an invitation to join—an opening in the circle, an empty chair—but instead we have given the feeling that we are politely accommodating an intrusion.

And now, god forbid, the near-perfection of our circle is ruined, as you just can’t get everybody to see exactly how they should move to retain geometric purity...

But the beauty of the Zen circle—the beauty of the circle we invoke when we encourage ourselves to draw the circle wider—the beauty of that circle lies precisely (or more precisely, *imprecisely*) in its imperfection.

Draw the circle wide. Draw the circle wider than what we expect as necessary, each and every circle we create.

May we leave an opening in every circle we create as an invitation.

May we add a chair--or two--whenever we gather together.

May we draw on the wide side of the brain, the side that knows that inviting in, making room, offering welcome, changing our shape is never an interruption or delay of what we do, it *is* what we do...it is *central*.

Rather, let us practice the sacred flexibility that allows us to give up our geometric purity when it comes to our circles, so that we are unafraid to draw them wider, stretch them longer, and find joy in the task of rearranging. Let us be fearless in our willingness to make new shapes so that we may be accountable to people who have not found us yet, so we may welcome those who thirst for our healing message, so that we may engage with our people and our partners the work before us: to save our lives as citizens and human beings.

A perfect circle is uninteresting, a closed system containing nothing, while an imperfect one vibrates with warmth. It invites us into the moment of its creation...It is open, human, fallible—an expression, that is, of soul.

Thus end the words of Rev. Rod Richards

While I don't think that this sermon is by any means one of the best I have read or heard, it did strike a spark for me about UUFCM and this spring and coming year. Two aspects of our situation got me thinking in response to Rev. Richards' words. One, we have been apart for about two years as a result of the COVID pandemic, not physically able to be with one another in any significant way, and we miss it. Two, we have grown with the addition of approximately 20 new members and even more friends, and, to a great extent, we don't know each other.

So what this sermon triggered for me is this. What will be our intention as we come together more and more in person, and will we live our intention? I'll explain. We have previously had a coffee hour every Sunday after the worship service, where we sit or stand around visiting with one another. However, many of us have had a tendency to "hang with" the people we feel most comfortable with, sitting at the same table and with the same people. A perfectly human tendency, but will it be good for us as we move more and more into meeting in person, although there will now probably be a number of us who will remain worshipping through the Zoom option?

Back to the sermon. I challenge us to make the circle wider, to open up the circle, to put extra chairs in our circle, regardless of the shape of the circle. Let's all make a significant effort to truly welcome everyone in as we work to get to know one another in this new phase our beloved UUFCM.

That's all I wanted to say, like I said, a brief reflection!