

I once heard—probably in seminary—that preachers often preach the sermon they, themselves, need to hear. I don't know how true that is for my colleagues, especially those who preach on a weekly basis, but lately, I've been feeling like it really does apply to me.

Unlike my colleagues who preach almost every week, I rarely need to come up with more than two or three sermons a year, which means I can choose topics that *really* interest me. What interests me now, and the topic of the last few sermons I've preached, is nothing less than the future of congregations—especially small Unitarian Universalist congregations.

As someone who works almost exclusively with small UU congregations, their future—perhaps your congregation's future—is inextricably linked to my future. And I hope that by preaching sermons I need to hear means I might be preaching a sermon that you need to hear, too.

So, here's what's been on my mind and in my heart lately as we find ourselves in another "church year," that long stretch of time between September and June when congregations are traditionally the most active.

I've heard from some of my fellow religious professionals who've made it through the last two pandemic-fraught years, that preparing for this year felt a little like "rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic," or "fiddling while Rome is burning."

I get that. Who among us isn't exhausted? I know I am. The things that helped me get through 2020 didn't work in 2021. And the strategies that made 2021 manageable weren't enough for 2022. And now, I have to ask myself, what's left to get me through to 2023? Even more troubling, there's part of me wondering, is it even worth it?

Now, I'm a bit of an optimist. I tend to thrive on situations that offer opportunities to try something new. And if there's anything positive one could say about the pandemic, it has definitely been an opportunity to try new things. If the effect of Covid-19 on our society was the only thing we had to deal with right now, I probably would be able to manage.

But it's more than Covid-19, isn't it? There are just so many heartbreaking things happening in our world today—I hesitate to even enumerate them. Unprecedented weather extremes caused by climate change; the embrace of fascism and authoritarianism by many of our fellow citizens; threats to democracy at home and around the world; the ongoing racial and economic injustice that has tainted our society from its beginnings; increased religious intolerance masquerading as freedom of belief; and attacks on reproductive justice and LGBTQ rights.

It's enough to make even an optimist like me ask, "why bother?" Maybe we are just rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic and fiddling while Rome is burning.

So, when I found myself giving into this state of despondency, I searched the web to see if there was anything out there that could bring me a glimmer of hope. And I'm not just talking about

some internet meme like. I'm talking about something substantial, something that could make me really believe that it is, indeed, worth it.

What if found are these words from Howard Zinn, the historian, playwright, philosopher, and socialist thinker who wrote *A People's History of the United States*. In his 2002 autobiography *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train*, Zinn wrote:

"To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness.

What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction.

And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory."

When I first read this passage, I could almost feel the sense of hopelessness begin to fade. These words are, indeed, substantial—far beyond some overly simplified internet meme. I found it especially encouraging that as a historian, Zinn asserts that being hopeful in hard times

is based on a fact. That "human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness."

Now, Zinn's emphasis on "human history" reminded me of something else from my seminary days. The work of Unitarian theologian Henry Nelson Wieman.

Before I go further, I need to say a couple of things. One, while I feel comfortable thinking theologically, that is, occasionally using the concept of God as one possible way to examine a situation—as in "where is God in this?"—I'm not necessarily fluent in the language of theology. Which is to say, I've found myself on more than one occasion reading an impenetrable passage from some theological text over and over again, only to find myself with no idea what the writer was talking about.

And two, CONTENT WARNING: I am going to be using the word "God" a few more times in this sermon. But know that I do so as someone who is primarily an atheist. But as I said, I'm okay using the concept of God to explore a subject—especially if the person I'm engaged with (Henry Nelson Wieman in this case) is using it.

Creativity is at the heart of Wieman's theology. He defines God as the "creative event" that works through human history. "God as creative event is that process of reorganization which

generates new meanings, integrates them with the old, and endows each event as it occurs with a wider range of reference.” (By the way, that’s from Martin Luther King Jr.’s doctoral

dissertation, *A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman*.)

King notes that while the creative event has a unitary character, it “is made up of four subevents”:

- emerging awareness of qualitative meaning through communication with other persons;
 - integrating new meanings with ones previously acquired;
 - expanding and enriching the appreciable world by a new structure of interrelatedness;
- and
- a widening and deepening of community.

This is what excites me about Wieman’s notion of the “creative event.” These four subevents together can set in motion a range of possibilities—up to and including the creation of a better world.

But in order to access this “creative event,” we need to be open to whatever those possibilities might be. And we do that through what Wieman called “creative interchange.” According to Professor Marvin C. Shaw,

Creative interchange is a certain kind of communication. It begins in the candid expression of one’s unique, personal perspective, and thus goes beyond the superficiality of much conversation. This perspective must be expressed without the desire to impress or to manipulate the other, so that it does not elicit a defensive or rejecting response. The one who hears must be free of self-preoccupation and not project feelings or interpretations onto what is said. If in addition, the hearer does not cling to the present state of the self, but is open to change, the new insight can be integrated, perhaps with modifications, into the mind, and this addition of a new perspective or pattern of interpretation enlarges the mind and increases what it is able to feel and know. Since the speaker and the hearer now share something of each other, further creative interchange may occur more readily.

Learning about creative interchange while I was in seminary had a huge impact on me, and it’s been the motivation for most of my continuing education since then. It’s why I’ve participated in multiple Circle Process trainings, and it’s why I became certified as a spiritual director.

I truly do believe that when we express ourselves without the desire to impress or to manipulate the other, when we no longer cling to our present state but open ourselves to change, the appreciable world is expanded and enriched, and we become more capable of kindness and compassion, courage and sacrifice.

And this is the possibility which gives me hope. That our congregations, no matter what size they may be, can help us access the creative event Wieman calls “God,” give us the energy to act, to live as we think human beings should live, and—in the face of all that is heartbreaking in this world—behave magnificently.

But as Priscilla Shumway shared in “Choosing to Connect,” we need to move beyond “a sense of separation, of judgment, between [ourselves] and others,” and learn “to hear the sentiments [we] agree with, rather than those [we] disagree with.”

Both Shumway and Zinn would agree that in this “infinite succession of presents,” we can, with “every act and choice [we] make,...create a better world.” What better place than a religious community to choose to go “beyond the superficiality of much conversation” and be truly present for one another, to listen to each other “free of self-preoccupation and not project feelings or interpretations onto what is said.”

That is how we practice “creative interchange.” And by practicing “creative interchange,” we invite all the potential of the “creative event” into our lives. And by inviting the “creative event” into our lives, we widen and deepen our community and increase “the possibility of” — together—“sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction.”

It isn’t necessarily easy, though. The creative event starts with communication, but in this hyperconnected world, where both information and disinformation are as close as the nearest device with internet connectivity, moments of creative interchange, of interpersonal connectivity, are hard to come by.

That’s why I’m such an advocate for what Kay Lindahl calls *The Sacred Art of Listening*, which happens to be the title of one of her books. Lindahl notes that “Listening is not a passive activity. It’s not about being quiet or even hearing the words. It is an action, and it takes energy to listen.”

Listening is something we need to practice, like a spiritual practice. It shouldn’t be surprising that the title of another one of Lindahl’s books is *Practicing the Sacred Art of Listening*. Here are three daily practices that Lindahl suggests:

1. Silence: spend at least a minute each day in silence. Use intention to listen for God, source, wisdom.
2. Reflection: take a deep breath before you respond, listen to your soul—get to know yourself.
3. Presence: be mindful of each moment, pay attention—be with the person you are with.

If you would indulge me, I’d like for us to try the first practice together. Let’s spend a minute or so right now in silence. Find a position that’s comfortable for you. Close your eyes if you’d like. Notice the space around you. Feel how you are almost inextricably connected to the Earth

directly underneath your body. Be aware of what it's like to be present in this moment. And listen.

SILENCE FOR ONE OR TWO MINUTES

Thank you.

Lindahll has some other suggestions for practicing the sacred art of listening:

- Notice when you choose to listen and when you choose not to listen.
- Notice what it's like to give the gift of listening to someone else and what it's like to receive it.
- Notice when you experience the art of listening—being a listening presence with another.
- Notice when you start to interrupt someone and what happens when you don't.
- Notice what happens when someone stops speaking and you ask,—Is there anything else?
- Notice what happens when you let go of your agenda to be present with another.

Finding Zinn's quote helped me to be more hopeful about the possibilities ahead of us. And it taught me that being hopeful is not foolishly romantic. This hope is reinforced by the belief that our congregations can be places where we, together, learn to communicate with each in such a way that creative interchange occurs, that it gives us the energy to act, and that we, together, can "live now as we think human beings should live."

In closing, I'd like to share the "prayer" Priscilla Shumway used to close her Braver/Wiser reflection:

May we continue to become more mindful of that which connects us rather than that which separates us. May we always remember that the acts and choices we make are sacred as we work to create a better world.

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