

“What’s Possible Together”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
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Reading

“Turning to One Another” by Margaret Wheatley

There is no power greater than a community discovering what it cares about.

Ask: “What’s possible?” not “What’s wrong?” Keep asking.

Notice what you care about.

Assume that many others share your dreams.

Be brave enough to start a conversation that matters.

Talk to people you know.

Talk to people you don’t know.

Talk to people you never talk to.

Be intrigued by the differences you hear. Expect to be surprised.

Treasure curiosity more than certainty.

Invite in everybody who cares to work on what’s possible.

Acknowledge that everyone is an expert about something.

Know that creative solutions come from new connections.

Remember, you don’t fear people whose story you know.

Real listening always brings people closer together.

Trust that meaningful conversations can change your world.

Rely on human goodness.

Stay together.

Sermon

This past week, I, like many of you I’m sure, spent a fair amount of time shoveling snow. And, my partner usually spends a good amount of time snow blowing the driver

and I get the slightly less strenuous job of shoveling a path from the house to the road where our mailbox is. I was outside with our five year-old doing this pretty focused on just getting that path cleared. Staring out at the blanket of white snow, that good, slightly firm kind of snow, it seemed like anything could be made. So, I started to throw the snow into a mound piling it higher and higher until we had a pretty good-sized hill for my son to climb on and roll down. A possibility emerged in an unexpected way.

Usually, asking “what’s possible” instead of “what’s wrong” or “what problem can I fix,” as Margaret Wheatley urges, is not something we’re used to doing in our own lives or in the life of a community.

The writer Peter Block describes possibility as “a declaration of a future that has the quality of being and aliveness that we choose to live into.”¹

I know that for myself it is far easier and more habitual to stay focused on what needs fixing now rather than what might be possible.

Possibility, when we encounter it, though has that quality of “being and aliveness” that can be life-giving and liberating - like that blanket of fresh snow or a paint canvas awaiting your first strokes. This kind of vitality and promise is what I think we try to support here in this community - the declaration of the kind of future we want to live into.

Solving problems and addressing what’s wrong certainly has its place. And, sometimes, when we come together to try to address a problem, new possibilities emerge simply from coming together.

A beautiful example of this has been the recent formation of the evening warming shelters at local churches in Montpelier. Here in our congregation, we open up our Vestry space every Thursday evening from 5 to 8 PM for guests of the overflow shelter at Bethany Church. When Reverend Amy Pitton from Bethany spoke with a few of us clergy back in August about this idea, I had no hesitation in saying that we would have people who would pull together to make this happen. And this has definitely been the case. So many of you have pitched in since early December donating food, setting up the space, chatting and playing games with our guests. And

¹ Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2008), 125.

warming shelters are now up and running at three other churches and Another Way so that every day of the week there is a warm place inside for the people who will be staying the night at Bethany to go in the evening for a meal and hospitality.

This all emerged out of a need to address problems. First, that our neighbors experiencing homelessness need a place to go in the evenings. And, second, Bethany Church which had taken on hosting of the overflow shelter last year was feeling a bit stretched and needed help from the community. By coming together and each being one part of the solution, we as a broader interfaith community are able to address a critical need.

The exciting thing from my perspective is not just that we as a church community are responding to an immediate need but that this kind of faithful action is where possibility emerges. This kind of showing up and being willing to stretch our hearts, our hospitality, our commitment just a bit wider makes new things possible - connections with new neighbors and friends, new ways of building community and making the world a more just place.

I think that our being able and willing to say 'yes' to this request was made more possible, in part, because of the dedicated ministry that so many of you have been engaging in through the Monday Community Lunch. Our operation of the community lunch also emerged out of the need to address a problem. The agency that had provided the Monday meal for many years lost its funding and wouldn't be able to continue the program. A number of amazing church members stepped in to ensure it could keep going and since then possibilities have opened up that no one could have imagined at the outset as we as a congregation have become more deeply connected to other groups and individuals in the community. For example, it was that first church year over taking over the operation of the community lunch that members of AmeriCorps approached the coordinators of Community Lunch about helping out with the meal on Martin Luther King Day and also with the idea of hosting a community dialogue afterwards. There were people of all ages and from a number of different community organizations and the general public that participated in conversations with one another about how to continue living our Martin Luther King's legacy today. And, that partnership has continued every January so far since then, including a week from tomorrow.

I think this is how possibilities emerge - often incrementally as we stretch beyond the limits of what we think or know we can do. We step into the realm of the unknown.

Sometimes, we are forced there by loss or unexpected transitions in our lives or by a problem that needs fixing right away. Sometimes, we can make a choice to shift out of an old pattern or relationship and into the unknown.

This can be a risky place. It can feel quite uncomfortable to stretch beyond the known and familiar. Most all of us would rather that we kept going along a safe and familiar path than head in an uncertain direction.

I ran track and field in high school and my speciality was running hurdles, and I'm not all that long-legged and so when I would run the 100 meter hurdles, I typically alternated which leg was going over the hurdle - left and right - taking four steps between hurdles instead of three which is what most other runners who were really fast would do. But, my coach worked with me on this, and at one meet, he really encouraged me to give it a shot to try to take just three steps between the hurdles. So, I did give it a try and that feeling of stretching my stride just a bit longer and taking off on that opposite leg was a mix of terrifying and exhilarating.

And, I think that stretch into the unknown can feel like that - like leaping when we're not quite sure how we'll land or whether we might tumble in the process. (I'm pretty sure that first time I tried that I did in fact hit the hurdle and fall down and then have to continue the race.)

This place of uncertainty can feel risky and scary, but I think these are also indicators that there is possibility present. That slight, or perhaps at times big fear, can be a sign that you have moved enough out of what is comfortable and familiar for something new to emerge. Old ways of being and doing fall away so that you can learn new ways. There might be something waiting to be born in this place of terror and unknowing.

Church, or spiritual community, is a place where we support one another in discovering the possibilities within ourselves, and in turn, the possibilities we might create together. This is a place where we try to live imaginatively and creatively asking ourselves "what's possible." We invite one another to share in imagining and declaring what's possible for yourself and also collectively.

As I have come to know this congregation over the last three and a half years and become a part of this church community, I have seen that this congregation is alive

with possibility. And, I don't mean in the "there's a lot going on here," busy kind of way, though there certainly is a lot of activity here on any given day or week. I have seen an openness and a willingness to move towards rather than away from the unknown. To engage in conversations about what could be, to hold one another in times of vulnerability, to make new connections, to stick together through difficult times.

This place of possibility can be a risky and uncertain space at times, yet it is also exciting and enlivening.

An area of possibility that is emerging right now for us as a community is in imagining what this congregation could build - both in terms of our facilities as well as our staffing - that can support our mission into an unknown future. This is work that many of you from the board, the Growth and Facilities Task Force, and now a newly appointed Steering Committee have been engaged with over the last year and a half. In the days, weeks, and months to come, our challenge will be to stay in this place of imaginative possibility - to see not only what problems may need to be fixed but also what is alive with potential - what new ways of being and doing we can declare together.

With the pull of so much that seems like it's not going right in the world, let's continue to ask one another "what's possible" and not just "what's wrong."

The theologian Howard Thurman wrote, "There are two questions that [a person] must ask [themselves]. The first is 'Where am I going?' and the second is 'Who will go with me?'"²

May we continue to ask one another again and again 'Where are we going?' knowing that we go together committed to love and justice on this sometimes uncertain path full of possibility.

So may it be.

² <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/quote/two-questions-ask-ourselves>