

Opening Up, Flowing Down and Turning Inside Out

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One way to approach something new like a project or a paper or a sermon, is to start with what you know. Rebecca Parker [president of SKSM] and I started doing this together in the early '90s when we often found ourselves planning together or trying to sort out a problem. In starting my time here at Starr King School with each of you, I want to commemorate it by telling you a few things that I know. Don't get me wrong, I am not looking at you as a project or a problem. But you and this school are a new relationship. So what do I know?

First: I know that you know something. That's it. That's all I want to say about it. You know something and sometimes, like maybe today, you may need to be reminded of that.

Moving along to my second knowing: I know that something brought you here today. I don't mean something like a bike, or a car, or a bus, or even your own feet and legs. I mean something inside of you brought you here today. Maybe it was something someone said — a parent, a friend, a total stranger. They uttered words that brought you up short or that validated a feeling of your own. Maybe it was a dream you had, or more likely a repeating dream or dream theme; your struggling with angels in the night, angels that would not let you go. Or maybe that thing that brought you here, that pushed you or pulled you to this place was watching a minister and finding yourself identifying with what that person was doing. "I can do that!" or "I want to do that!" Or, yet again, maybe it is a frustration, many frustrations about the state of the world, about the way life is moving on this planet earth and your yearnings to help make a difference.

Something brought you here today. Maybe you can't even quite identify it or specify it. But, in its own way, it is HUGE because it is no small matter that you are here today. You have overcome many obstacles to make it to Starr King School in Berkeley, Calif., at this time in your life. Something brought you here.

A third knowing: You come here today with a picture of yourself. No, I don't mean a picture that you carry around in your wallet and can pull out to remind yourself of who you are on those days that get really confusing, although that can be helpful in this whirling world. In fact, I have a friend who once gave me a picture of herself to hold while she spent several days working through a conflict with another. It was her way of knowing someone else was looking out for the self she did not want to lose.

So, while the actual pictures of ourselves are important, they are not the ones I am speaking of when I say you come here today with a picture of yourself. I mean that you each have a mental image of yourself, an image that is related to what it is that brought you here today.

I'd like you to think of that picture of yourself for a moment. Go ahead and settle into your chairs. Close your eyes. Take a few deep breaths and move into yourself. Peering under your surface, skin-image, how do you see yourself? What are the characteristics of self that you find?

Think of the adjectives you would use to describe yourself. Curious, careful, able, bitter, calm, optimistic, pessimistic, friendly, shy, confident, over-confident, under-confident, angry, funny, loving. What fits in this mental-image picture that you have of yourself?

Now take this picture of yourself and place it in a larger picture, a picture that you carry of your place in the world, your being in the world, your doing in the world.

Are you outside in a redwood grove?

Are you somewhere inside a church building?

Are you in a hospital ward bending down to talk with a patient?

Are you sitting down to eat pausing to pray before the meal?

Are you reading a book?

What is the larger picture you find yourself in as you assess who you are as this person coming to seminary?

Now, slowly open your eyes and return to this room.

This is what I know about you. Something brought you here and you have a picture of yourself. I wish to place honor and importance in these things. After all, I am glad that you are here and that you are you

However, in the theme of the day, "Opening Up," I want you to open yourselves up to this. In order to get the most out of your time in seminary, you must not be held by the expectations that are inherent in what brought you here and who you are in your current picture. Expectations are tricky. They can be what get us going in the first place, like expectations of what seminary will be like may be a great part of what got you here. But expectations can also act like blinders, keeping us oblivious to what is happening just a bit outside of the path we have set ourselves upon.

A Zen Story

One of the devotees in the temple was well known for his zealousness and effort. Day and night he would sit in meditation, not stopping even to eat or sleep. As time passed he grew thinner and more exhausted. The master of the temple advised him to slow down, to take more care of himself. But the devotee refused to heed his advice.

“Why are you rushing so, what is your hurry?” asked the master.

“I am after enlightenment.” replied the devotee. “There is not time to waste.”

“And how do you know,” asked the master, “that enlightenment is running on before you, so that you have to rush after it? Perhaps it is behind you, and all you need to encounter it is to stand still — but you are running away from it?”

As in the story, it is very possible to feel so pushed or drawn by a preconceived picture of the enlightened self or enlightenment, that one misses what is in the present moment.

For instance, maybe what brought you here was a fellow congregant who told you that you felt like a minister to her. You know the scene. You had just participated in leading worship at your home church, or helped out in a conflict situation, or given solace to someone who was suffering, or taught a great game to the children, or... People tell you you're a natural, a minister to them, and you start picturing yourself as one and then come to seminary to follow the straightest and fastest route to that goal. Fine.

Then, you are in your second semester in a class on the Hebrew scriptures, and you find yourself so captivated by the texts that you seek out classes in Hebrew so that you can read the texts in their original language. You start looking at doctoral work, thinking about being a Unitarian Universalist theologian or an academic. Farfetched? It has happened.

Or, while finding out more about your Unitarian Universalist roots, you discover your Jewish ones, or your Episcopalian ones. And with an M. Div., you go on to become a rabbi or a priest. It has happened.

Or, one day you are riding your bike to class thinking about a sermon you heard and wondering what worship is like in a Unitarian Universalist church in Florida, or South Carolina, or Pennsylvania or Massachusetts. Next thing you know, you're riding your bike from Louisiana to the Atlantic Ocean and then up the coast to Maine, preaching at UU congregations as you go. It has happened.

Or, war breaks out in Bosnia/Kosovo, and you have been reading James Luther Adams. Adams believes that we must choose a faith, examine that faith, and act upon that faith. That is our responsibility as a free people.

You came to school as an experienced medical doctor thinking you were looking for a way to leave that behind. Instead, living out Adams' charge of joining the "cooperative effort for the common good," you join Doctors Without Borders and spend a seminary semester tending the victims of hate in those war-torn lands. It has happened.

Or this. Since you were a small child in a religious education program at your family's Unitarian Universalist church, you have wanted to be the reverend in the sanctuary on Sunday mornings. While in seminary, you go off on your long-anticipated parish internship and discover that still, small, struggling voice within which calls you to street ministry outside of the church walls.

Or, after you fulfill your Clinical Pastoral Education requirement working in a prison, you find yourself creating a film documentary on women in prison.

Or, you create a writing ministry.

Or, you learn to play classical guitar.

Or, you become a chaplain at Ground Zero in New York City.

Or you live with a family on a dumpsite in India.

Or you create the most comprehensive Universalist timeline ever seen.

These are some of the opportunities that opened up to seminarians who have come before. And I feel safe in saying that none of these paths were in the initial set of expectations held as the students sat in their orientations. And there are more, limitless opportunities waiting for you. Don't be in such a hurry that you forget to notice what is unfolding just off to the side of the path you are on. I was talking to a friend a couple of days ago who is a graduate of this school. She said to tell you that all you really need to bring to Starr King School is a blank journal. Keep it with you and take note of what is happening.

On the cover of your Order of Service is a poem by Rumi. Whether you are opening up or flowing "down in ever widening circles," what is required is for you to take risks, maybe some very large ones. You have already taken risks just to get here. I know that is so and, guess what, you're not done yet.

While in seminary, you will be doing some close, some would say microscopic, examination of your calling and of yourself. You are doing this so that you can know thyself, and be true to thyself while being in relationship with others. People do not like to see religious leaders waffle around in personal ambiguities. Instead, people tend to lay their own ambiguities onto the religious leader in such a way that knowing and being true to yourself is paramount to survival for the religious leader. Some of us here at the school have been known to describe this process of self-examination as turning yourself inside-out, dissecting the pieces and putting back in the renovated, redeemable parts. Or, in simplified language, "another frigging growth

experience.” I hope that you will find many such experiences here. Believe me, better here than later when you are in the midst of a congregation.

Change. Change. Change. You are being asked by your life and by this seminary experience to open up to change in yourself in the midst of a present larger reality that is itself constantly changing. Spiritual director Jack Kornfield says, “The heart of the spiritual life is to live in the ever-changing reality of the present.”

The ever-changing reality of the present — here are a couple of examples. I was listening to National Public Radio the other morning and I heard these two news items back-to-back. First, private weather forecasting is becoming a business, a precise business. Airlines and truckers, for instance, can pay for forecasts that will allow them to change routes and reschedule as often as every six hours, “avoiding costly delays.” Second, Bishop Caldwell of a Baptist church in Shreveport, La., is concerned about “the face of the congregation as the Lord wants to see it.” He is advertising and paying white folks, out of his own pocket, \$5 per hour on Sundays and \$10 per hour on Thursdays to attend the church. Last Sunday, in a congregation of 1,000, 50 whites came, most not wanting his money but wanting to know more about his church.

These changes may feel remote to the ministry you intend to enter, but I hold that they will, in some way, inform your ministry as they inform the lives of the people in our congregations.

Change may mean giving up expectations of how things are supposed to be. It may mean that the plans you have come with, the plans you expect to fulfill as you move into the future, may well need to be reconsidered and tweaked in light of what the present is teaching you, challenging you to do, or offering out of an unexpected realm. It’s risky business this changing, reforming, forming into a religious leader. Those of us who are here, including your new classmates, are here to make this opening up, flowing down and turning inside out journey with you. No one needs to do it alone, just as no one is ever done with it.

That’s what I know for now. I hope that some of it is helpful during this time of orientation and later when you are opening up, flowing down and turning inside out.

We must remember that we join together in this community of the spirit, supporting one another, challenging one another, speaking our truths with love, and opening our hands to be held in the circle that is Starr King School. And as Kate told us yesterday, we each also hold a spoon that, with a little help from our friends, can get us to the stew in the pot.

Let it be so.

Amen