

“Listening to the Future”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman on October 18, 2020

As I was deciding on the focus of today’s sermon I took time to imagine how some of you might respond to the idea of listening to the future. I imagined that, for some of you, the title would pique your curiosity. I imagined that some of you might be confused by the title. Then I thought about those of you who consider ideas predominantly from a rational and logical framework. I imagined that you might have been asking yourself, “How did he come up with that title? Doesn’t he know that it’s impossible to listen to the future?” In answer, I want to assure you that I recognize we don’t have the ability to hear what hasn’t yet been said. We do, however, have the capacity to imagine the future. Humans have been doing that for a very long time. And as I have just shared, through the use of imagination we have the ability to perceive, and even create, what lies ahead. So this morning I invite and encourage you to focus on the future—what has not yet come to pass—and let your creative abilities take you where imagination can lead.

The idea for this sermon came from a celebration that many of you participated in. Last year at about this time, our Fellowship celebrated its 60th anniversary. We had a number of events that led up to the culmination of the celebration on Sunday, October 13th. For the service that Sunday there was a historical time-line that covered much of the west wall in the Social Hall. There was a collage of photos that included current members and friends as well as some who no longer attend the Fellowship. And after the service, in the RE classroom, people were able to watch videos of several long-time members as they shared about both Fellowship highlights and struggles of years gone by. Numerous people I had conversations with that day talked about decisions that were made in the past that made the 60th anniversary celebration in our new building possible. And our guest minister that Sunday, Rev. Tandi Rogers, delivered a sermon titled, “Into the Next 60 Years...”

In that sermon, Rev. Rogers talked about the early history of the Fellowship. She pointed out that within the first 10 to 15 years of that history a small group of people, possibly as few as 10 people, bought property. Their intention in purchasing the property was to someday construct a church for the Fellowship to meet in. She then stated what is obvious, 10 people don’t need an entire church building. These early members were imagining the future. They were thinking of those who would be part of the future they were imagining. She then stated that these people loved us. They loved us even though they had never met us. And then she posed a challenge—a challenge to write a vision statement for the next 60 years. She asked us to “Imagine what it is like to love people you will probably never meet and cast an intention for them in the next 60 years.”

One year later, we have the Vision Statement she challenged us to create. If you haven't read it, or even if you have but don't recall just what it says, I encourage you to go to the UUFB website and read it. The Vision Statement was written before COVID arrived in Montana. The last line now seems prophetic. "We of the UUFB...will move forward into an uncertain future with grace and humility, fostering compassion and love, claiming our prophetic heritage, and making our fellowship, larger community and world a safer and better place." Every time I read the Vision Statement and come to that line I feel both inspired and proud to be part of this Fellowship. The members of the Fellowship voted to adopt this Vision Statement at the annual meeting in June even though we weren't able to meet in person. As Bruce indicated at the beginning of this service, we found a way to adapt to the realities of COVID and keep moving forward.

I mentioned a few minutes ago that videos of a few long-term members were made for the 60th anniversary celebration. Those members shared stories about some of the challenging times during the Fellowship's earlier years. I believe that at some point or points in the future, members and friends of this Fellowship will look back to this period of time and think about how we, as individuals and as a religious community, made it through this very difficult time. They will talk about the multiple challenges we are facing, the unchecked COVID-19 pandemic and its many ramifications, civil unrest triggered by systemic racism and the injustice such racism creates, wildfires more intense and widespread than at any previous time in recorded history, and last, but not least, a Presidential election that could imperil our democratic system of governance. In short, they will wonder and talk about these incredibly challenging times we are living in. And I imagine they will wonder and talk about how we were able to persevere. I don't know for certain what will be said in those conversations, but I have already begun to let my imagination wander through some of the possibilities that might occur.

This morning, this afternoon, this evening and in the days ahead, I want you to imagine those future conversations. What might the members and friends of UUFB say about us and this Fellowship 2 years from now, 5 years from now, 10 years from now, and even 60 years from now? As you imagine these future conversations you might think about some different areas that will be talked about. I imagine the UUFB members and friends of the future will talk, or at least wonder, about a number of topics. They will wonder and talk about how we went from all of our meetings being in person, to holding services and meetings almost entirely online—and how we made that change in less than a month. They will wonder and talk about how we continued to stay connected with one another during this time of social distancing. They will wonder and talk about how the members and friends of this Fellowship continued to be actively engaged in social justice issues, including showing up at in-person demonstrations, while COVID case numbers were rising. And they will wonder and talk about how the UUFB members and friends of today found a way to financially support the Fellowship during a time of significant financial uncertainty and instability.

I want to focus on that last question at this point. The annual UUFB pledge drive will officially begin in the coming weeks. As usual, it will go on through November and possibly into December. There will be a stated end date, but I am sure that, just as in years past, pledge forms will be received days or even weeks beyond that supposed final date. That will be one of the few things similar to pledge drives of years past. This year, because of COVID, many aspects of the pledge drive will be considerably different than any previous pledge drive. Of course, we will do some of the things that we have done in the past. For example, a pledge goal will be set and draft budgets will be created. As has been common practice in the past, the members of the Finance Committee and the Board, along with those who are organizing and conducting the pledge drive, will review the numbers and share those numbers with the members of the Fellowship. And a final budget will be voted on at the annual meeting sometime in January. But there will be much about this year's pledge drive that will be very different. Given all of the challenges we are currently experiencing the big question will be, how will the members and friends of this Fellowship respond. The answer to that question won't be known until all of the pledge forms are in and the budget is approved by the membership.

So as we prepare for the 2021 UUFB pledge drive to begin, I would ask us all to listen to the future, or at least take time to imagine listening to the future. Imagine what will be said about us by those who will call this Fellowship home in the years ahead. And as we imagine listening to the future members and friends of this Fellowship, I would encourage us to recall our Story for All Ages this morning, *The Little Red Stroller*. The practice of giving, which is repeated over and over again in this story, offers one way to approach making a decision about what to pledge for the upcoming year. We might think of our pledge as "giving forward," just as Luna and her parents did with Ernie and his parents, and Ernie did with Gigi, and Gigi did with Callie, and on and on until Sella gave the stroller he had to the adult Luna and her new baby. While the story ended with Luna and her new baby being given a stroller, in my imagination the story continued and so did the giving.

May we, as the story depicts, give graciously of what we have. And that through our giving, others will benefit, just as we have, from involvement in this Fellowship and from the giving of others who came before. May those who think back on this incredibly challenging time we find ourselves in talk of our perseverance and our generosity. May their words express admiration and appreciation. And may they know that we loved them long before we met them.

May it be so.