

The summertime is full of really positive feelings for me. It's usually a time I get out of my normal groove, and find a slightly different way to be for awhile. Sometimes there's some travel, and it doesn't have to be far. Where we live in Ohio is a gateway to the midwest. We're very close to West Virginia, a relatively quick drive to Kentucky, and only hours away from here in the Finger Lakes. It's really wonderful to have a car and being able to see these different places, and the wonderful people that live in them. It's not something I take for granted. It's really a treat to be with you this morning.

Preston reached out to me about the theme for this Summer, which is a compelling one: My truth. One of the aspects of this church community that I've enjoyed most is embracing that truth is never fixed, and we give ourselves the freedom to change. One of the reasons I decided to become a Minister in this faith community is realizing that I could change dramatically in my view of what is ultimately true, and I could still be honest with all of you.

I could stay in the ministry if my experiences challenge the very foundation of what I hold to be true. But there have been some guiding posts for me over the years.

Have you ever had the experience of a story or situation that has stuck in your head for a while? Someone might say or do something, and for reasons that are not always clear, it leaves an imprint and follows us around, maybe trying to show us something. For me, they're usually not the stories I would expect to stick to me, and it has sometimes taken me years to unravel the reasons why they stick. One of those stories is one I heard when I was in seminary. Thich Nhat Hanh, the great peace activist, Buddhist monk who was expelled from his homeland in Vietnam for teaching peacemaking during the war, was invited to be a guest teacher in San Francisco. He was teaching them how he approaches walking meditation, a practice where you bring awareness to your body while you're walking.

The people he was teaching had been taught before, and thought they already had a very clear idea about how to do this. They already thought they knew how to walk, move in the world. And most of us are like that too. We already think we know what it means to move in the world, and how it must be done. At least that's been my attitude sometimes, a kind of odd false certainty, with little room for curiosity. So he is teaching people who already feel they know what they're doing, and he gives them an instruction that is new, one they've never heard before until that morning. He says while you walk, please smile to yourself. Offer yourself a gentle smile. Don't force it, just let it be subtle. Smile. After he gives the instruction they begin the walking meditation, and he can feel the energy in the room. Everyone is doing what they've always done. They're very serious, walking around like they know what they're doing. They've got this under control.

In the middle of walking he gives them one final teaching: He says I can feel you're not smiling. If you're not smiling, you're wasting your time.

That has stayed with me for years, and has been a challenge and companion to me: in whatever you're doing, if you're not smiling, you're wasting your time. It's taken years to fully appreciate what this teaching might mean. I love to smile. I love to laugh. But when I first heard this teaching, I was feeling really serious about many things. I was serious about my studies, serious about what I felt was preparing me for what my future would be. I was working part time as a chaplain in a nursing home, and then at Rikers jail. I was in touch with acute suffering both in myself and other people, and this teaching seemed borderline ridiculous. It challenged everything I felt was true at that time. And if I had to sum up what I thought was true then, it might be something like life is really hard, and there's no way getting around that, and it's a good day if we can bear it.

I still think that's a fine enough truth. But this story stuck in my craw, challenging me to think there may be something beyond that. Not more true, but also true. Allowing a space for enjoyment, for appreciation, for subtle joy seemed almost threatening to me when I first heard this story. And I've learned now to really pay special attention when I encounter a situation that threatens to overturn everything I think is true. And I think that is a very peculiar part of being in a faith community like this. Most communities try to prepare their members to hold onto what they think is true, defend it, try to make it persuasive, even use it as a weapon sometimes. It's very peculiar and unusual to allow ourselves to be open to being overturned and changed, to grow.

This has been my attitude at least at this point in my life. I've shared and some are startled to hear that I hope in many ways I'm a very different person in 20 years. It would be a sign I've actually grown and learned things.

It would be a sign I was willing to be changed by what I experienced. And it's taken me until very recently to realize that it's important at least for me to guide that change. Not manipulate or force it, but guide it. We don't force the smile. But without the guidance of a subtle smile, our changes can grow more predictable. We get more sure, more stiff, more serious, more certain. I might fool myself into thinking I know what it means to live a life, and forget to be curious about what else there might be.

I was talking to someone recently who was fed up and left ministry in one of the Christian denominations. We were having coffee, and he said I don't know much about Unitarian Universalism or who you are as a Minister or person. It was our first time meeting for coffee. He asked something which at this point I've been asked many different times, and each time I answer is a new experience for me. He asked: What do you believe in? He could be asking a version of the question at the heart of this Summer Series: What is my truth?

I used to get very tongue tied at those moments, and it took me years to find out why. Everytime i was asked the question: what do you believe? Its like I saw my whole life flash before my eyes, and the overwhelming sense was how to do you condense in a few pithy sentences a lifetime of experience and learning. I've learned now just to trust my gut, and say what comes to mind. Often I surprise myself, but it still feels true. So when he asked: What do you believe in? I responded with I trust in the unknown.

I said I know I don't have all the answers or even any answer, and I'm convinced now having answers doesn't lead to a great life, at least not for me. I'm beginning to trust in the unknown, and that means I can keep learning, failing, growing. And that gives me the hope that I can change, and perhaps others can change too. We are changing, and I'd like to be intentional about guiding that change. Growing more appreciative, more honest, allowing room for more curiosity, more joy. Those are some nice suggestions.

Jennifer, my wife and I met in an acting class in New York City. I think one of the reasons I was drawn to the performing arts is because I've enjoyed discovering the gap between what I think is happening on the page, and what it's actually like to do something. Often you can rehearse a really serious scene and find things that are funny. Or you're in a funny scene, and all of a sudden you feel the heartbreak underneath it. You get to experience all these different colors that are not found necessarily on the page, in a description of what is true. It's discovered through doing it, and finding out, and being willing to be surprised by what we find. And then to go an extra step and allow ourselves to embrace what we find, and then let it go, so we can find new aspects.

That has been a great guide for me. When I was working as a chaplain I was introduced to a style of learning which I've found very helpful. It's act, reflect, act again. The style of learning is to start doing something before you know what you're doing.



It's very different from other styles where you're taught that you should study and learn before you attempt to try something new. In this style, you enter a situation and do your best without knowing what you're doing.

There is an openness, receptivity, and sensitivity that comes with doing that, and developing that willingness I find is very helpful. Being willing to enter a situation that I know going in I don't fully understand. Then after exiting that situation, reflecting on what happened; what was wonderful, what was hard, what was enjoyable, what was confusing. Reflecting with others, taking apart the situation and analyzing it. Then go back out into a similar situation and repeat the process. Enter the unknown, learn from it, go back into the unknown. I've come to see that's not just true for intense situations, but just about every situation.

I was called late at night, around midnight, after a building had exploded in downtown Youngstown. The news on television was assuming it was a gas leak, but there was no official word yet.

The news was very vague if anyone was in the building when it exploded. So when I got a call from police dispatch, I had a feeling what was coming. I'm usually called when there is a death of some kind: an overdose, someone is shot, there's a bad accident. I wished I wasn't right, but I was. They said please come down to the site of the explosion, they've found a young man inside, and his mother has been standing outside for hours now. Once we get confirmation, and can ID the young man, we would like you to notify his mother. This is obviously an intense and unknown situation. I had never been in that exact position before, but at that point I knew it was my turn to enter into the unknown. And what I found when I went there, was not what I expected fully. When I arrived, one of the police officers came up to me and said: "I know this woman." He told me: I've had to watch her stand outside for hours, and I know it's her son who was found in there. But I can't tell her, not until they do the official ID from the coroner, but I already know it's him.

And then he said something which was a surprise to me, and not something I came into the situation expecting. He said I'd like to help. I'd like to be there when you notify her. When we received confirmation, we both went to her together. When I told her it was her son, the police officer also felt permission to be fully human. He knew her, and he effortlessly gave her a hug, as they both cried together. The worst day of her life, and a small act of compassion. We just stayed with her. We stayed until she was ready to be driven home. The worst day of her life, and I wondered what she would say is true about her life. And I wouldn't presume to have the answer.

And I've learned in situations like this, and in far less intense situations, having an answer or a sense of what is true was never the point. The point was to be there, to be in relationship, to enter the unknown. To enter the unknown, to learn just enough, to enter the unknown again.

To trust there may be something worthwhile there, however small or fleeting. One smile. One hug. One cry. One act of connection. It opens a door, and with the help of a community like this, we learn how to more fully step through that door. Not knowing what we'll find or who we'll be, but stepping through it anyway. And doing that with other people who are teaching us all the possible ways to move through the world. All the possibilities. Loving this struggle and discovery may be more important than what we find. Developing the willingness to be open and changed. To keep going until we discover an uncommon joy, which on one level makes no sense, and on another makes all the sense in the world.