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February 7, 2016
“Do Something Impossible”

Call to Worship:

Edward Everett Hale:

“I am only one. But still I am one. I cannot do everything. But still I can do something. And because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.”

Personal Point: Riley Hellinger

Reading “The Chair Men” by Robert Fulghum from “What On Earth Have I Done?”

We say the young have much to learn, but I find that they know and do things unfamiliar to me, so I am pleased to learn from them when I can. Example: Two young college students asked me for a ride, because they were late to work. Their summer construction job was near my office so I was glad to oblige. On the way, I asked, “Besides working hard and playing hard, what’s happening in your lives?”

They exchanged glances. Then one said. “We are eating a chair.”

What?

Yes. It seems that their college philosophy teacher gave them an extra-credit assignment: *Do something unique and memorable – not dangerous or foolish, but something creative, inventive and instructive. Write it up and explain what was learned and how it might apply to your philosophy of life.*

So. They are eating a chair.

They bought a plain wooden kitchen chair at an unfinished furniture store. Using a wood rasp, they have been shaving away at the chair, mixing the dust into their granola for breakfast, and sprinkling the dust on their salads at dinner. So far they have consumed most of a leg, two rungs and a back piece. And while they don’t want to overdo it, the pace is picking up. Still the project may not be finished before summer’s end, so they may enlist friends, who, it seems, are enthusiastically willing to help eat a chair.

And yes, they consulted a physician to make sure the wood dust was not harmful. And no, it doesn’t taste bad – especially if they mix in a little cinnamon at breakfast and a little lemon pepper at dinner. And, yes, they have learned a few things along the way.

“Like what?” I asked.

Like how amazing long-time goals can be achieved in incremental stages. Like how something seemingly idiotic affects your thinking about other things you do.

For example, they routinely run about fifteen miles a week to stay in shape – around and around a lake. They wondered where fifteen miles a week would take them if they ran in a straight line. So they got a road map and have been marking off the mileage, headed south.

They could be in Portland, Oregon, in a couple of weeks. But that's boring, so they have a European map now and are starting out in Vienna headed for Athens. Using guidebooks they're figuring out what there is to see and do along the way. They're touring the world in their minds. And, of course, they're very pleased with themselves. They're sure they'll astound the professor when he asks for their report. "We ate a chair."

"It will blow the dude away," said one.

For all the goofiness of the project, these young men are learning patience and perseverance. Some things cannot be had except on a little-at-a-time, keep-the-long-goal-in-mind, stay-focused basis.

Time for All Ages

"Do something unique and memorable – not dangerous or foolish, but something creative, inventive and instructive. Write it up and explain what was learned and how it might apply to your philosophy of life."

Our worship theme is change, and sometimes it just takes a little change to see the world in a whole new way.

(Debra instructs crowd in drawing exercise. First we do "wrong" or "non-dominant" hand; then we do "right" or "dominant hand." Between each, ask how it felt; compare drawings, etc.)

Reflection: Do Something Impossible

Our spiritual exercise this month is "Do something impossible." Do something unique and memorable—not dangerous or foolish, but something creative, inventive and instructive, and reflect on how that changes your life.

What "I can't" might you change to "I can"?

What "chair" could you "eat"?

How might your life change if you try something you always thought was impossible?

Whatever chair you choose to eat, don't just do it to prove that you're brave, daring, or clever. Pick something that you think will make you look at life differently—like it is wide-open with possibility!

Sometimes a really simple change can help us see the world in a whole new way.

The activity we did this morning, drawing with our "wrong" hand, was inspired by my esteemed colleague Roger Paine, who I worked with for seven years during my time at First Parish in Lincoln.

He told a story about at time he took an art class with an artist named Agnes Carbrey.¹ She was trying to teach the class how to draw with charcoal, and one day she had her students pair off, and take turns drawing head-and-shoulders portraits of their partner.

¹ Roger's whole story here is taken from his sermon "Drawing Faith with the Wrong Hand" preached at Rev. Stephanie May's ordination, April 13, 2014.

But as we did it this morning,
she told them they had to draw it with their “wrong hand.”

The class groaned.
Agnes told them to look right at their partner’s face,
take charcoal in hand, start drawing, and don’t look down until they’d finished an entire line.

As you have recently experienced, when you try to draw with your wrong hand, your strokes
won’t behave,
you don’t have any of your usual control—
but at least your inner critic is thinking:

“This is bound to be bad—how could it not be?”

Roger’s partner was a wiry man in his sixties named Bob with a kind, angular face and short
white hair.
After five minutes, Roger’s charcoal portrait of Bob had made him look like a serial killer.

Roger was busy trying to fix it, to make him “look better,” when Agnes snatched his drawing
away from him.

“It’s finished,” she said.

They were then asked to draw their partner’s face once more—this time using their “right hand.”

When they were all done, Agnes hung up the “right” and “wrong” hand portraits side by side.

And for every single person in the class, their “wrong hand” portrait was more interesting, more
promising—
bolder, wilder, and more energetic.

In fact, Roger said his wrong-handed portrait of Bob
was the only good thing he drew in that class,
and Bob asked to have it—
Bob thought there was a hint of Chagall in the disfigured lines.

So as we go into this month of Change, I am wondering, as Roger’s experience made him
wonder:

“Can we give ourselves the freedom to draw our faith, our beliefs—and our churches—
with the ‘wrong hand?’
Which is to say: without any of our usual control—
in the worthy hope that as a result,
our beliefs and our churches will be
more interesting, more promising:
bolder, wilder, and more energetic?”

Because our beliefs matter—they shape us—
and they can shape the wider world.”

If we believe we can't change ourselves, if we believe we can't change the world, well, then we can't.

Dorothy Day worked her whole life to fight poverty and war, one person and protest at a time. A disheartened person asked her, “What is the sense of our small effort?” She replied:

“... We must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time.
A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread in all directions.
Each one of our thoughts, words, and deeds is like that.
Don't sit down and feel hopeless.
There is too much work to do.”

“We cannot do everything. But still we can do something.”

The college students Robert Fulghum met were challenged by their professor to do something unique and memorable, something creative, inventive and instructive.
And when they answered that challenge by eating a chair, all of a sudden they started to realize they could do all kinds of things.

“Amazing long-time goals can be achieved in incremental stages...something seemingly idiotic [can affect] your thinking about other things you do.”
The impossible starts to seem more possible.
It could be as simple as saying, “On the other hand...”

There's another reason why our worship theme this month is Change.
As students—and hopefully adults too—take this month as a chance to learn more about Black History,
we can remind and rededicate ourselves to continuing to seek change, continuing to seek justice in America.

Here is one last story about what can happen if we let our minds open to the possibility of change,
if we realize it is time to draw our faith with a different hand.

In the 1950s, America was entering the social revolution for civil rights. White churches were debating and discussing integration and justice issues.
At First Unitarian in Chicago, the minister was outspoken in his call for racial justice.
Some people agreed with him, but others did not.
One night, a board member called a secret meeting,
excluding the minister,
and when the board was gathered, he:

...began to complain, suggesting that this was politics,
not religion, from the pulpit;

that it was alienating people, including him and his wife; and that both the minister and the church should be “more realistic.”

The other board members raised the question,
“What is the purpose of a church?”
They asked their fellow board member:

Did he want the church only to make people feel comfortable?
Only to confirm them in their prejudices and not morally challenge them?

“Well, no,” the so-called “realist” admitted.

“Then what *is* the purpose of a church?” the others kept asking.

“How should I know?” the man said. “I’m no theologian.”

“But you’re a member here, and a trustee of this church,” said [the board,] refusing to let him off the hook.

... The discussion continued until about 1 a.m., when fatigue combined with the Holy Spirit and the man blurted out,
“Well, I guess the purpose of this church is, uh, to get hold of people like me, and change ‘em.”²

I’ve been familiar with that story for a long time, a classic told by James Luther Adams, a Unitarian scholar who was on that board of trustees and there at that meeting. Re-reading it this week, I noticed something new in this story. This story is not about one person convincing a doubter that there is a “right” way. This story is about the community living the questions and staying in conversation, even when the conversation got hard. It’s a story about every person in the room taking leadership, speaking their minds, and seeking meaning and purpose even when it meant disagreeing with a friend; and it was about how even the tiniest change— one man, one change of mind— can be a part of the huge arc towards justice.

“I am only one. But still I am one.
I cannot do everything.
But still I can do something.
And because I cannot do everything,
I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.”³

² James Luther Adams was on the board of the church at this time and related this story. It has been paraphrased in many sources; I got this version from *Our Chosen Faith*, by John Buehrens and Forrest Church, pg 65-66.

³ Edward Everett Hale, as used in the Call to Worship.

This handful of people refused to give up on each other.
Instead of drawing a picture of the church with the same hand of dominance they always had,
together they imagined drawing a new picture, in a new way.
It is a picture that we are still striving for today,
a world that is more interesting, more promising—
bolder, wilder, and more energetic.

May we, this month, find ways to draw our faith with the wrong hand.
Do something impossible.
“Don’t sit down and feel hopeless.
There is too much work to do.”

And so let us rise and may our singing carry us into the future, with hymn number 12, “O Life
that Maketh All Things New.”