

Wake Now Our Vision
September 17, 2017
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This all started when I was walking down the street in New Orleans this past June. I was there for the Unitarian Universalists Associations General Assembly, which is the business meeting of all the representatives from Unitarian Universalist churches across the country.

And it was Monday, the conference had ended on Sunday and my flight wasn't until that afternoon. So I had some free time, and, to my surprised I had been convinced by a friend of mine to try out something that felt very New Orleans to me, and that was to go to a Tarot Card reader.

Now, I can be a bit of a skeptic about these things. At least, I definitely used to be. A younger version of myself would have scoffed at the idea of me spending my hard earned money on what I perceived to be as someone just reading my reactions. But then again, a younger version of me would be pretty upset that I'm a Minister right now, so it's probably best not to listen to him.

In any case, the curious part of me won out over the skeptical part of me as I wandered in the French Quarter and happened upon a Tarot Reading card place that actually had some slots available for that morning. And as I sat nervously and skeptically waiting, I wasn't sure if I was comforted or horrified by the woman who was sitting in the waiting area with me wearing a "March for Science" t-shirt as she waited for her own reading.

And so I told myself that it didn't matter if it's real or not, I'm just going to act as if it is and keep myself open to the possibilities and I can decide later what was valuable to me or and what was not.

And then I was called in. The woman who was about to do my reading starts by asking me a few questions: Who am I, why am I in New Orleans, what do I do, that sort of thing. And so, since I'm about to start this new position as the Minister here, I begin by telling her that.

And she starts flipping over the cards. "You're very spiritual, and this new job is going to really help you grow spiritually" she says. How did she know??! Oh right, I literally just told her that I'm a Minister.

"And I see you.... Going to another conference sometime this year." Ok. Broad enough statement. I'm literally traveling for a conference right now. Not something so surprising.

And then she flips over another card.

“This is good, you are going to be very successful.” she says. “How many people go to your church?”

“I think there are about 75 members,” I say.

“Oh, this is going to be really good. I see at least 200 by the end of the year.” She says.

“Uh, um, really?” I stammer in reply, “200, huh? By December.”

“At least,” she says.

Now, ok, I think there must be about 40 people here this morning. And, I’m just going to be honest with you right now, we are not going to get 125 more people as members before December. It’s just not the way it works.

Now, this is really interesting to me, because this woman, who I later found out doesn’t go to church at all, somehow knew immediately that what people want from a new minister is for the church to grow. And by grow, I mean add more members.

And every church that I interviewed with when I was looking for a church had more or less the same question, how will you help the church grow? And to that I always had the same answer: The first question we have to ask is *why* you want to grow as a church. For what purpose?

Because, my friends, growing membership is great, but it can’t be a goal in and of itself if we don’t know why we are doing it.

A church that is larger in membership can, and maybe perhaps should, be a symptom of other ways the church is living out its vision.

Now, over the past few years this church and its leadership has developed a vision statement that details how they want to see the church in five years:

“We, the people of First Parish, are a welcoming mid-size congregation that brings its love beyond the walls of our church. We share our worship and gathering space with neighbors and allies for progressive change. We are challenged by our UU Principles and committed to justice and compassion for all, on Sunday and every day.”

Now, before I go on, I think it’s important to say that a vision statement is not about our

sight and what we can see with our eyes. It's about what we can envision in our hearts and minds as the reality for this community.

When you worked to envision who you would be in five years, it did include membership growth – right now we are a small congregation, in five years we hope to be a mid-size one.

But it wasn't JUST about membership growth. It's about other kinds of growth as well.

It's about being welcoming. It's about bringing the love of this congregation beyond the walls and into the community. It's about sharing our space – our worship space and our gathering space with our neighbors and our allies for progressive change. It's about living out the Unitarian Universalist Principles (which, if you aren't familiar with them – and let's face even if you are you could always use a refresher - are in the front of your grey hymnal). It's about a commitment to justice and compassion. And it goes beyond Sunday morning worship.

This year we are going to explore that vision together. Each month in worship we will explore a different aspect of this vision and how we can go about making it a reality together.

So the question I have for you, that I want you to contemplate over the next year, is how are we going to live into this vision? And how will you specifically help us live into that vision?

Because our world right now is so in need of that message of love, that message of justice and compassion. We need to bring it beyond our walls. We need the imagination to envision a world that is different than it is. Our UU Principles, all seven of them, are not beliefs, but rather visions of what our world could be. We do not live in a world where the inherent worth and dignity of every person is respected, but we can imagine and envision a world in which that is true. And we recognize our parts in making it a reality.

Maybe not in our lifetime. Maybe not in our children's lifetime. As we hear in our reading today, "we help create the foundation, which comes atop the foundation already created for us."

It's planting seeds in a garden we never get to see. (That's a lyric from Hamilton – yes, scripture is everywhere).

This five-year vision of this congregation really goes far beyond that. It's something we will continue to strive for and to create and to make better and better. Until one day we

are gone and the people who come here thank us for that vision. Just as we can thank those who came before us.

At the end of my session with my Tarot Card reader, after I had finished talking to her about this church, and asking her questions about my family and my love life, after the session was over, she had one question for me:

Can you tell me about your church? I'm surprised to see a Minister here. Many priests I know wouldn't think this kind of thing I'm doing was ok. I am looking for a community where I can be accepted a woman who is divorced, a place where I can bring my kids, somewhere that doesn't hate gays. I want to go somewhere where my views will be accepted. I want to be a better person, but I don't want to be shamed for who I am. Could I go to your church?

"Absolutely," I said.

If there are others like her in the world, perhaps her vision for our future wasn't so wrong after all.

There are a few things we can learn from my visit to the Tarot card reader when we think about our vision here at this congregation:

Looking into the future, something that both Tarot card readers and church vision statement creators attempt to do, requires a little bit of a leap of faith. We have to ask the skeptical voices inside us to be quiet for a moment, and be willing to act as if what we are saying is true. It requires us to listen with an open heart to ideas that might seem impossible. It means trying new things. It means welcoming people who need this churches messages of love, justice and compassion, even if we didn't expect that they would.

This vision of this church is one that is so badly needed in our world right now. Let us envision it together and act as if it was so.

And let us say together Amen, Amen.