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CROSSING THE BRIDGE TO SHALOM

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The title I picked for this Sunday, "Crossing the Bridge to Shalom" might suggest to some people that shalom is a place, but it is not a place, either real or imaginary. In Judaism, shalom is one of the underlying principles of the Torah, the first part of the Hebrew Bible. "Her ways are pleasant ways and all her paths are shalom". "The Talmud (a central text of Judaism, composed of teaching and commentary on the Torah) explains, "The entire Torah is for the sake of the ways of shalom". Maimonides, the medieval Sephardic scholar of the Talmud, comments "Great is peace, as the whole Torah was given in order to promote peace in the world, as it is stated, 'Her ways are pleasant ways and all her paths are peace.'"¹ Shalom is a state of mind, a deeply cherished value, and a way of life to be striven for.

Although, in fact, the word "peace" crops up so often in definitions of shalom, you might have the impression that the word only means that. Yet like the Hawaiian "aloha", the Sanskrit "namaste", the Arabic "salaam" and others, it encompasses many different meanings. It can also mean hello and goodbye, it can refer to an absence of conflict, both interpersonal and societal, but the deeper nuances of the word are too often overlooked. Scholars usually tell us that shalom, simply put, is the way things are supposed to be. The word means wholeness, completeness, and fulfillment. It is NOT some anemic notion of "making nice", but in the recent words of our nation's president in his speech given in Selma, Alabama, requires "the occasional disruption, the willingness to speak out for what's right and shake up the status quo."²

This deeply cherished value, this way of life we yearn for, if realized, would know all beings to have what they need for a good life. If realized, all of us would manifest care and justice and would accept responsibility for the condition of the world around us. I will call to your minds Rev. Don's distinction earlier this month between receiving as a guest and giving as a host. He was talking about stewardship of this church, but the distinction holds true for shalom as well. We receive the wholeness and fulfillment of shalom if we consider ourselves guests, but a depth of commitment is expressed when we assume the responsibilities of hosts, giving shalom as a gift to our church, country and world.

It doesn't require extraordinary powers of perception to see that we have a way to go. If shalom is sort of a combination of peace and justice or universal flourishing, then even a casual glance at a newspaper tells us that **this ain't it**. The world is incredibly beautiful still, and yet that beauty is threatened by our refusal to give up an unsustainable life style. Babies charm us with their laughter and we quote the startling insights of children, but we are not yet able to control the violence within us and prevent the 33,000 lives, too many of

¹ In the book *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*, author [Cornelius Plantinga](#) described the Old Testament concept of shalom:

² Obama, Barack, speech given on the Edmund Pettus bridge in Selma for the observation of the 50th anniversary of the March on Selma.

them children and teens, lost to guns every year. We pay lip service to “respecting women” and giving them equal treatment under the law, and yet that whole business of Pennsylvania women making \$.76 for every dollar a man makes for doing the exact same work hasn’t outraged us enough to change it. And still, 1 woman in 5, IN THIS COUNTRY, will be the victim of domestic violence or sexual assault in her lifetime.

I could go on for a long time, but I think you get the point. There’s a gap between the state of shalom that we dream of and the state of affairs that we actually have. I didn’t touch on racism, homophobia, classism, or the poison we injected into our government when we amended our constitution to declare corporations to be “persons”. Only thirty-six% of people registered to vote came out in the last election. Why bother, when big money can buy an outcome?

And yet, the prospect of shalom, the way of wholeness, still gives pause. When we as a denomination, when we as a nation, grapple with the gap between our dreams and our reality, we can choose to reorient ourselves to our purpose, our values. Both this nation and this denomination grew as an expression of high ideals. Both have known their share of dissidents. Both have sometimes grown dissatisfied with the status quo.

Integrity is often seen as consistency between our behavior and our professed values. Living a life of integrity requires that we be willing to assess and reassess our actions in the light of what we say we believe.

Jessica York of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations (UUA) tells the following story. It offers insight into one such reassessment.

“In 1948, most congregations and houses of worship in the United States were segregated by the color of their members’ skin. The First Unitarian Society of Chicago was one of these congregations. Although their church was located in a neighborhood with many African Americans, only whites could join, according to the written by-laws of the church.

The day came when many members began to believe they needed to take action against racism if they really wanted to live their values and principles. Their minister, Reverend Pennington and member James Luther Adams proposed a change in the church’s by-laws to desegregate the church and welcome people whatever the color of their skin. They saw this as a way to put their love into action.

When the congregation’s board of directors considered the desegregation proposal, most of them supported it. However, one member of the board objected. He said, “What if some members don’t believe this?”

The debate went on in the board of directors' meeting until the early hours of the morning. Finally, James Luther Adams asked the person who had voiced the strongest objection, "What do you say is the purpose of this church?"

The board member who opposed opening the church to people of color finally replied. "Okay, Jim. The purpose of this church is to get hold of people like me and change them."

*The First Unitarian Society of Chicago successfully desegregated.*³

In the language invented by leadership expert Ron Heifetz, The First Unitarian Society of Chicago had successfully grappled with an adaptive challenge.⁴ Heifetz is the King Hussein bin Talal Senior Lecturer in Public Leadership, Founding Director of the Center for Public Leadership at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, and co-founder of Cambridge Leadership Associates. He is highly respected in his field and his is the model currently in use by the UUA.

Heifetz makes a distinction between technical problems and adaptive challenges. A technical problem is one that can be fixed by application of a tool that a person or organization or society currently has. In contrast, an adaptive challenge is one for which the means to resolution is not known already by the person or organization or society. It is more difficult and requires that the one facing the challenge step outside of their own default ways of operating to learn and yes, even change. The First Unitarian Society of Chicago decided that their religious values required that they acknowledge their own discriminatory practices and change accordingly. The vignette I read kind of glosses over how long it took, referring to one long night of debate, but I'd be willing to bet the proposed change to their bylaws was debated for a LONG time before it came to a head. One of the characteristics of a successful response to adaptive challenge is that it takes a long time; many years of unsuccessfully trying "quick fixes" and "putting on band aids" may be part of that characteristic.

Typically, a technical response to a problem is the first thing tried. It is so much easier to ask an expert in to make the problem go away. Heifetz uses the example of a heart patient to illustrate part of the difference.

It is not easy to perform heart surgery, but it is common enough for us to consider it well within our "arsenal" of tools. It is a viable technical fix. However, getting a patient to change their lifestyle to prevent further heart disease is another matter. Heifetz is a medical doctor

³ York, Jessica. *Harvest the power*. workshop 5: story about James Luther Adams, UUA.

⁴ Heifetz, Ronald Abadian, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, Harvard Business Review Press: Cambridge, 2009.

and former clinical instructor at Harvard Medical School, so he is close enough to this scenario to understand the dynamics. The patient must change their eating habits, must incorporate exercise into their daily routine, must stop smoking if they smoked before and since we know that eating, exercising, and the decision to smoke or not smoke are conditioned by the people we hang out with, we may have to make changes THERE as well.

The success rate for heart surgery is fairly high. The success rate for getting people to change their diet and exercise habits-not so much. These things require change-almost never an appealing prospect. Heifetz says that it's not so much change that people resist; it's that they resist the loss that change brings. Sometimes people deny or hide their discomfort with loss, but when we look hard at resistance to a prospective adaptive challenge, there's always some loss involved. Loss of identity, feeling of competence, comfort, or security, loss of reputation, loss of time and/or money, loss of power, control, status, or independence are all significant, besides the more obvious loss of job, resources and even life. Loss, and the accompanying grief.

Heifetz writes that there is no such thing as a broken system. All systems work well to further the ends they were created for. If the context in which those ends were created changes, then the ends need to change as well. Revisioning a system's purpose may mean learning and adapting to altered circumstances, with the resultant experience of loss. I don't think I'm going out on a limb when I say that none of us really seek experiences of loss and that, in fact, we try hard to avoid them. This makes the prospect of an adaptive challenge hard to face and the temptation to look for technical fixes very seductive.

There are three primary indicators of an adaptive challenge being treated as a technical problem: recurrent conflict around the same issues, a long string of attempted relatively easy fixes to a problem that haven't worked and a continual turning to the formal leadership for solutions.

The leadership required in such circumstances is not what we commonly think of as leadership. Generally, what's expected of leaders is to successfully apply technical fixes-and we prefer that those fixes be fast and cheap. Leaders who point out the need for change aren't usually popular. As I said before, change brings some kind of loss and we don't like that. But the leadership required to work through an adaptive challenge must have the integrity to persevere and endure "even at the cost of personal convenience or comfort".⁵

⁵ Garrett, Rev. Don, UU-Link, March 2015.

So, the next time someone asks us to change, we could remember the real risk the person doing the asking is taking. Yes, I suppose it is easy to blow it off as an integrity issue. And yes, sometimes we make it tough to act with integrity. Doing that takes considerable courage.

Maybe a practical application would help to fill out the picture I'm painting. One of the real life examples of adaptive leadership cited by Heifetz in his book "Leadership without Easy Answers" is that of Lyndon Johnson's role in the civil rights movement.⁶ For those of you who have seen the movie "Selma", you need to understand that President Johnson wasn't quite as unsympathetic a person as he is portrayed there. In the movie, he dismisses the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's request to ease unfair restrictions on voting to allow participation by African Americans. The movie suggests that Johnson thought this couldn't be done, but Heifetz portrays him differently. According to Heifetz, Johnson knew that the American people would not take the problem seriously enough to really challenge the racist status quo regarding voting in Selma until they saw the whole ugliness of black life there. The brutalization and violence inflicted on black bodies were no longer something they heard rumors about or something that happened in other places. Once they saw it for themselves, on their own TV sets, doing something about it became a moral imperative. Clergy, including UU minister James Reeb and lay people, including UU congregant Viola Liuzzo flocked to Selma to help.

When those ordinary people crossed the bridge at Selma, they expressed, in the words of our nation's president "the belief that America is not finished, that we are strong enough to be self-critical, that it is in our power to remake this nation to more closely align with our highest ideals."⁷

And change DID occur. Is it enough? No! Is our culture still hostile and violent to minorities? Yes, absolutely. But we do have the capacity to mature and change and in a changing world, indeed, in a world that changes faster than it ever has before, we need this capacity more than we ever have before.

May we be such people. May we continue to cross the bridge to shalom.

⁶ Heifetz, Ronald Abadian, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1998.

⁷ Obama, Selma speech March, 2015