

Shared Ministry

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The Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley

How many of us really know where we came from, what we are, and where we are going? As David Eaton wrote, our destiny is to travel from the unknown through the known of life to the unknown beyond. “Mystery – mystery – life is a riddle and a mystery.”

We may not know the answers to some of the big questions, but we can find the answers to some questions by coming together in our community of faith. Our journey may be mysterious but choosing to travel together on that journey gives us relationships and opportunities to know and be known, as we come to understand our selves and each other, even if we’re still not sure where we’re going.

Are you getting everything you need? I mean, are you getting what you need here – in this congregation. Unitarian Universalist consultant Glenn Turner has said that, “People come to our congregations seeking intimacy and spiritual growth. And we give them committee meetings and Sunday morning worship. Neither of these adequately meets those needs.”

Years ago when I was in college, I was startled to discover that people could write on the walls. People wrote a lot of pretty crude things, but the fevered pitch of academic work also produced a lot of scholarly graffiti. One that I remember was philosophical. It was a fictional debate among three philosophers. It went something like this: “To be is to do.” – Thomas Aquinas. “To do is to be.” – Rene Decartes. “Do-be-do-be-do.” – Frank Sinatra.

On one level, this is a clever joke, using nonsense syllables from Sinatra’s song, “Strangers in the Night” to poke fun at philosophers’ overwrought efforts at resolving their conflicts between being and doing. But, on another level, Sinatra’s solution to the problem may be the most accurate one we have. Being and doing

are not separate things, and we confuse the issue when we try to think of them that way.

Albert Einstein, in his theory of relativity, stated that matter and energy are the same thing. This means that what we think of as solid objects are actually to be complex patterns of energy interacting on a very small scale. And, in many ways, energy patterns can also function as things: for example, we talk about magnetic fields as though they were things, when they're really nothing but energy.

One consequence of this is that it challenges the structure of our language. It points out that the way we speak of many things is neither accurate nor true. For example, it breaks down the difference between nouns and verbs. The objects we call "things" are really patterns of subatomic energy. Things are not nouns; they are verbs. The boundary between being and doing breaks down: do be do be do.

When I joined the Community Church of Chapel Hill many years ago, I did it to get a thing. I wanted a resource; I wanted a place to go. But what made joining that church rewarding was what I did there after I joined. I listened to sermons that provoked, stimulated and challenged me. I met people who were varied and interesting. I talked with them and learned about their lives. I made friends. And I joined the choir and sang with a group of people every week in a way that was both uplifting and liberating.

I joined to get something; what I got was something to do. It was the doing that made church worthwhile and rewarding.

In many ways, the fundamental image for a community of faith like ours is the pot-luck supper. Each person brings a little something that might not be much on its own – it wouldn't even be a very good meal for the one person who brought it. But when everyone brings something to the table, then everyone can share a wonderful, varied, complete dinner together. The shared food and the shared fellowship are a blending of things and actions that come together to create something that wasn't there before.

There's a story I like called "Stone Soup." It takes place in Europe a couple of hundred years ago. This is a time when armies marched back and forth over

the continent to fight each other. For the ordinary people, it didn't much matter what the armies were fighting about, though, because the soldiers helped themselves to food and supplies as they passed by. So soldiers meant trouble to the little people because, whether they were coming or going, whether they won or lost, soldiers took their food.

Well, this story concerns three soldiers who were trying to make their way home. Maybe they were all that was left of a great army; maybe they were deserters; we don't know. The peasants didn't know, either. They just didn't trust the men.

Well, it was a long journey, and the three soldiers needed to eat, but didn't want to steal or hurt anyone any more. When they came into the village, they asked the people if anyone had anything to eat. "No one has any food at all," was all anyone would say. "No food at all? That's too bad," the soldiers replied. "Maybe we can help you. We have the makings of an excellent stone soup that we'd like to share with your village." The villagers had never heard of such a thing. "What is stone soup?" they asked. "Stone soup is the most amazing, delicious, nourishing food you've ever tasted!" the soldiers said.

The villagers asked, "How do you make stone soup?" "It's easy to do, but we'll need your help," the soldiers said. "We've got the most important ingredient, three special stones that will cook up into a great soup. We just need a big pot full of water with a fire underneath and we can make enough stone soup to feed everyone."

The villagers were amazed as the soldiers put their stones into the boiling water. After a while, one soldier tasted the contents of the pot. "How does it taste?" one person asked. "It is good – very, very good. Of course, it would be a little bit better if there was an onion to put in, but since no one has any, that's all right." Someone spoke up, "I think I may have one or two small onions that are almost rotten. But maybe they're good enough for the soup." He was back in a minute. "Let's take a look at them!" said the soldier. And in they went.

"Mmmm! That's better!" the soldiers said as they tasted the broth. "This is just the way stone soup should taste. Delicious! It's too bad there aren't any carrots, because I think it would be even better with just a little taste of carrots."

Someone remembered that they might have had a couple of carrots they could bring, and so on. In this way, people brought potatoes, turnips, cabbage, salt, and finally even a couple of chickens went into the soup pot.

And before long, they had a huge batch of stone soup that was full of every good thing. Everyone who had been hoarding their little bit of food got a return far greater than their donation because they could all share in the wonderful, nourishing soup they'd made together.

And what about the soldiers? Were the stones a fraud, a trick to get the villagers to share their food with them? Maybe. But the stones also represented faith, trust, and hope – without which, there wouldn't have been any soup for everyone to share. The faith that helped create the soup also helped to create a community out of people who had been alienated and distrustful. The joy and happiness they shared along with the soup was as nourishing in its way as the food itself.

In our lives, it can be tempting to hold onto the little bit of good we've got, hide it, don't let anyone know we've got it – they might want to take it away. It might be an onion or a carrot or a dollar, but it might be a few minutes of time or little bit of peace and quiet. It's hard to imagine that could improve our lives by letting go of the things that are important to us.

But that's the way it works. Since the protestant reformation, liberal religion has been based on the idea of the priesthood of all believers. There isn't some priest who has all the good stuff any more. Ministry is something that each person gives to every other person. This is the idea of shared ministry. Everyone takes care of everyone else. I know of a congregation with the mission statement, "You will be cared for and you will be asked to care for others." Like in the stone soup story, everyone gives what they have, and everyone gets back far more than they gave. This is the secret: generosity produces abundance.

If you're waiting to give until you have so much of something that you won't miss it, that time will never come. There will never be a point where there's too much wealth or happiness or spare time. But if everyone shares what they have, then everyone can experience abundance. Even happiness and love are like

that. You don't need to have a lot of them in order to be able to give some away and end up with more than you started out with.

This church already has everything it needs to be a truly great and vibrant liberal religious community; each of you only needs to give the little you have to make a stone soup of gifts and talents and so much love that this congregation could be more wonderful than you've ever dreamed. You only need to share.

There are many different kinds of gifts; and people have different things to offer. There's sometimes a tendency to think that only certain things are of value, and those are what you should give. Stone soup needs all sorts of things to become a feast.

There's a saying that, "If everyone wanted to play the violin, there would be no one to dance the polka." Musicians and leaders and organizers wouldn't make much sense unless people show up to dance! Of all our needs, the need to give is one of the most important needs we have, and one of the most satisfying to fulfill. We all need to give something: the trick is to figure out what we have to offer. So many times people demand things of us that we don't have or don't enjoy or just can't do.

This is why we've put together a survey for you to complete this morning. It doesn't ask you what you want to sign up for. It asks you what you're good at; what you like to do; what you're interested in doing. This is the beginning of a fundamental shift in how we view our church. It's not a set of jobs that need to be filled, or even a bunch of tasks that need to get done. Our church is over 200 people, each of whom need to be connected with the opportunity to share their gifts with the congregation. You don't serve the church as much as serving the church serves you.

When we all serve one another, then our heaven is begun. Let's all share in the dream of making the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley a truly great and rewarding community of faith.