



**NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST CHURCH**

Oh! The Places You'll Go

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It's the season of commencement, of graduation celebrations of all stripes. Whether the particular graduation marks a transition from kindergarten, high school or a doctoral program, commencement marks both the ending and a beginning: one life changing day ushering in a new chapter of life. Congratulations and mazel tov to you and yours if you are celebrating a graduate or are one yourself!

When I graduated from high school, I received a copy of Dr. Seuss's *Oh the Places You'll Go*. I have heard that this is still a popular graduation gift, with its whimsical wisdom for crossing a threshold into a new chapter of life. Young or young at heart, lay or ordained, I am pretty convinced this book is for anyone's ministry, and for our ministries, and for Sara's. After all the stories Sara has told this congregation, I want to tell her one more to send her on her way. Let's listen.

Congratulations!
Today is your day.
You're off to Great Places!
You're off and away!

You have brains in your head.
You have feet in your shoes.
You can steer yourself
any direction you choose.

Out there things can happen
and frequently do
to people as brainy
and footsy as you.

And then things start to happen,
don't worry. Don't stew.
Just go right along.
You'll start happening too.

OH! THE PLACES YOU'LL GO!

You'll be on your way up!
You'll be seeing great sights!
You'll join the high fliers
who soar to high heights.

Except when you don't.
Because, sometimes, you won't.

I'm sorry to say so
but, sadly, it's true
that Bang-ups
and Hang-ups
can happen to you.

You will come to a place where the streets are not marked.
Some windows are lighted. But mostly they're darked.
A place you could sprain both your elbow and chin!
Do you dare to stay out? Do you dare to go in?
How much can you lose? How much can you win?

You can get so confused
that you'll start in to race
down long wiggled roads at a break-necking pace
and grind on for miles across weirdish wild space,
headed, I fear, toward a most useless place.

The Waiting Place...
...for people just waiting.
Waiting for a train to go
or a bus to come, or a plane to go
or the mail to come, or the rain to go
or the phone to ring, or the snow to snow
or the waiting around for a Yes or No
or waiting for their hair to grow.
Everyone is just waiting.

NO! That's not for you!

Somehow you'll escape
all that waiting and staying
You'll find the bright places
where Boom Bands are playing.

On and on you will hike,
And I know you'll hike far
and face up to your problems
whatever they are.

So be sure when you step.
Step with care and great tact
and remember that Life's

a Great Balancing Act.
Just never forget to be dexterous and deft.
And never mix up your right foot with your left.
And will you succeed?
Yes! You will, indeed!
(98 and 3/4 percent guaranteed.)
YOU'LL MOVE MOUNTAINS!
Today is your day!
Your mountain is waiting.
So...get on your way!

Three points from this story, for our congregation's new beginning:

One: Oh the Places you'll go!! A new chapter in ministry is such an adventure!! It's so exciting to imagine the possibilities, for the minister and for the church! The sky seems the limit. I've been looking over the dreams you took time to imagine for our Give Dream Grow pledge drive in March. These dreams are inspiring for us, and challenging. Listen to a few of the possibilities- for new programs:

- A third trip to Esperanza for longer than a weekend!
- That there is development of ministry with people with disabilities (raise awareness and provide resources.)
- We will become better at encouraging and developing lay leadership in the many areas of church life.

Or the new members we might anticipate being transformed by our message of love and justice, and how we might become a more diverse and multicultural community of all generations:

- I dream of Neighborhood Church increasing its outreach to the African American and Latino communities.
- I dream of a more diverse congregation of all races, ages, and social economic levels.

And yet still, there are dreams about the financial strides we will make, and dreams of transforming our facilities and our sanctuary. And I've even heard dreams of the return to choir robes! Yes, oh the places you'll go!!

At the beginning of a new ministry it is so thrilling to explore these possibilities, and to hang on to the hopeful energy and freshness we feel when we imagine them. But we can't do them all, and not all at once.

The key word for us with our dreams is "discernment." In the religious context, discernment is the process of making choices in light of our vision of the biggest dream we have for our church, the most complete picture of our future. In our case, a way of exploring our larger vision is to think about what our congregation would be like when dreams are fulfilled. How will we be different?

Oh, the places you'll go!! The first piece of wisdom to lift up from our story. Which brings us to the second: "I'm sorry to say so but, sadly, it's true that Bang-ups and Hang-ups can happen to you . . . How much can you lose? How much can you win?"

What? No!!! Not for us! Bang-ups? Hang ups? Losing our way together? Yes, it's true. In ministry, conflict and loss is unavoidable. Even the most successful ministries have their challenges. As I mentioned in my sermon last week, at a minimum, life in a diverse Unitarian Universalist religious community is challenging. It requires compromise and a willingness to make mistakes, but also a willingness to forgive. Ministers and members alike, we all need to practice saying the magic words of generative communication. "I'm sorry," "Help me understand," "Thank you." "Please forgive me," and "I love you."

These moments of challenge will be inevitable. How we approach them is up to us. Challenges can divide or create schisms or factions. Challenges can also be opportunities to build consensus, or to be emboldened to take risks.

While I was initially interviewing with the Search Committee, your outgoing board chair Grady Goddard pulled me aside for a pep talk. Always wise, she shared that the thing most people regret at the end of their life is not taking more risks. While this is true, for institutions like churches, risk taking is a communal, not an individual endeavor. We need to discern together what the right risks are to take, and when.

For us, regret may visit us when if we take too large or reckless risks and miss the mark, and conversely if we fail to take the right risks that could take us higher and farther towards our vision. Disappointment may also come as we imagine all of the places we could go and discover the limitations of our ability to take risks. These could come in the form of a scarcity of resources: time, energy, attention or finances.

Already, we have taken a risk to bring the new Sequoyah High School on board with us for the 2016-17 school year, with thanks to Alyssa Bellew and Kirk Dillman for their skillful efforts. This was a risk in line with the highest vision for Neighborhood's facilities and community partnerships. With risks always come consequences—despite our best efforts, we lost the rental income of St. Monica as they found a more appropriate home for their growing school. While creative problem solving has mitigated our losses, we are still projecting a deficit for next year, but not an insurmountable one. Was it a risk we needed to take in line with our larger vision? Absolutely.

Risk taking is required for such adventurous places. With big dreams come big risks. The larger our vision, the greater our risks need to be. The history of our Unitarian and Universalist faith is full of stories of our forebears taking risks on behalf of their dreams. Some of them have taken hold and changed the shape of our faith forever, and some of them have faded away, good ideas which in practicality never truly came to fruition. The Transcendentalist movement of the mid-19th century is a good place to look back and see some of this history. Ralph Waldo Emerson, trained as a Unitarian minister like his father, once said "All life is an experiment.

The more experiments you make the better.” One of the great experiments which has endured throughout history was Henry David Thoreau’s foray into voluntary simplicity on Walden Pond, still a site of pilgrimage for Unitarian Universalists today. Less successful was the Brook Farm experiment in communal living, founded in 1841 by Unitarian minister George Ripley. The dream was to create a community of like-minded souls and activists in West Roxbury, on the outskirts of urban Boston, where each person could contribute according to their gifts and affinities. As it turned out, with little experience in dairy farming, a series of brutal New England winters and a devastating fire, the experiment failed after just 6 short years. Nevertheless, the Brook Farm experiment created a new crop of families and individuals dedicated to progressive schooling and social reform, particularly around the abolition of slavery and economic equality.

These are just two examples of risks in service to a larger vision from the same period in history. Today, we can look at similar experiments in our faith, with emerging Unitarian Universalist church communities like the Sanctuary Boston and Original Blessing popping up, with new visions for how the church can meet the needs of contemporary society. While more prudence and fortitude made for a more sustainable and lasting change, the risk taking pushed our movement forward.

Which brings me to the third point I want to lift up from the story... The waiting place...

Waiting for a train to go
or a bus to come, or a plane to go
or the mail to come, or the rain to go
or the phone to ring, or the snow to snow
or the waiting around for a Yes or No
or waiting for their hair to grow.
Everyone is just waiting.

The story warns of the Waiting Place as a peril for crossing a new threshold, one we should pay attention to. The Waiting Place is a place of inaction, indecision, the place where nothing is happening and nothing changes. The place where all the places you could go get overwhelming, and you end up going nowhere, being stuck. The Waiting Place is sometimes accidental, sometimes it is circumstantial. One doesn’t always have a choice to be in the waiting place.

Today’s Juneteenth celebration of the ending of slavery in Texas, nearly two and a half years after President Lincoln’s emancipation proclamation, which failed to be properly enforced on the state level by resistant Confederate troops. Can you imagine the waiting place for those families and individuals remaining in captivity, while they may have heard of the release of family or friends across state lines? The feelings of frustration and humiliation at continued forced labor and captivity? When incidents like the pool party police assault of black teenage girls in McKinney, Texas continue today, we can perhaps understand why the state was the last in the nation to conform to Lincoln’s declaration. The first Juneteenth was held as a celebration and an affirmation of black life that is inherently free, regardless of the letter or

enforcement law. Not waiting to be told by their captors that they were free, they knew in their hearts knew of their worth, in spite of their bondage. Religious community was often the place where this message was the clearest. The Juneteenth declaration was simply one small step towards greater freedom and equality for Americans of African descent, a struggle which continues today.

The Black Lives Matter movement has joined the chorus of liberation movements in affirming black life and condemning police brutality that threatens that freedom, even as daily incidents, like the pool party assaults continue. In LA County, the movement has been actively putting pressure on a civilian committee tasked with oversight of the Los Angeles Police Department, the Los Angeles Board of Police Commissioners. The movement has been demanding that the Board address the police killing of a mentally ill 25 year old black man named Ezell Ford last August. This Tuesday, in a small but meaningful victory, the board found the majority of the officer's actions out of policy, a report that will now be presented to LA Police Chief and District Attorney for their responses. This is an accomplishment of sustained organizing efforts of a dedicated group of ordinary citizens turned activists—many of whom are mothers of black sons, like Dawn Modkins. In a radio interview, Dawn was asked to speak to her observations about the current needs for justice organizing. She said:

We, as a community, as a society, as those of us who are being most impacted by police violence, we cannot wait for some single leader, a Malcolm X to return, a Martin Luther King to return. Are we waiting for the incidents to stop on their own? Are we waiting for the police to police themselves? We are the leadership we are waiting for, and each of us has a responsibility. If it's not us, then who?

For LA Black Lives Matter, the small victory is a win in community organizing in the face of many losses. As Hannah and other Neighborhood members join the Coalition for Increased Oversight of Pasadena Police in advocating for an Independent Police Audit and appropriate use of body cams, there may be a role for each of us to play. What might it mean for us to heed the warning of the Waiting Place and to join Dawn Modkins as allies in saying we are the ones we are waiting for? All freedom struggles are connected, but not the same. On this LGBTQ Pride Sunday, we lift up the inherent worth and dignity of all people, while knowing that each struggle is unique and worthy of specific, and sustained attention. When Black Lives Matter, All Lives Will Matter.

Throughout this year, you may have felt a little bit like you've been in a Waiting Place here at church. You've heard the message that we will wait . . . we will wait for our ministry to fully start . . . we will wait until our budget is more flush to begin making new dreams . . . and yes, some of this waiting has been necessary, and prudent, and just plain realistic during the transition period after Jim's retirement. There will be some waiting still as I get my feet on the ground and orient more fully to the rhythms of congregational life and a very different landscape, in so many ways.

And yes, there will be some waiting as we need to be cautious in our ambition, our risk taking, heeding our limitations. Discerning together when to wait, and when to act, let us be bold as we cross this threshold, a new adventure in ministry together. Oh, the Places We'll Go!!! I know we are the ones who will make our big dreams a reality!

And as the story goes:

So be sure when you step.

Step with care and great tact

and remember that Life's

a Great Balancing Act.

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Yes! We will, indeed!

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