

As many of you will know, I work at McDonald's in Leamington, I look after the guests in the dining room. Now, from time to time we get duplicated orders of food which we give away hoping to build up good relations with our guests. On the occasion I want to highlight, one too many ice cream sundaes had been made and so I had the delightful task of giving it away to one of our guests. I looked around the dining room and saw a young couple sat alone to my left; their eyes fixed on each other's eyes, hands holding each other's hands across the table, they were deeply into each other. Such hope there was binding them together, such hope in her, such hope in him, hope for union; of heart, perhaps of body, perhaps of life. So, being a softy for hope, I saw the opportunity to advance their affection, and I made my way over to them, with one sundae and one spoon in hand. I felt such sweet anticipation, the sure advance of their affection, as the young man would receive the sundae and gently ... present it ... to his sweetheart. I imagined the smile and confidence sweeping over her lips as she received it. It was a sweet image - soon to be made real. I so want to describe it, that act of love enhanced, achieved right there, in my McDonald's dining room ! With all that in mind I approached and said to the young man, "Please ... forgive the interruption and receive this, compliments of McDonald's." And so the young man turned slightly, said "Thank you" and took the sundae. As he extracted the spoon from its wrapper, he smiled at her, she smiled at him, each in anticipation, and then, he, slowly, took a spoonful of the ice cream ... and shoveled it into his own mouth! What vulgarity ! As that act was repeated ... I could not remain to witness it. I later shared that experience with another young man who had two young women with him, I got as far in the story as offering the sundae and then asked this young man what he would do? With little hesitation he said, "I would eat it."

Oh what loss, what wasted opportunity, what shared hopes shattered as he crumbled, his inner drives revealed, his own hopes shattered on the hurdle of his own ungoverned and thoughtless selfishness. There in McDonald's I cried out, "No, No !"

Such is the pain of good hopes tripped up by the undisciplined hurdles of self-interest, the very hurdles which stop many Churches from achieving their hopes of reaching others, thus, of growing long term viable congregations. And the distinction between those conflicting motives

points us toward the heart of the inner conflict, the biggest hurdle which faces Churches which want to grow.

I am reminded of the refrain from the song by Billy Currington.¹ “Then I heard the ol' man say, (*sing*) 'God is great, beer is good - and people are crazy' ”². People are conflicted by their numerous drives, the result being that people often do things contrary to their own good intentions, frustrating their own hopes, defeating their own goals and objectives.

This self-defeating feature is evident in all parts of human life: in individuals, couples, teams, governments, social groups, and congregations. I have often seen this through all of my life, in my own self, and in the lives of the congregations to which I have belonged and with whom I have worked over sixty years.

Now, the most revealing and problematic times for congregations is when a new minister is called, and that is why I speak on this with you today, my friends in this congregation, at the call of a new minister to serve here.

There are indications that, as should be expected, this danger is at hand for this congregation over the coming years, for I - who still know little about this congregation other than its friendliness, sincerity, and intelligent insights - I heard the warning bells ring out at our most recent, delightfully boistrous celebration at the call of the Rev. Rodrigo to lead this congregation.

President John Upcott there expressed his delight at the call. And as he wrote in the latest Church newsletter, “It was amazing to hear the spontaneous cheers and response of the congregation to the news that the vote was unanimous. We now look forward to a new minister who can help us move forward, but we need to do our part to make this Church be all it can be.” So there is no indication of division or dissent at the call, but I heard a warning bell ring. In the meeting itself, unanimous though it was, on two occasions President John first noted the

¹ A favourite song of ex-FBI Director James Comey “God is great, beer is good - and people are crazy” heard on CBC 04 May 2018, Billy Currington song lyrics: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKpQRjj_WbU&list=RDPKpQRjj_WbU

² There are three substantial talks suggested by this phrase: the functional rather than essential nature of 'gods'; the functional rather than essential goodness of nature; and the functional and essential craziness of people – thus today's ...

majority wish of the membership for growth but alerted us to those, including himself, who did not necessarily see growth as the priority.

The danger however is not with the self-aware difference of priority noted by John, the greater danger is with the presently unaware hurdles to growth residing within those who want growth but have not realised the changes which will be required, changes which will, unavoidably, threaten deep, heart-felt features of this Olinda Church, and of the people dedicated to it. Yet change will be needed.

A simple example. At a recent service I was sat by a long-term UUC member. The choir was singing and performed well, so well that, on impulse, (oh, how sad my lack of self-control), on impulse I started clapping, and others joined in. And that was when my seat-mate said, “That was a good performance, but we don't clap.” To which I, again, I admit, impulsively, responded, “But I do.” Now, was I less comfortable in this Church, was I someone looking for a Church, that would, likely be the last time I would come here. I would feel slapped down, hearing that “We don't adapt to you, you must adapt to us.”

And why not make new people adapt ? This Church has been here for over a century. This membership has been attending, sustaining and working in this church for years, often decades. I can hear the echoes of a membership facing that challenge. “How things get done, who does what, that's important to us, it's part of who we are as Olinda UUC. Change that to suit new people? What do they know about being a Unitarian Universalist Church? Why would we be prepared to change just to accomodate new people? One set of people would want to change one way, others would demand different changes, conflicting changes. Being torn first one way and then another, that's no way to grow anything, that's no way to grow a Church, at least not one I want to belong to - or pay for.”

And now we do get to the heart of the matter. Why does this Church want to grow – and I take that to mean increase in attending and supporting membership. It could grow, I think, but why does this Church want to grow?

The motives and their missions will be varied among us.

Some will see numerical growth as necessary to maintain what has already been sustained here saying, “We have a responsibility to maintain this Church: it is an obligation to our ancestors, an obligation to the history of this Church, an obligation to my family, a need to keep something going that I depend on as my body, and my friends, and my world crumbles.” Now that was and is a valid mission.

Some will see growth as an extension of the mission of this Church, but even that will be varied.

For instance, some will see the mission as maintaining the founding impulse of the Unitarian and Universalist causes in distinction to Orthodox Christianity. That is, the UUC as, essentially a Christian Church with a modern theology and ethic. And that was and is a valid mission.

Others will see the mission in terms of drawing on the wisdom of all of the great religions for personal insight and social cohesion. That too was and is a valid mission.

Yet others will refine that wisdom and see the mission as making real the justice themes inherent in all great religions – particularly the motto, treat others as you would want to be treated if you were in their position – so, they say, “We should become the most inclusive of congregations.” Still others will feel that it is absolutely necessary to publicly and loudly press the justice claims in the world beyond the UUC, in Canada and around the globe. Each of those was and is a valid mission.

Then there are those whose interest is in experiencing and exploring the spiritual in the world, which has always been and remains a valid mission.

There are yet other divides. Some will feel that seekers and new members should integrate into this congregation, others will realise the constricting nature of that desire and, while maintaining the present form they would sponsor a new UUC, based here, funded from here, but free to be whatever it needs to be, wherever, however it needs to be, to make real the mission of this Church within new generations: children, youth, 20 somethings, young family types, high career people, young retirees – which-ever. And each of those has been and remains a valid mission.

Do you see how many variations there are? Do you see how allegiance to some means being

unable to support others? Do you see how the success of one undermines the viability of others, leads to friction, dropping enthusiasm, dropping support? I have seen it before, first hand.

I ministered with one congregation that had successfully grown through several challenges and had developed an amazing drama ministry which raised \$50,000 a year to give to other charities and missions they chose after each play. But as pressure came on the local finances so the money for outside missions was increasingly 'needed', taken to support the local church. As a result they lost the allegiance of most of the leading actors and directors which had been getting their satisfaction from raising and giving that money to outside missions.

But, here, remember, all of those motives, and othes not noted, have entirely valid reasons for existing and expecting support from Olinda UUC. None of them are wrong. None of them invalid. They just tend to be contradictory. In a finite world they are mutually self-defeating. But here is a unifying insight. All of those individually valid motives carry power with their adherents because they reflect the self-image of those adherents. The motives and their mission express who those people are, or at least who they see themselves becoming. So that, to minimize their mission is to minimize them. To have control over their mission is to have control over them. And therein lies the deepest motivational challenge to any of us, and all of us. We want to have some sense of control over ourselves and thus, over our lives, thus over our organizations, our Churches. ³

(An aside ⁴)

As a Church it is possible to respectfully handle most of the varied missions held within a congregation, I and others have had some degree of success in doing so, but the prevailing wisdom among growth consultants is to simply start new congregations with a well defined vision, and to fulfill focused missions excellently, thus largely attracting those who see themselves being fulfilled within that particular kind of mission.

³ Luca Dellanna, *The Control heuristic: explaining irrational behaviour and resistance to change*, Luca Dellanna, April 2017, Kindle edition. (A poorly written but insightful text.)

⁴ *We so want that sense of our world in control that we will project philosophies, royalties and divinities with benign control so that we can serve them and expect thereby to have some control over the results.*

But, within this established Church the missions are varied, thus the options are varied, and the path forward is sure to include failures which stress everyone out. That failure filled path is not to be avoided, it is the way toward increasing strength of character within the leadership, and personal growth within the membership.⁵

Some failure is inevitable. I ministered with another congregation which agreed to fund a two stage advertising program to attract more people, people like themselves, to their Church. The first phase re-introduced the Church to the community, the second was to invite people to specific free social events at the Church. The first phase culminated in an invitation to the Christmas eve' services. When there was little response to that invitation the leadership lost confidence in the program and canceled it to save money for local expenses. Failure is always going to dog progress, what are needed are people who are used to overcoming failure and using it to refine future endeavours. Rick Newman calls such people Rebounders and the on-line version of this talk includes a summary of the nine qualities of successful Rebounders. I commend it to you since our time here is short.

But let us add one more valuable feature, the call made to the Rev. Rodrigo Solan-Quesnel. He and his partner will face the future here with optimism. They should. This is a welcoming and cohesive congregation in a vibrant community. But how they feel after a few years will depend on how well our leadership deals with the variety of missions, some noted above, and their expression, over the first year – the year when people will hang-in, giving the benefit of the doubt to the new minister and to the leadership of the congregation.

We risk putting high stress on Rod and his partner. Under high stress, young ministers have been known to lose all enthusiasm for a congregation or even for the call to minister. Not only will this congregation shape the future of this Church it will also shape the future for Rod and his family. It is an awesome responsibility to call a new minister, particularly a relatively young one, but, there is evident wisdom in this congregation. There is much caring, even love for each other in this congregation. It is possible to succeed together.

⁵ Rick Newman, *Rebounders: how winners pivot from setback to success*, Ballantine Books, N.Y., N.Y. 2012

You have the wisdom to understand and to deal with the dynamics within the membership. You have the love and caring for each other and for Rod and his partner. You have resources beyond those normally found in a congregation of this size and location. You have a vital message uniquely appropriate for the people of this generation. You have a very capable minister who is fluent in the language of two of the dominant cultures now in this area.

May your wisdom and mutual love find the way forward. May your outstanding personnel and significant resources enable you to achieve the specific growth you seek, both in personal terms and in terms of increasing membership within this fine congregation.

Thank you greatly for your welcome to me and to those like me. Thank you for the privilege of speaking with you today.

Nine attributes of Rebounders ⁶

All of the Rebounders I studied exhibit basic qualities that are typically associated with success, but aren't unique to Rebounders. They're relatively intelligent, ambitious, and curious. They want to accomplish things. They're life-long learners, with enough of an open mind to realize there's a lot they don't know. And they are willing to work hard to reach their goals. But that describes a lot of people. Here are the nine additional attributes that give Rebounders an important edge.

All of these qualities are learnable.

1. They accept failure.

... a catchy slogan: Failure is not an option. It might sound good, but for Rebounders, pioneers, visionaries, and other people who accomplish much, failure is a frequent option. That's because they attempt things that are hard to do. Most Rebounders hate to fail. But if it happens, they fail productively. They look for insight that can be gleaned from their failures. ... They're comfortable with the risk of failure because they've worked up to it, usually by overcoming smaller setbacks and learning how to recover. The ability to take prudent risks, the

⁶ Newman, chapter 14 (summarized)

kind of risks most people need to take if they want to be successful, depends on a willingness to accept failure, if it happens.

2. They compartmentalize emotions.

One of the most common attributes of Rebounders is a kind of equanimity that allows them to overcome guilt, blame, anger, and other bad feelings that often accompany setbacks.

3. They have a bias toward action.

Taking purposeful action to fix a problem is one of the hallmarks of resilient people. They do it because they believe they can influence what happens next, instead of capitulating to the vagaries of fate.

4. They change their minds sometimes.

The need to discard old thinking and reprogram your dreams and ambitions is so common that it's practically an adult rite of passage. Yet a lot of people cling too long to ideas that won't get them anywhere. Changing your mind often means you have to be able to recognize your own mistakes and discover the flaws in your own thinking. ...

Modifying your dreams and ambitions is often the best way to attain them.

5. They prepare for things to go wrong.

Rebounders do have a powerful belief in their own ability to control the future – perhaps too much, occasionally – but that's because they've learned through personal experience that effort produces results. They also tend to believe, however, that if they're passive or complacent, they won't get the results they want. Because plans tend to go awry without careful attention, the way weeds grown in a garden if it's not tended regularly. ...

Thomas Keller (*Chef*) ... “In the kitchen it's easy for me,” he said, “Outside of the kitchen, it's a different world. But if I'm not challenging myself, then I'm not progressing either.”

6. They are comfortable with discomfort.

Rebounders don't live just for comfort; they also live for fulfillment. So they're willing to accept hardships and inconveniences as long as they feel they're getting closer to an important goal. ...

Rebounders think of success a bit differently, often regarding discomfort as a small price to pay for the privilege of pursuing their ambitions.

7. They're willing to wait.

Everybody wants to succeed quickly, including Rebounders. Yet many people hit roadblocks and quit points that challenge their dedication at a goal, and a lot of them give up and move on to something that's easier or more convenient. What sets Rebounders apart is the determination to succeed on their own terms, no matter how long it takes. ...

Rebounders don't just wait passively for a lucky break, or do the same thing over and over. They constantly learn and get better, continually improving the likelihood of success until the odds tilt in their favor.

8. They have heroes.

Some Rebounders are romantics, with a surprisingly strong belief in the power of narrative and their own role in something historic. ... many have mentors or role models who guide them and help them frame what they believe in. ...

Heroes help Rebounders set and meet higher standards than they probably would without them.

9. They have more than passion.

Most Rebounders start with passion, but they often discover that passion isn't enough. ... success requires drive, which is a lot more scarce than passion. Thomas Keller called that extra quality desire. ... passion doesn't always get them out of trouble. That takes a higher form of resilience. ...

Adversity is no fun, but it teaches things we can learn no other way. Instead of dreading failure, you may learn to grudgingly cherish it, because it's a unique and fleeting opportunity to learn things that a lot of other people will never be able to know. ...

It is not inherently good when bad things happen. It's up to us to turn a bad situation to our advantage. If growth or knowledge comes from tribulation, it's only through our own effort that it happens.