

My intention for this morning is to begin a conversation with you that will last some time. It's a conversation about our mission. Those in the know say that every congregation should have a mission. Not a page long statement with a bunch of nice sounding words but a mission. Mission, as in a north star, a direction, an all encompassing concept, notion, that ties everything we do together.

A mission is the fundamental reference point for who we are and what we do and how we go about doing it. A mission should reflect who we are as individuals but more importantly, who we are as a congregation, as an entity. A mission should be visible, knowable to the world around us and to all of us within.

A mission essentially captures why we exist as a faith community. As I said, it is a foundational statement of who we are and what we are about.

Needless to say, it's not easy to discern who we are and why we exist. It will take time and effort, and the contributions of us all to determine why we exist. But it is important for us to do so. It's important because it is the glue that binds. It is the north star that guides us. It's the reference point against which all our thoughts, actions and deeds are to be evaluated. If an action, program, project does not support moving our mission forward, we don't do it.

The fundamental question becomes does it support our mission?

Now I suspect that those of us who are heavy into individualism will chaff at the very notion of a collective vision that guides us. We UU's are notorious for our individuality and independence. I suspect, every UU has at some point heard the notion of herding cats. There is a reason for that.

And yet, having an identifiable point of reference is what will hold us together through thick and thin. It will get us all on the same page and moving in a singular direction. It's what allows us, in fact, calls us, to be truly unified. It maximizes our strength, our abilities and efforts. .

Developing a mission is a form of spiritual development. It requires that we consciously think about who we are, who we want to be and what is ours to do in this world. It asks us to go deeper, be more open, maybe even risk being real. It makes explicit what we value, what we hold dear. It reflects who we are and want to be. It becomes a roadmap to our legacy, individually and collectively.

I want to come back to the concept of collectively, or collectiveness. Our seventh principle talks about the interconnectedness of all existence. What does that really mean? Is it a concept, a notion that speaks to what we believe. Is it more than a concept, is it an organizing principle? Is it what we can call truth? If it is a truth, how does it manifest?

If it is a truth, how do we recognize it in real life, in our actions, our deeds? If we are truly interconnected with all of existence, there is no separateness, there is no existential distinction between you and me, them and us, good and bad. If the interconnected web of all existence is real, separateness is an illusion, a myth, a mere distraction. A distraction that subverts the truth of connection. If interconnectedness is more than a concept, how do we recognize it in our lived lives?

In a real sense, this notion of interconnectedness is scary. It flies in the face of me, you, them, should and should not. Interconnectedness flies in the face of better and worst, up and down, in and out, good guys and bad guys; those in the know and those who just don't get it! Interconnectedness takes away our self-determination of superiority, better than. Interconnectedness takes away our ability to be primarily self-referential. And our egos rebel.

Ask a star athlete on a team. Individual achievement is no longer the criteria of evaluation. I may be tremendously good, but if the team regularly loses, so what? That's the beauty of team work, that's the wonderful lesson of team play. It teaches a fundamental truth: we need each other. A team may be successful built around an individual player, but it will not ultimately thrive.

Team spirit is an ephemeral concept, you can't really define it, but it is a potent force, and any coach, every successful team knows it. The military, police, even companies, often go to great lengths to create it, to build it, to leverage it. Common terminology regularly includes the notion of family.

There is a reason for that. I think our culture understands, maybe all cultures understand that family comes first, before you or me. We are but a part of something bigger. Family is the glue, the unifying force, not the individual, at least conceptually.

So whose are you? Whose are we? To whom or what are we willing to be accountable? Who or what are we willing to use as our reference point? That's what it all boils down to, who, or what, outside of ourselves, are we willing to use as a primary reference point?

People who are very successful, are very clear about their priorities. A big time attorney generally puts work first, and family second, even their own health may come second or third or not even show up on the priority list. We do know this, we do recognize this dynamic in the various ways it manifests in our own lives.

The spouse or partner that puts self ahead of coupledness, weakens that partnership. We do know this. The parent that puts work ahead of family has a very real impact on the nature of their family dynamics. It is not necessarily fatal, or even inappropriate, but it is real none-the-less. If one travels a lot for work or play, the rest of the system has to accommodate for the fact.

Think about marriage vows, at least the marriage vows of yore. "I take you to be my wife, my husband". I take you to be mine!!! That's what those words mean. You are no longer someone else's. Father's traditionally give their daughters away—give them away—implying they belonged to them, the family. Let's not get crazy with our analysis and view this as wholly sexist and inappropriate. Let's just see it in its simplest terms.

A daughter belongs to the family of birth, until she no longer belongs to that family. At some point, she belongs to a new family, her own family that's beginning, being created through marriage or the like. This is often a momentous occurrence. I've seen it. Hard, manly men, giving their daughters away can bring tears. It's a life passage, a turning of the page.

Whose are we? Whose am I? To whom or what am I willing to be accountable?

When I say I am my mother's child, mother is the reference point. Not me, she is central to the concept. When Mormons or other religious people go on missions, go out into the world, they go not with self as the reference point. They go with their faith commitment as the reference point, the basis on which decisions and behavior are based.

When we UUs covenant to be in right relations with one another, being in right relations becomes the reference point, not you, not me, but we, the relationship. And it's not easy to do. It's maybe easy to say, but it takes work, because we have egos that want to keep us separate. We have beliefs we want to hold on to, we have shoulds. Letting go of our ego drives and our shoulds in deference to "we" and "us" is a sign of maturity, of spiritual maturity.

I believe when we become members of anything, especially a faith community, we are agreeing to put the collective before the I, before self. We are agreeing to see ourselves in reference to the whole, no longer just a self, an individual. We are not asked to give up our individuality, or our sense of self. But we are asked to see ourselves in reference to something outside of ourselves.

Whose are we? Whose or what are we willing to use as our reference point? Are we willing to subsume self to something larger than me, myself and I? What is our guiding light? Where does our north star point?

I suggest we look to our seven principles for guidance; these are values, beliefs we as UUs have already accepted. I suggest we look to see how these principles play out in our every day behavior; my every day actions, yours and ours.

We all make choices, millions of them every day. What is it that drives our behavior? On what basis do we make our choices? As we go through a process of discernment about our collective mission, the answer to these questions should become more clear. And may we also grow in spirit, both individually and collectively.

Amen