

“Virtual Realities and Essential Ministries: What Makes a Congregation?”

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The Rev. Heather Janules

This morning, I share a story about a recent surprise. As some of you know, I regularly get headaches. They are not migraines but they are migraine enough to be something beyond the garden-variety headache.

I first explored how to treat my headaches when I lived in the Washington DC area. A trusted friend encouraged me to visit her bodywork person. The friend couldn't explain what this person Kathy did but swore by her treatments.

As a New Englander, raised by a long line of skeptics, I was not so sure about this. But trusted friends can be persuasive. Eventually I took the leap and made an appointment with Kathy.

Before my appointment, I imagined what Kathy looked like, a willowy woman in flowing garb. She may play Enya in her office or maybe that ethereal music just followed her around wherever she went. She would somehow smell of herbal tea and patchouli at the same time.

So, when I drove to her office I was surprised to find it in a utilitarian office building. A massive SUV was parked in her spot. Kathy was tall and sturdy, dressed in a polo shirt, slacks and sensible shoes

Kathy uses Bowenwork, a practice that assumes the body knows how to heal itself. Bowenwork techniques simply get the body's attention and stimulate recovery.

I am glad my friend encouraged me to work with Kathy. Sessions with Kathy helped me prevent my headaches and – perhaps even more important – I grew spiritually too. Seeing how my body was out of alignment was the beginning of me seeing how my life was out of alignment. I became inspired to seek my next ministry, to relocate closer to home and serve this congregation. When I moved back to New England, I sought another Bowenwork practitioner but Kathy is irreplaceable.

Fast forward to now. Late April I planned to travel back to DC to attend a conference. I booked an AirBnB in my former neighborhood and added a day to my itinerary to have lunch at the Thai restaurant I miss so much and, of course, to have a session with Kathy.

When the pandemic hit and it became clear I wasn't flying anywhere as the conference was now virtual, I called Kathy to cancel my appointment. She was understanding. But then she made a suggestion I did not expect. Kathy has been doing energy work over the phone for the past ten years now. Would I like to keep the appointment and give it a try?

With her question, I was right back where I was when I first began seeing her – unsure of how this would work and skeptical of the possibility. Only by then, I trusted Kathy too. I agreed and we kept the appointment.

When the day came, she called me from her landline as she claimed it was easier to connect that way. After we discussed a few of my physical concerns, she decided on her approach. Kathy asked me if I wanted her to explain what she was doing. I said yes as I was curious about the process. She told me she was asking to connect with my energy and – I didn't see this coming – then recited a prayer to Mother Mary.

As the session went on, she described physical changes she observed. Some of them I noticed, some of them I didn't. When it was complete, I felt better, my neck and shoulders loose and tension free. Perhaps this over-the-phone energy work thing...works. Perhaps it was a placebo. Either way, I was just grateful that I kept my appointment with Kathy and comfortable with the mystery.

I tell this story as I have been thinking a lot about virtual ministry. Since mid-March, when it became clear it was not safe to gather in large groups lest we transmit the Coronavirus, we have offered our 10:30 Sunday service through an on-line format. Soon after we made the switch, our Family Worship services resumed on Fridays, also on-line. When the Standing Committee responded to Governor Baker's stay-at-home order by closing the building to events, committee meetings, adult classes, covenant groups and staff meetings also made the jump. After today's service, we will have our first-ever virtual Annual Meeting. Following the school schedule, we determined we would remain virtual for the rest of the

program year and, with the now-familiar “abundance of caution,” for the summer. Whatever our services can offer – a balm for tired souls, a challenge to our social conscience, an invitation to consider new ideas, celebration of the life we share together – it now all happens at a physical distance.

From the feedback some have offered, I know you appreciate these opportunities to connect. We now gather in a way that former members from Chicago and New York and current members in India can join us. I am delighted we have welcomed a few visitors along the way. You can worship in your pajamas and mute the preacher whenever you wish. As on-line platforms are both auditory *and* visual, we can now add another medium to communicate our message, photos and videos along with words, silence and music. I don’t know if the author of today’s meditation would call this “a still nobler worship” but it is a worship service all the same.

And I know it is not the same. We no longer sing together and no longer enjoy live singing by our choirs. It can be hard to get into the worship mindset when you have the freedom to start a load of laundry during the service. We miss hugs and handshakes and plates of cheese and crackers at coffee hour. For the staff, as some have assumed, it is strange and sometimes difficult to preach or play or teach before a camera without the immediate feedback of a gathered community. I love the experience of worship as it is an interactive, dynamic, in-the-moment coming together of human life. Some of this magic gets lost through prerecording...and me sitting in my living room, hoping the leaf blowers outside will stop before it is my turn to unmute and lead the next element.

All of this is to say that, like my work with Kathy, there is value in connecting via technology and – if there were some way to go back to how we used to live – I would prefer to worship in person.

I bring up virtual and analog ministry now as we are approaching a crossroads. The Governor has recently granted permission for houses-of-worship to gather again, assuming we follow clear guidelines.

Amid the pandemic, congregational life includes a number of risks – close proximity of people from different households, enclosed spaces, sharing objects

like hymnals, serving food and the average age of worship attendees¹ Thus, I assume Baker was influenced to re-open churches by the organizing of a number of clergy.

You have likely heard of the letter more than two hundred ministers sent to Governor Baker. They write, in part, that they

...have seen how marijuana dispensaries, liquor stores and abortion clinics have all been deemed “essential,” but churches and other places of worship have not. We are grieved by this, but we have been patient...

However, church IS essential for us. Your order of March 23rd would forbid us from gathering together to worship God, but the word of God commands us to not forsake the assembling of ourselves together...

It is also clear that church is essential under both our state and federal Constitutions...the words of the Massachusetts Constitution still declare that “It is the right as well as the duty of all men in society, publicly and at stated seasons, to worship the Supreme Being” ...

They conclude:

...Please do not underestimate or dismiss the abilities of the church. Many of us have members who are doctors and nurses. We will listen to their expert advice as well, and they will help us be models of safety....²

Shortly before Baker granted permission for houses-of-worship to reopen, Unitarian Universalist Association President, the Rev. Susan Frederick Gray, issued a press release, advising congregations to plan for virtual ministry until May of 2021, a very different stance than the authors of the letter to Governor Baker. She writes, in part:

public health officials consistently predict a long trajectory for this

¹ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/april-web-only/churches-reopen-older-adults-coronavirus-risk-states.html>

² https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScNv-nJOHlI6VbD_gwdU4LK3D4M7LJJmtc9Q9WVBFyXx35WA/viewform?fbclid=IwAR1ily63j4CGGu4J4_GzvCvGVFBbAil-Je433koP4ow6saN57nKof84NgB8

pandemic. A majority of our congregational members, leaders, and staff members are in high-risk categories. Our care for the well-being and safety of our members and staff must be a priority...

...anticipating a year of virtual operations allows for more creative long-term planning, while still being flexible if conditions change significantly...small in-person groups of people and limited staff activities onsite may become possible while wearing masks, observing social distancing guidelines, and following diligent cleaning practices.

In making our recommendations, we are guided by science and our deepest held values...As COVID-19 disproportionately impacts people with disabilities, Black people, Indigenous communities, Latinx people, the elderly, and essential workers...religious communities have a moral responsibility to do all we can to reduce risks for those already at such high risk.

Public health officials are clear. There will need to be multiple weeks of reduction in infections, adequate testing, sufficient personal protective equipment available, contact tracing programs and perhaps a vaccine before it will be safe for many of our congregations to fully gather in person again. All this said, our ministries are essential services³

As Susan Ritchie's video on the influenza pandemic reveals, the theological and political divides that emerged then are with us now. We are living 1918 all over again except they did not have Zoom and cell phones and we are not in the middle of a World War.

As we consider the options, I remind us that engaging in congregational life somewhere between entirely in-person and entirely virtual is complex. For example, what if the public schools are open in the fall? Our children would be exposed to people from many households. Their contact with people in a high-risk category could prove dangerous. So do we keep children segregated from adults? Do we lay off staff people who are medically vulnerable? Neither of these options reflect our values. And I can't imagine congregational life without spending time with our children. Or singing. Or sharing food. We could follow the CDC guidelines

³ <https://www.uua.org/pressroom/press-releases/message-uua-president-updated-guidance-gathering>

but, frankly, who wants to quietly worship, wearing masks and sitting far apart? Who would be the person to turn away the attendee who would exceed the safe capacity of the sanctuary?

It has been said that good leaders keep their focus on mission. Since mid-March, I have distilled my personal mission in this time. Simply, my goal is to survive this pandemic. And, as your minister, my goal is to aid and abet you and the community-at-large to survive as well. Losing Linda Reck and Madeleine Smith as quickly as we did makes clear there is no room for denial about risk. For me and for my loved ones, which includes the people of the Winchester Unitarian Society, my goal is to prevent preventable disease and death. But what happens next is not up to me but up to us.

Before I conclude this morning, I would like to do a pulse check. In a moment, a poll will appear on your screen, inviting you to indicate your intentions regarding congregational life. After you vote for the statement that best reflects your perspective, hit submit...

As we prepared for this service, I gathered photos from past events to celebrate what is special about community. In this preparation, I reviewed images from my installation service, held about four years ago. Seeing us singing together, hugging, the laden buffet table; from my current perspective it seemed indulgent and dangerous.

But then I was reminded of a ritual, held towards the end of the service. It was like the Laying on of Hands, when a community joins together and blesses a minister. Only this ritual blessed the connection between us. Then-Standing Committee Chair Barbara Savage and I each placed a hand on our membership book, connecting us to members past, present and future. I may be a skeptical New Englander but even I believe we can bond across time and death. We left the pews and formed a circle around the sanctuary. My mentor, Abhi Janamanchi, asked us face the door and to go forth, reminding us, as we say in our weekly Affirmation, that “we gather not for our needs alone but to use our common power to build the Beloved Community within and beyond these walls.”

The connection he blessed between all of us was, in a physical sense, intangible – nay, even virtual - but I attest it is so, so real. We may have now all left the

building but that which lives between us remains. Many have left the community since that ritual in the sanctuary and many have joined. Yet I have faith that our covenant endures.

My final message this morning is this: “Please do not underestimate or dismiss the abilities of the [Winchester Unitarian Society.]” If science and our values persuade us to remain virtual for most or all of next program year, we have it in us to counterbalance the lost public intimacy through creative ways to connect, grow and serve through different platforms and diffuse locations.

Whether virtual or analog or a little of each, we all need to engage in these questions, to accept the eventual guidelines set by our Standing Committee and to work together to make our ministries as powerful and this pandemic as endurable as possible. We need one another to not only wear masks when we are near each other but to continue celebrating and grieving, learning and growing together as we always do, perhaps in ways that are unfamiliar or yet to be discovered.

As I have heard many times, a congregation is not its minister or its building. You, the people, are the Winchester Unitarian Society, called to serve and promote the values that bring and hold us together. Whenever the building is closed, hearts and minds remain open. Poised on the edge of decisions with significant consequences, I pray we bring our best, most creative selves to navigating the unknown terrain that unfolds before us.