Dwelling in Possibilities

A sermon preached by the Rev. Lee Bluemel
at the North Parish of North Andover, MA
on February 8, 2015

“I dwell in possibility...” – Emily Dickinson

The goddess Lakshmi showed up yesterday at the Unitarian Universalist church in Worcester, where I grew up. The India Society of Worcester was holding a Lakshmi Puja in the church sanctuary, and the minister posted a photo on FaceBook of the goddess all decked out- colorful, covered by flowers, with her four arms and her hands full of the gifts of prosperity, lotus flowers and the holy Aum symbol for well-being.

Well, I was jealous. Lakshmi, after all, is the goddess of wealth and happiness in the Hindu tradition. And here I was, having been asked by the Stewardship Team to write a sermon about “Possibilities” to kick off our annual Stewardship Drive at North Parish. A goddess of wealth and happiness sounded like she could come in handy!

Well, sometimes, the phrase “ask and ye shall receive” does come true. I was sitting at my desk and suddenly, there she appeared in all her glory.

Then she said, “You called?”

“Yes!”, I replied, a bit dumbfounded and surprised that a Hindu goddess in high demand would pay attention to me.

“You look like you could use some help,” she said.

Relieved, I explained my predicament: “Every year in my congregation, we have something we call a ‘stewardship drive’. It’s the time when people make a commitment to give money to sustain the church in the year to come. And so we kick off the Stewardship Drive with a service and sermon—lovingly called “the sermon on the amount”.

She said, “I should’ve known. They always wait until the day before the stewardship sermon to call on me. Typical. Well, let’s get one thing straight first. Are you sure you should be talking with me about this? I’ve noticed a lot of Christian churches talk to God a lot, but not the goddess. I don’t want to get you in trouble. And I’m not going to help if I’m not respected.”
“Don’t worry about that,” I reassured her. “This is a Unitarian Universalist church, there’s a women’s spirituality course called “Cakes for the Queen of Heaven” that a lot of women have taken- with a new group this spring. They look at and deal with the internalized sexism of how we imagine the divine. This is hard work, but it is liberating.”

Well that’s good, because the Goddess in all her forms is all about liberation—liberating people from their own self-imposed limitations into new possibilities. It’s funny how often human beings do that! I see it all the time. People seem to get stuck in old ideas of who they are, defined by the Story they’ve created about themselves. They forget their dream for their life, or they keep their dream but it doesn’t line up with the life they’re living. I’ve seen congregations do that too. Humans even put limits on their ideas of the divine- perhaps they do it to us most of all! They get these limiting stories in their heads about God, or about Love, or Creativity, or what’s possible in the future of the earth and all beings. Then they start wars with other people about it, or they get addicted to lesser things than Love. Sometimes, they limit their perspective to their own lives instead of appreciating the majesty and mystery of the universe, or they approach death scared because they haven’t done their living. They get stuck in scarcity thinking, that there’s not enough to go around, or they despair and give up on the future. But what about your people? I bet they’re not like that. Tell me about them, and the possibilities they believe in.

Well, they are people who dwell in possibility. They dreamed up the possibility of a new space to make room and light and beauty and connection to nature for more people, and made that come true. But perhaps what might convey the most about them is sharing a few of their “six word stories of faith.”

You see, last week, I invited those present at church to write a “6 word story of faith”. We collected them and I typed them up into a little lavender booklet that I have here. Listen to some of these:

Crashed, fixed by love, on my journey again!

Trust that you ARE enough and you ARE capable of loving and being loved.

Life is short. Love easily. Be kind.

Lean in- softly. Listen.

Lost and found, filled with the divine.

Celebrating the awe and connection to the universe and all its inhabitants.
To think, speak and act always out of love.

Love, connection, sharing. Believing in oneself and the value of others.

Family, future, working together for better lives.

I believe in the opportunities for mankind.

Faith is love, joy, compassion, giving for oneself and all others.

There is a drive in human life towards the best welfare for all.

Love, every day.

“Love, every day. I love that! I have a feeling that there’s a very good possibility that you are going to become known as the “Love Church”.

I know! And I have to tell you, something unexpected happened to me when I was typing up these statements. It really hit me: Wow! They all get it! We really are on the same wavelength when it comes to the heart of what matters, the heart of our faith. They know it, internally and expertly! I really am preaching to the Choir! Geez, maybe I can retire!

“How old are you?! Keep dreaming, girl!”

“I know. Besides, I’m not ready to stop yet!

“And you’re not doing this to teach folks something they don’t already know, as much as give them a little boost each week, right? Like an energy boost in one of those smoothies some of your people drink. This booklet is like a nice loud “AMEN!” – like that “Amen corner” I know you want. Anyway, back to those stories. Maybe you should tell the people to use them to create new possibilities. They can use them to find others like them. They can share their little booklets with someone who might be a Unitarian Universalist, let them know there’s a whole church-full of you! They could even start leaving them ‘by mistake’ in coffee shops, on bulletin boards, other places where they might be picked up. They could put a link to that booklet on their FaceBook pages.

That’s not a bad idea, Lakshmi! I’ll follow up on that.
Of course it’s not a bad idea—I’m the Goddess!

Speaking of which, I’m busy. Let’s get back to your other task at hand—raising the funds so there is a vibrant church for all these people. First, how many people do you have working on this?

Six.

What??!! Six people, to contact everyone in the congregation and motivate them to give generously? Boy, I better stick around here for a while! How are six people going to raise the majority of your budget, when it takes a whole army of people to run the Red Bow Fair?

I know, I know. We really rely on people paying attention and having a mature understanding of what it takes to be part of a congregation.

I guess so! So, I presume they all know the drill, and what’s expected? This happens every year, about this time, at North Parish?

Well—we’re starting about a month earlier than usual this year, and the Stewardship Team didn’t want people to know ahead of time because they were afraid people wouldn’t come. So... no. They have no idea that I’ll be talking about stewardship this week.

But, according to my sources- and there are several people from your church who stay in regular conversation with me—you have been talking about going out of your comfort zone, and not holding back, about being part of a movement for justice in the world. That sounds like good stewardship advice. And look at all that’s going on! Just a glimpse says a lot—16 senior youth in your OWL program, your junior youth visiting temples and mosques, new visitors every Sunday, people plotting coalitions for justice...and so much more! You’ve got 100 people meeting for Buddhist meditation each month in this building for 3,600 minutes of meditation and 60 hours of alpha brainwaves! So far in 2014, you’ve served 11,156 people out of the Food Pantry! Think of all the possibilities of full stomachs and alpha brainwaves and empowered youth in the months and years ahead! This ‘sermon on the amount’ should be a piece of cake!

Truth be told, we ministers often dread this sermon. Unitarian Universalists often don’t generally like talking much about money.
But money is necessary to make all of this happen!

I know, I know. But it’s a bit awkward, and talking about money can bring up our own class backgrounds, or fears of being judged, or fears of letting go of money which represents all sorts of things to us, including security, status, food and shelter, fancy vacations or sending our kids to college at expensive schools.

Well, I’m sure you know that living in fear is going to get you no where. Maybe you should also rely on your sacred scriptures—what the gods tell you to do. Doesn’t it say in the Bible, in Luke 12:48, “For unto whomsoever much is given, of them shall much be required.” And in the gospels Jesus talked more about being unattached to money than he did about heaven and hell. Anyway, don’t Christians do that tithing thing, giving 10% of their income to God?

Well, some of them do. But we are not exactly part of that tradition, Remember— we’re Unitarian Universalists— which means we approach the Bible for inspiration, not authority. It’s a little more complicated for us.

We do talk about percentage giving, but we go for a lower percentage. There’s a whole chart that explains it all. Still, some people seem to ignore the chart entirely, maybe because it’s quite a leap in their thinking about giving.

Well, don’t you govern by democracy?

Yes, we do.

Then that chart of percentage giving sounds like the fairest way to go about this to me. It means everyone gets to participate— to the best of their ability. And it upholds all those values that you all talk about—honesty, and fairness, and generosity. Those are just words until they are put into concrete actions. Hey, I know what you can do! Why don’t you tell them that if they don’t pledge enough, you’ll do a whole month-long sermon series about money? Or you can keep preaching about money until you’ve got enough! That should motivate everyone!

Yeah, but it might also motivate them to stop coming to church for a while!

True, true. You’ve got a point there.
So, you have to preach one little sermon and then it’s all over, right?

No, not exactly.
The sermon is followed by a whole month of focusing on stewardship.
And sometimes people aren’t paying attention much, so it goes on even longer.

**Oh, what fun! As the goddess of wealth and happiness, I love talking about this stuff!**

Well, you might not like some of the conversations around here so much. The trouble is that sometimes as the pledges come in, if they’re not adding up the way we need them to, it can creates a real sense of scarcity of resources, which makes everyone tense and requires lots of meetings. And usually the staff has to wait through a rollercoaster of sometimes dire predictions until right before the Annual meeting in May to know what their compensation will be.

**Well that sounds unpleasant. Scarcity thinking usually does lead to unpleasantness. But it’s not like your leaders are being exorbitant, right? Most of the budget is for the building and the staff, right? Without the building, where would AA and AlAnon go? The People’s Pantry? Bread and Roses cooking? McVagly, the Sangha, Merrimack Valley People for Peace? Where would all the UU kids get together on Sunday mornings, and the adults? And how can you run a mid-sized church without staff? Didn’t I hear that you’re planning to have a new, full-time Director of Religious Education and a new ministerial intern by next September! If you have a full staff, a funded budget and a new building, you’ll really be humming along! Oh, I can’t wait to see it! Your Love Church reputation will definitely start hitting the streets then. You know, for those who feeling some discomfort about this stewardship drive, you might try a change in perspective. Everyone knows that for congregations and faiths and values to thrive, people need to commit to them financially, right? But instead of thinking about this as a time of obligation or duty, what if everyone thinks of this Stewardship Drive as a time to dwell in possibilities—for themselves and for this church. What if they think about this as a season for the spiritual practice of possibility dreaming—kind of like Lent, but a lot more fun.

You are asking people to pause and meditate on something challenging. Stewardship isn’t about paying for what you ‘get’ from church, it’s about but dedicating a portion of our money to make Love real in the world, to help more Love and compassion and inspiration and peace and even justice emanate out from this particular community. Clearly, these people care a LOT about all those things. Just read those 6 word stories of faith!

So, that’s my advice. Read over those stories, and think about the power of a congregation in alignment with such deep faith. Become the best Love Church you can. Dwell in your possibilities. And you will be a reflection not only of me in all my glory, but of the best of humanity, an imperfect but passionate beloved community.

**Good luck! Blessed Be. Shanti. Amen.**
Words for Meditation:  I Dwell in Possibility
-- Emily Dickinson, 1830 – 1886

I dwell in Possibility –
A fairer House than Prose –
More numerous of Windows –
Superior – for Doors –

Of Chambers as the Cedars –
Impregnable of eye –
And for an everlasting Roof
The Gambrels of the Sky –

Of Visitors – the fairest –
For Occupation – This –
The spreading wide my narrow Hands
To gather Paradise.
Reading by Jack Kornfield- from the book called *Offerings: Buddhist Wisdom for Every Day*, the pages for Feb. 6th – 11th. Offered along with the question: What does Unitarian Universalism offer you- or what might it offer you- as a life-long faith?

“One of the major sources of our spiritual consciousness is found in our earliest life—the benevolent oneness of existence in our mother’s womb.

Then, as an infant, we experience the freshness of seeing, feeling and touching the world for the first time, the immediate physical presence of our senses and our own needs. Reawakening this intimacy, recapturing spontaneous unbroken trust in what we know and feel, is essential to finding our spiritual ground in later practice.

Many people have their first spiritual experience in childhood, that of an innate and natural connection with what is sacred and holy. The playfulness, joy and curiosity of our childhood can become a foundation for the delighted rediscovery of this spirit in our practice. If our relationship with our parents is respectful and loving, that too becomes a model and foundation for respect and trust in all other relationships.

The independence and rebelliousness of our adolescence offer us yet another quality essential to our practice: the insistence that we find out the truth for ourselves, accepting no one’s word above our own experience.

Adult life brings its own natural spiritual tasks and openings. We become more caring and responsible for our family, our community, our world. We discover the need for vision and feel a strong desire to fulfill our own unique expression of life.

As we mature, a natural contemplative quality enters our life. We can sense a movement within to seek periods of reflection and to gain perspective, to stay in touch with our heart.

(And finally,) As we age, having seen many cycles of birth and death, there is a detachment and a wisdom that grows within us.”