

Navigating the Rapids:
I. When the Unexpected Arises on the River of Life
Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley
September 12, 2010
The Revs. Judy Welles and Duane Fickeisen©

*"There is something about river rafting that brings people together
and brings out the best in them."*

— Bill McGinnes
Owner and President, Whitewater Voyages

Opening Words
Duane Fickeisen

It has been the tradition of your congregation, since before Judy and I arrived to be your ministers 13 years ago, to mark the beginning of the liturgical year with a gathering of the waters on the first Sunday after Labor Day. As many of you know, we will retire at the end of June, which gives this year's gathering of the waters particular poignancy.

We will leave with fond affection for you and with confidence in your future. We love you, and we love our work with you. It has been and continues to be a privilege to serve with you. We will certainly feel a sense of loss and grief. And we will always hold you in love.

After coffee hour this morning, we invite you to come back here where we and Anne Gero, who is your President, will hear and respond to your concerns and questions.

The congregation's mission statement includes the powerful aspirations to transform lives and care for the world. It begins, though, with the vision of being an "enduring liberal religious community." A robust and sustainable beloved community will indeed endure.

The founders gave this congregation to the future, recognizing that a healthy, organic community would grow in numbers, in spiritual depth, in organization structure, and in its influence on the world around us. Of the 94 charter members, 54 are no longer members, mostly due to moving from the area or death. And yet their dreams for the beloved community live on. We have experienced change before and weathered it well. And we will do so again.

We hope and expect the congregation will thrive through the transition and into a new, yet unexplored, and exciting future.

For the next several months together, we will run the rapids of change. Today and next Sunday, in a two-part series, we will use the metaphor of river rafting to suggest how to navigate skillfully through the transition and how to equip ourselves for the journey.

This boat is river-worthy and robust. It is strong. If we all hang on and keep paddling, the ride will be invigorating, even if at times we all get wet.

So here are some lessons for all of us to keep in mind this year as we launch into this new adventure together. Welcome to the river!

2. Somebody Has To Be In Charge (Duane)

Imagine the chaos of a crowded raft entering the rapids without a leader. Fortunately you have skilled and capable leadership. They will have good support from the denomination through the transition. The board will meet in a planning retreat next month with an experienced UU facilitator to develop plans for a healthy ending of our ministry with you and for a successful transition in ministerial leadership.

Your congregation is strong. You have a wonderful, dedicated, collaborative staff team. With recent work on the building, the facilities have been improved, and our finances, while never allowing us to do all that we would like, are adequate and well managed. Your programs and support systems are strong. Others in the UUA have taken notice of this congregation, and we expect you will attract eager, skilled candidates to succeed us.

Your leadership — Board members and committee chairs — needs your support. Please trust them, help them, volunteer and say “Yes!” if it is at all possible when they ask for your involvement. Let them know you appreciate their work and their devotion to the beloved community and its mission.

Please don’t sabotage them. Transition times are stressful, and it is important to work toward resolving conflicts, not allowing differences to divide the congregation. There may be times when you disagree with your leaders. Trust that they have the congregation’s best interests at heart. Give voice to differences, and listen to each other with respect. Work toward transparency and open communications. Try to set aside individual preferences for the good of the whole community.

3. If The Raft Overturns, Hang Onto It (Judy)

Don’t strike out on your own if something happens that you don’t like. This is YOUR raft, YOUR church community. There are lots of loving folks who want you among them and who value what you have to offer. They need you, and they’ll be reaching out to pull you back on board. Stick around for the ride.

4. When It’s Time to Paddle, Paddle; When It’s Time to Rest, Rest. (Duane)

There is plenty of work to do through this year and beyond in the transition. When your leaders ask you to paddle hard, give it all you’ve got, knowing that every effort matters, and trusting that it will all be worthwhile. The more you put into your congregation now, the more you can expect to get out of it.

And when it is time to rest, rest well, because no doubt you’ll soon be asked to paddle hard again. We will celebrate and play in the months ahead, hopefully with a good balance between ending and beginning.

Expert players in chess recognize the importance of playing the endgame well, with the goal of finishing the game with dignity for all the players and with enough energy to begin the next game. That means staying focused on the objective and not being distracted by the opportunity to wipe out an opponent’s entire team.

A good ending will enable us all to celebrate what we have accomplished together, forgive each other for the ways we have let each other down, and to recognize,

name, and grieve the loss. Seldom can we ignore the work of forgiving and grieving without it returning to haunt the future, but if we do it well, all of us can move forward with positive anticipation of what comes next.

And that means we'll need to balance rest and work.

5. Wear Your Life Jacket (Judy)

I hope that you have a spiritual practice that you can use to sustain you in the months ahead. If you don't have one yet, this would be a good time to find something that you can rely on for regular renewal and clarity. I know that some of us pray, some meditate, some do yoga. Some of us might have a sustaining spiritual practice but not realize that's what it is — you write poetry, you take pleasure in the world by going for walks and taking photographs, you lose yourself in a craft project, you exercise regularly.

Think about what keeps you balanced, and make it a regular practice this year. This can be a wonderful year of growth and learning, and wearing that life jacket of a spiritual practice can keep you focused and moving forward.

6. Expect to Get Wet (Duane)

It's impossible to imagine running significant rapids without getting soaked from time to time. That's why it's called whitewater, after all. There will be spray in our faces and the occasional big wave.

As we have done so often over these past 13 years, we will again be breaking new ground, running rapids we have not experienced before, creating precedents for the future of the congregation. It is impossible to know in detail what the whole journey holds for us. Surprise awaits, no doubt. And wouldn't we be a bit disappointed if it didn't?

When the big waves come, we'll come up sputtering and shouting and grab the bailers. We might as well enjoy the thrill of the unexpected as our adrenaline gets pumping. The cold splash in your face will serve to keep you awake, alert, and focused on the here and now.

7. If You Fall Out, Don't Lead With Your Head (Judy)

One thing I know from friends who are river-rafters is that if you fall out and find yourself propelled downstream by the force of the water, don't lead with your head! You want to be able to see where you're going and keep your feet in front of you so that you can navigate your way to safety and your friends can pick you up.

Personally, I kind of like the idea of leading with your heart. Remember what you love around here, and pay attention to that. Of course you want to be smart about figuring out what to do, but you can't go wrong by loving each other and being kind and respectful. Lead with your hearts...

8. Keep the Destination in Mind. (Duane)

Look ahead. Scout the territory and keep the purpose and the mission in mind. While you may not be able to know where every boulder lies nor where every side channel leads, you have a solid mission that offers guidance in the journey toward creating and sustaining the beloved community.

Imagine together what a bright future there might be for your congregation just around the bend, the resources and fresh ideas that a new minister will bring, and the still unrealized potentials for transforming lives and caring for the world.

Keep the congregation robust and healthy, make sure it has adequate resources, and care for your leaders and staff so that you will attract a great minister and be ready to welcome her or him as you embark on the next chapter in the life of your congregation.

9. Don't Panic. Enjoy The Ride! (Judy)

Every summer when we install our new Board of Trustees, we suggest some guidelines that will help them to be good leaders of the congregation. One of these guidelines is "shun panic."

This goes for all of you. Of course you will be feeling some loss and uncertainty about what lies ahead, but there is nothing to panic about. Don't lose track of your own knowing that this is a great congregation; remember what drew you here in the first place.

And remember the words that we all say together whenever we hold an Ingathering of new members: we pledge to be a community in which we can honor all that life brings to us.

So enjoy the ride — allow yourselves to be excited, scared, surprised, exhilarated. And have fun! A great adventure awaits you! Enjoy it!

May it be so. Amen.

Choir Anthem There's a River Flowin' in My Soul

Closing Words "No Rushing a River"
Jeff Rennie, River Days: Travels on Western Rivers

There is no rushing a river. When you go there, you go at the pace of the water and that pace ties you into a flow that is older than life on this planet. Acceptance of that pace, even for a day, changes us, reminds us of other rhythms beyond the sound of our own heartbeats.