

*Equipping the Saints: The Ministry of All* Rev. Kathryn Ellis

For three years, I was the “Director of Equipping” at WellSprings, the new Unitarian Universalist congregation in Chester County. When I told people that most folks looked blank or confused. As far as I know, I was the first equipping director in a Unitarian Universalist congregation. Maybe the only one . . .

And it isn’t only UUs who have never heard the term. Although it is used in some Christian churches, very few people have heard this title. Indeed when Ken Beldon, lead minister at WellSprings Congregation, told me that he was looking for a Director of Equipping, I only knew what he meant because of one book assigned in a seminary course. And I wasn’t completely sure that I did know! (I did.)

So, I started to use a familiar story to describe that work and the vision for the work. You’ve seen the Wizard of Oz, haven’t you? At least once, maybe a dozen times. I remember every year as a little girl I’d be eager to watch when it came on TV and then I’d have to hide my eyes when the witch was going to set the scare crow on fire or the flying monkeys were attacking.

But that’s not what I wanted to talk about this morning. Think instead of the end of the movie when Dorothy, the scare crow, the tin man and the lion return in triumph to OZ. They have gone on a perilous journey; one might say that the wizard had sent them on a spiritual journey. The wizard told them, “The beneficent Oz has every intention of granting your requests, but first you must prove yourselves by performing a very small task.” A very small task, indeed, bringing back the Wicked Witch’s broom!

To do that, they had to face their fears, face themselves and be themselves. They challenged evil and restored the good. Dorothy’s journey is the heroes’ journey as described by Joseph Campbell.

The heroes’ journey is a rite of passage and it follows a common pattern of life, growth and experience. Campbell: “To find your own way is to follow your bliss. This involves analysis, watching yourself and seeing where the real deep bliss is – not the quick, little excitement, but the real deep, life-filling bliss.”

Dorothy, the scare crow, the tin man and the lion come back to the Emerald City to be given their rewards – the gifts they had asked the wizard for before their journey to the wilderness. And what do they see? They see that the wizard is not a big scary monster, not a powerful magician, but an ordinary and in fact, a fairly small and elderly man. He says that he really can’t give them what they asked for, but they insist. He gives them the gifts that we know they already possess. The scarecrow gets a diploma to show that he has a brain, the tin man gets a ticking heart and the lion gets a medal for his courage.

Then Glinda the good witch comes along and tells Dorothy that she always had the power to go home but that she had to learn it for herself. She had to confront her fears and grow up to be . . . Dorothy.

This is the job of Director of Equipping, not the scary, deceptive part, but what the Wizard and Glinda do at the end. To help our heroes to see themselves, to claim the gifts they always had and to be empowered to use those gifts.

For myself, I re-interpreted the earlier part of the story where they first meet the Wizard. Perhaps he really didn't appear so frightening and demanding; maybe they saw him that way because they were already discouraged, frightened and beaten down. They expected powerful magic and so they saw magic. They hoped to be rescued by magic.

Instead, I think that what the wizard asked of them was to explore themselves, to take responsibility for their own lives, to pay attention to their own spiritual journey and to begin a spiritual practice. In response to his charge, they set forth on life's journey of self-discovery, self-acceptance and service.

In my interpretation of the story, like T. S. Eliot, Dorothy arrives where she started her exploring to "know the place for the first time." I think she has come home to "bloom where she is planted." That is, knowing her own capacities, Dorothy finds work that brings her joy and is needed in her Kansas community.

In our lives, every one of us sets out on the hero's journey, repeatedly as our lives change. In the story pattern, there are always helpers. Some helpers give a special gift, a talisman or a tool. Other helpers tell the hero how to use what she already possesses.

This was the vision of my work at WellSprings. My job description called for me to help people to claim, name, and develop their gifts, and to help people to share and sustain their gifts in community. This continues to be essential to my ministry. I didn't and don't have a working magic wand or magic mirror. I listen and try to help people see and hear their own hearts and minds.

Why should my old job description matter to you here at the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Restoration? After all, I am here now. I hope that it will matter to you because I think the Equipping Church is a vital vision for 21<sup>st</sup> century congregations. I think here, too, we can help people to claim, name, and develop their gifts, and to help people to share and sustain their gifts in community.

Unitarian Universalists affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person, agree to accept one another and to encourage each other's spiritual growth. We aspire to transform the world. We want to be ourselves and work in the service of love. Becoming an equipping congregation gives energy and structure to that vision. It

provides a direction for our aspirations so that they can be more than idealistic statements.

Let me tell you another story, a less familiar one. I heard it a couple of years ago on the public radio show, "Speaking of Faith." Krista Tippett was interviewing Chinese American writer Aichee Min. Min grew up in Maoist China and was part of the Cultural Revolution. As a young woman, she was sent to a labor camp. What Ms. Min said about her experience struck me:

And then you turn into animals because you don't feel love. . . . I never thought that I belonged to myself . . . Because I was taught to write 'I love you Chairman Mao' before I was taught to write my own name . . . (and then) In the labor camp, we were mentally castrated. . . . 100,000 youths aged from 17-25 were not allowed to date. The price of date was death if caught.

They weren't allowed to be human, weren't allowed to love. She went on:

But in the fundamental sense, when humans are allowed to be humans, they start to transform. . . . You asked me how I changed. I think coming to America plays a big part. . . . My daughter was in the nursery school. First thing she was taught was love. And then she would, you know come home and say, 'Everybody's different, but everybody's perfect.' Things like that. You know it moves me.

This nursery school saying which we might cynically make fun of like we sometimes make fun of Barney and Mr. Rogers, "Everybody's different, but everybody's perfect," was profoundly significant for Aichee Min. It was so significant because she grew up not being allowed to be different, not being allowed to be human. At her American citizenship ceremony, Min couldn't sing the Star Spangled Banner without crying. She said, "We know what it's like to be American. It was to be allowed to be human, to be ourselves."

Min said that she felt that she can be more Chinese in America than she can in China. "Confucian theory of leadership formation rests on the idea that 'if you want to be a leader, you have to be a real human being. You must recognize the true meaning of life . . . and you must understand yourself first.'"<sup>i</sup>

Tippett asked Min what faith meant to her.

Faith to me is that it only shines, it only tells you who you really are, and you encounter faith when you're at the point of where you can make a choice . . . you will be who you are and will show who you are at that moment."<sup>ii</sup>

This is the vision of an equipping congregation – that each of us can be fully human, fully who we are, that we can grow and transform into our own truest self. This means acknowledging our gifts and our vulnerabilities. It means living out that

everybody is different and everybody is, well not perfect, but valuable. Healthy people need love and meaningful work. We need to be able to express and to receive love, to serve and to be served. An essential characteristic of healthy love is the capacity to give.<sup>iii</sup>

Methodist minister Kirbyjon Caldwell wrote that the church “exists to equip people in order to release them back into the world grounded in truth and community . . .” And I would add grounded in love. An equipping church is “where people serve together to transform lives.”<sup>iv</sup> This transformation of lives includes our own, but doesn’t stop with our own. We are called to service for love and justice in our communities. We have all been blessed; we have all been given gifts. We don’t need to be other than who we are to be of genuine service to the world. Theologian Howard Thurman wrote, “Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

To come alive, to be who you really are means making commitments. It means knowing when to say yes and when to say no. You have to experience safety and trust in your congregation. And yes, love. To love means knowing others deeply and allowing yourself to be known. To come alive in this way means being able to answer important questions: Who am I? What is my work, my purpose? And who are we? What is our purpose? It means being able to really hear others’ answers.

This theological vision is new and emerging. “Connectedness is the defining feature of an emerging world view.”<sup>v</sup> “The fundamental insight of 20<sup>th</sup> century physics (is that) relationships are more fundamental than things.”<sup>vi</sup>

At the same time, this vision is also very old. Equipping the saints is a biblical expression. Paul and others described their vision of the first century Christian church. Ephesians, chapter 4:7-16 (probably written in the late first century by an admirer of Paul’s)

(7) But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift. . .  
(11)The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some Prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of the ministry . . . (NRSV)

Who are the saints? You are. I am. We all are. To be a saint doesn’t mean to be a perfected person – it means to be a member of the congregation. We all are ministers. We all are the saints.

First Corinthians 12:4-7

Now there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services but the same Lord and there are varieties of activities but it is the same God who activates them in everyone. To each is given a manifestation of the spirit for the common good. (NRSV)

Ways to come alive to help yourselves and others to be equipped:

### Intention and attention

We focus both on the inward journey of the soul and the outward journey to serve and transform the world.

Regular spiritual practice is important. Give yourself the gift of silence so that you can listen deeply – listen deeply to your own heart, listen deeply to others and listen for the sacred.

Small groups help us to truly attend to each other and to encourage each other.

Ask questions and listen for the answers. Ask yourself and ask others.

What brings you joy?  
Where do you experience the divine?  
Where do you feel called on your spiritual path in  
your daily life?  
Where are you experiencing love and truth in your  
life?  
How have you been responding to what you think  
your growth should be?  
What are your obstacles?  
How can we help?  
What do you need?

Expect change – what is healthy grows, changes and evolves.

Attend to your connectedness – to each other, to the larger community, to the earth.

May it be so. Amen. Ashe.

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<sup>i</sup> Senge, Peter, C.O. Scharmer, J. Jaworski and B.S. Flowers. *Presence: An exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations and Society*. New York: Currency Doubleday, 2005, p.180.

<sup>ii</sup> Tippett, Krista. *Speaking of Faith, Surviving the Religion of Mao*. [www.speakingoffaith.org](http://www.speakingoffaith.org), 9-06-2007

<sup>iii</sup> Mallory, Sue. *The Equipping Church: Serving Together to Transform Lives*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001, p. 83

<sup>iv</sup> Mallory, p. 9.

<sup>v</sup> Senge et al, p. 188.

<sup>vi</sup> Senge et al, p. 193.