

**Words of Inspiration “Restoration DNA”**  
**Rev. Kathryn Ellis**  
**November 13, 2011**

In October, we had several worship services focused on the theme of discernment. On the 9<sup>th</sup>, I talked about my personal experience of discernment, especially about my call to ministry. On the 16<sup>th</sup>, we had a Story Sunday about community purpose, and on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, David Dubbeldam talked about his ongoing discernment of his call to the ministry.

David discussed the importance of intuition, feeling and reason; he quoted from the book, *Listening Hearts*, “Discernment may be understood as apprehending rather than comprehending.” And he quoted Dawna Markova, “There is no such thing as finding one’s purpose. It’s about creating conditions for six months or six minutes, where your purpose can find you. It’s not about asking what is the meaning of life, but rather asking what your life means. It’s being willing to receive the truth of what you hear.”

Discernment is “the ability to judge well,” and “perception with a view to obtaining spiritual direction and understanding.”<sup>i</sup> Discernment is associated with wisdom, perception and insight. It is about paying attention to all kinds of perceptions including those that don’t seem to make any sense. It is deep listening and seeing. Discernment means staying in the presence and asking yourself questions.

Today, my focus is community discernment, particularly identity discernment. In your order of service this morning is a list of some sample questions to ask ourselves this year as we think about Restoration’s DNA. (Attached.)

As part of our ongoing discernment process, I am asking you to think about and answer the question for contemplation in today’s order of service. When you know what your answer is, please send it to me. The question is, “What is the one thing that if it were no longer here would make Restoration no longer be here?” A group of three women considered the question with me; here are some of their reflections:

1. Community that is not dogmatic and accepts you as you are. Here there is the potential of being deeply understood. Genuine relationships.
2. Sense of community that is not judging. Laughter.
3. The warmth, laughter and joy. Kind, comfortable people. It feels important to be present.

One mentioned the congregation's small size and another mentioned multiple levels of stimulation.

This is a simple first step in identifying what is most important to this congregation. I believe that Restoration does have authentic answers to questions of identity: Who are we? Why are we here in Mount Airy in 2011? Who are we becoming? What is our purpose, now?

But you have not articulated, envisioned those answers in a simple and clear way that everyone knows and really feels, in a way that guides this community in its decision-making, its social justice work and in its growth. My plan is to lead the congregation in an ongoing discernment and discovery process, taking the time that we need.

Baudrillard, a French philosopher, speaks of the exponential speed of modern life. Where things are moving too quickly, nothing can stabilize, gather or grow. (He tells the story) of a man exploring Africa. He was in a desperate hurry. He had three or four Africans helping him carry his equipment. They raced onward for about three days. At the end of the third day, the Africans sat down and would not move. He urged them to get up, telling them of the pressure he was under to reach his destination by a certain date. They refused to move. He could not understand this; after much persuasion, they still refused to move. Finally, he got one of them to admit the reason. The African man said, "We have moved too quickly to reach here; now, we need to wait to give our spirits a chance to catch up with us."<sup>ii</sup>

In her book, *Decision Making and Spiritual Discernment: The Sacred Art of Finding Your Way*, Nancy Bieber says, "We discover what we already know, though we often didn't know that we knew it."<sup>iii</sup>

This is not about looking for problems or feeling bad for what we are not. You've done enough of that! And I don't think it helped. This fall, I read *The Strategically Small Church: Intimate, Nimble, Authentic, and Effective* by Brandon J. O'Brien. He writes about the strengths of small congregations, by which he means congregations with fewer than 300 regular attenders. Primarily, he says, "(The small church) needs to stop trying to be something it isn't."<sup>iv</sup> "It means (the small church) can proceed in ministry not from a sense of its deficiencies, but from confidence in its strengths."<sup>v</sup> "A church should welcome everyone; however, they shouldn't become everyone."<sup>vi</sup>

O'Brien tells the story of his first little country church:

They had no musicians and no musicality. I had little stage presence or charisma . . . Even so, we were something no other church could be. We were ourselves – unashamedly, unapologetically, and unalterably ourselves. And strangely enough it worked.<sup>vii</sup>

He says that what small churches “have in common is a commitment to helping their church members grow deeper . . . (They are) empowering, vibrant and effective.”<sup>viii</sup> In a small congregation, one can make real connections, genuine relationships. “Every person,” He writes, “enters the church with something to offer the congregation and in need of something from the congregation.”<sup>ix</sup>

A Gallup poll identified six basic needs of people coming to religious communities now:

1. The need to believe that life is meaningful and has purpose.
2. The need for a sense of community and deeper relationships.
3. The need to be listened to and to be heard.
4. The need to feel that one is growing (spiritually).
5. The need to feel appreciated and respected.
6. The need for practical help in developing (spiritual maturity).<sup>x</sup>

This is also not about starting over, re-inventing structure. You have done that before. It is about paying attention both to Restoration’s history and to its identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. An old metaphor, from the industrial age, for organizations was the machine. When each part worked well mechanically then the whole would function. With this metaphor, organizational leadership focused on control and structure. But this metaphor no longer works so well. We are much more aware of wholeness and interdependence. We recognize that human organizations are organic; healthy congregations grow, change and evolve.

DNA is the genetic code in every cell in our bodies. Each person’s DNA guides our unique growth. These genes “provide the potential for who you are and who you can become.”<sup>xi</sup> Talk of DNA is common now, but it was only discovered in 1952.

Church consultant, Thomas Bandy, writes, “Identity will replace planning as the key to building enduring organizations.”<sup>xii</sup> p. 84 “The identity of a congregation functions like a genetic code that is embedded in every member, team and leader. . . . It is the foundation of trust that enables risk.”<sup>xiii</sup> Restoration DNA shapes the congregation’s identity and growth. I think it is time to discover it. What do you think?

An experienced spiritual director, Nancy Bieber says:

As one of three themes in our spiritual discernment and decision-making, *willingness* weaves through all our discernment. It is in our *attentiveness* as we listen more deeply for what is really true about our lives and become awake to divine nudges. It’s in our *responsiveness*. It gives us courage to take steps, to explore options, and to gather the patience to wait when we need to.<sup>xiv</sup>

Are you willing? One of my ministerial mentors cautioned me that I needed to be really sure that you are ready to do this work, to take all the time that we need, to be ready to deal with change, culture change. I like to talk about deep listening, and I think of much of the discernment process as about listening – listening to our “still, small voices,” listening to each other, listening to the community outside of Restoration, and listening to the mystery. But my mentor said- You have to claim authority, name the process and share your vision. So this morning, I want to share some of my vision with you.

In 2003 as part of the path to ministry, I was asked to write a personal mission statement: “Working with authenticity and integrity, I will use my relationship and teaching skills as well as old and new knowledge to enhance others’ spiritual and emotional development so that together we may increase compassion, hope and justice in our community.”<sup>xv</sup>

In 2005, I was asked to write my vision of my ministry two years after I had graduated which is about now. “I see myself as a parish minister on a collaborative team of ordained as well as lay ministers. The team and the congregation will be diverse in visible as well as invisible ways. As a congregation, we will demonstrate radical hospitality, and we will have clear expectations for healthy boundaries and healthy behavior. We will be active in social justice work in our community. We will challenge bigotry and hate. We will do our best to ‘speak truth to power’ and to speak truth to each other in love. We will be a community that continues to learn.”<sup>xvi</sup>

In a 2008 seminary essay, I wrote, “my guiding vision is of leading a spiritually engaged and growing congregation, one in which congregants are regularly engaged in spiritual practice and one in which leaders engage in genuine discernment about the congregation’s call in the world. This will be a congregation that is outwardly focused and one that discerns a mission for itself in the world.”<sup>xvii</sup>

And in 2009, I wrote, “We are interdependent and we need community to grow and to flourish. We need community to create meaning, to cope with trauma and to celebrate our joy. We are embodied, physical and relational selves who are part of the natural, material world. By acknowledging our vulnerability and joining together, we can create authentic communities, communities where deep listening and trusting relationships are nourished. Spiritually vital communities help people to heal.”

Unitarian Universalist theologian, Sharon Welch highlights the communal and generational nature of our truths. “We learn how to be moral not from God . . . but from the experiences, teachings and guidance conveyed to us by other human beings.”<sup>xviii</sup> We have been given “the gift of the ancestors. We see as we were seen; we love as we have been loved.”<sup>xix</sup>

I believe that we are called into community to fully live as the embodied,

embedded, relational and meaning-making beings that we are. We are not called just for ourselves. We are called to love. We are called to be ourselves so that we can be effective in our work to serve and to transform the world. In community, we grow and we are transformed. We dream and act.

Rev. Forrest Church advised us, "Do what you can. Want what you have. Be who you are" I am asking you to go with me on the path of discovering what we already know – who we are, what we can do. Will you come with me?

Can we be open to mystery, take our time . . . listen with hearts as well as minds? Can we trust? Trust the listening, trust the waiting, trust the spirit, trust each other?

"Do what you can. Want what you have. Be who you are"

Amen and Blessed Be.

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<sup>i</sup> *New Oxford American Dictionary*

<sup>ii</sup> O'Donohue. *Anam Cara*, p. 151.

<sup>iii</sup> Bieber, Nancy. *Decision Making and Spiritual Discernment: The Sacred Art of Finding Your Way*, p. 7.

<sup>iv</sup> O'Brien, Brandon J. *The Strategically Small Church: Intimate, Nimble, Authentic, and Effective*, p. 67.

<sup>v</sup> O'Brien, Brandon J. *The Strategically Small Church: Intimate, Nimble, Authentic, and Effective*, p. 15.

<sup>vi</sup> O'Brien, Brandon J. *The Strategically Small Church: Intimate, Nimble, Authentic, and Effective*, p.71.

<sup>vii</sup> O'Brien, Brandon J. *The Strategically Small Church: Intimate, Nimble, Authentic, and Effective*, p. 58.

<sup>viii</sup> O'Brien, Brandon J. *The Strategically Small Church: Intimate, Nimble, Authentic, and Effective*, pp. 18-20.

<sup>ix</sup> O'Brien, Brandon J. *The Strategically Small Church: Intimate, Nimble, Authentic, and Effective*,

<sup>x</sup> Quoted in Rediehs, Gene and Larry E. Webb. *Healthy Church DNA: Transforming the Church for Effective Ministry*, Bloomington, IN: IUniverse, 2008, p.3.

<sup>xi</sup> Rediehs, Gene and Larry E. Webb. *Healthy Church DNA: Transforming the Church for Effective Ministry*, Bloomington, IN: IUniverse, 2008, p.55.

<sup>xii</sup> Bandy, Thomas G. *Coaching Change*, p. 44.

<sup>xiii</sup> Bandy, Thomas G. *Coaching Change*, p. 84.

<sup>xiv</sup> Bieber, Nancy. *Decision Making and Spiritual Discernment: The Sacred Art of Finding Your Way*, p. 25.

<sup>xv</sup> Ellis, RSCC Essay, *What is Your Vision of Ministry*, unpublished, 2005

<sup>xvi</sup> Ellis, RSCC Essay, *What is Your Vision of Ministry*, unpublished, 2005.

<sup>xvii</sup> Ellis, Kathryn. *MLTS Second Review Essay*, unpublished, 2008.

<sup>xviii</sup> Welch, Sharon. "A Return to Laughter" in *A Language of Reverence*, Dean Grodzins (ed.).(Chicago: Meadville Lombard Press, 2004), p. 46.

<sup>xix</sup> Welch, Sharon. "A Return to Laughter" in *A Language of Reverence*, Dean Grodzins (ed.).(Chicago: Meadville Lombard Press, 2004), p. 56.

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## Some Discernment Questions

Who are we now?

Who are we becoming?

Whose are we?

Who do we love?

What do we value?

What are our gifts? What are our capacities?

What do we do well?

What do we want to try?

How are we called?

What is our sense of moral obligation?

What are we called to do?

Who are our neighbors?

What must we do to be faithful to our own vision?

How do we see the vision of the “beloved community?”

What is it time to stop doing?

What must we say no to because it is not ours to do?

What question lies at the heart of our work?

What is fun for us?

What makes us feel alive as a community?