

Still Point Tipping Point. Which?

This past summer I found myself reading a good bit of T S Eliot. His poetry rang with a freshness that it didn't have for me those 50 years ago when I was first introduced.

Reading Eliot's "Four Quartets" set me on the arc of this sermon.

Four Quartets is the last major work of T. S. Eliot and most consider this long poem the culmination and crowning achievement of his life's work. Taken together, they seem to be Eliot's response to the Second World War raging around him, and his need to vent more personally, more deeply. To find some refuge – *some still point* – in the midst of madness. These lines from Burnt Norton struck me.

From 'Burnt Norton'

Time past and time future
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.

[Notice by the way, that it's not "the present"]

Time past and time future ... point to one end which is always present ... the still point of the turning world. I reflected, "the present moment, shaped by the past and shaping the future, is the still point of the turning world." So, the still point is a fulcrum, then – sort of like the bar that sits at the middle of a teeter-totter board ... or the axel-hub at the center of a turning wheel? That seemed to me a too simplistic understanding of such dense imagery. I had to delve deeper into the meaning – or meanings – of 'still point.'

Googling "still point" doesn't take you to anything that suggests a fulcrum or axel hub. Rather, it refers to a notion more akin to the flow of chi in the body. In craniosacral therapy for example, still point describes the gradual – and brief – pause of the craniosacral rhythm. A still point is an indication that the body is making therapeutic changes which almost always includes at least decreased tension and overall enhanced vitality.

This led me to think of a similar word – equipoise. In clinical trials it refers to a point of balanced probabilities – in other words uncertainty. But for our purposes the more apt definition is ‘a state of equilibrium.’

So, I think that the poem’s central image – the still point – refers to a point, or state, of balanced forces. Not to the bar at the center of the teeter-totter, but the whole of the teeter totter balanced on the bar at that point where, in the next instant, it could go up or down. That’s the still point.

It’s the gymnast just before launching into her routine -- composing herself, getting her body set, fixing her eyes and attention on those bars.

It’s the soloist composing himself and taking those first few breaths just before giving the nod to his accompanist.

It’s this morning when you woke up and before you tackled the challenges, the opportunities, the rigors of today, perhaps you first set your intention or said a morning prayer ... or maybe you took stock of your body and directed your energy to your legs, those slightly numb fingers or that achy back – before you could engage the day.

It’s Robert Frost when he stopped in those woods hoping to find the inspiration and courage to go forward.

For some reason this led me to reflect on us – Restoration – and feeling that we may be at that still point – that point of equilibrium, of restored energy, of decreased tension and enhanced vitality. What do I see that makes me say that?

Well, first, just look around here and you’ll see so many improvements that make Restoration a more attractive, accessible and inviting place:

- The handicapped ramp to the sanctuary
- The new, beautiful doors that invite you into the sanctuary
- The meditation chapel that enhances the sacredness of the sanctuary
- The new audio-visual system that enhances our worship and makes
- Streaming our worship onto the website possible
- Air conditioning that makes worship so much more comfortable and makes possible
- A 52 week church year that’s clearly a strong aid in making Restoration a place to visit during the summer months – and stay
- Our new sign that both proclaims our presence, our worship and invites interest
- Our new kitchen which supports our fellowship that’s a hallmark of this community

And it's not just these physical improvements. They're just tangible signs of the confidence and care we have for one another. We can see that in the

- Worship associates program that offers a deeper faith experience to its participants and a new level of worship richness to all of us
- The choir expansion and greater participation in many other events here such as
- The multi-generational book club ... homework helpers ... Kirtan chanting ... Buddhist meditation ... the revival of the flea market in that hands of a new generation of members.

And this is just my list. You could probably offer more evidence of what about Restoration gives you joy now and optimism for the future. In fact I've invited a few of our members to do just that.

So, I invite you to hear a few words first from a fairly new member, Sara Skochko

"What makes me confident about the church is that I see people becoming involved in our community happily and intentionally. They don't do it resentfully or because of an "all hands on deck" mentality created by our small numbers. They do it because everyone wants our community to thrive. And the people who can't or don't want to get so deeply involved, I still see how happy everyone else is just to see them there every Sunday - there is a lot of love in our community. I also see that we resolve our disagreements with understanding and a belief that everyone else is acting with good intentions. There is so much trust and faith in one another, because we all know that we all want the best for the church, and we know that everyone is trying to make that happen, even if we have different ways of getting it done."

Thank you, Sara. And next we'll hear from one of our very long term members, and the current moderator of our church, Tim Styer:

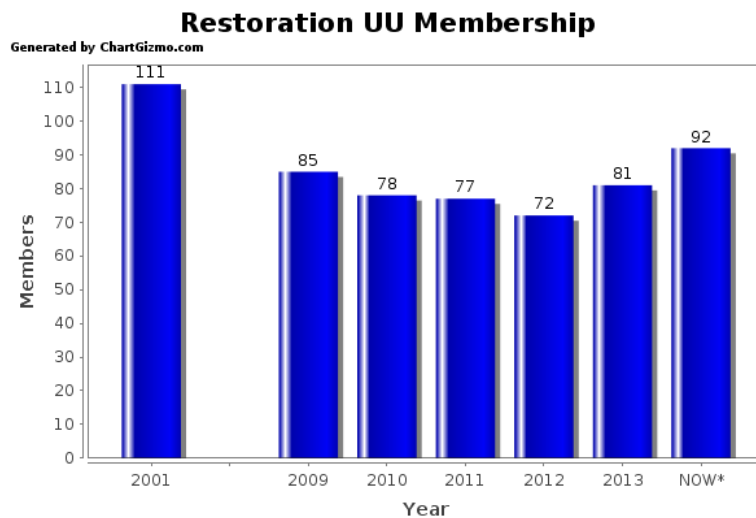
"What makes me happy at Restoration? It is the place to come where you can stimulate your mind renew your heart and soothe your soul. Where we can laugh cry, play, experience beauty and love.

"What makes me optimistic? I recently found a quote by Reverend Vanessa Southern, Minister of The Unitarian Church in Summit, NJ. Of her church she says, 'This is a place where people bring to their spiritual and religious lives an ethic informed by a world that has grown smaller and more clearly interdependent; a world in which differences of race, gender and sexual

orientation blend and brush up against each other all the time. *Where they gather they want professed truths to be visible and in action. They are tired of religion getting in the way rather than paving it.* If that isn't a description of this congregation, I don't know what is!"

And thank you, too, Tim.

So, what gives me optimism for our future together? I can show you in two charts. The first is of Restoration membership:



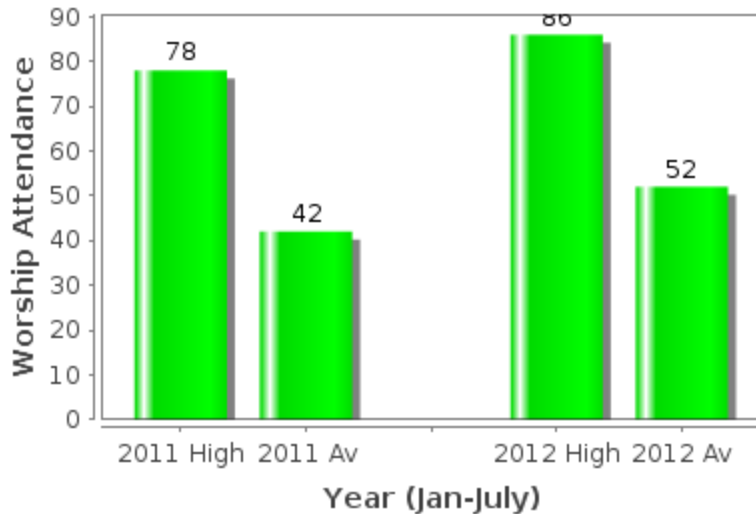
Transition years in a church are always bumpy, and you can see that in the stats for 2009 and 2010. Since our calling Rev. Kathy Ellis – thanks to her liturgical, preaching, pastoral, and personal skills – Restoration is back on track – growing over 25%!

And, by the way, the 111 members in 2001 was during Rev. Bonnie-Jeanne Casey's ministry and was the last time our membership was over 100. Can we see ourselves reaching and surpassing that mark before long?

Now let me show you another slide which gives me further optimism for our future:

UUCR Worship Attendance

Generated by ChartGizmo.com



This chart shows two comparable periods and excludes the biggest-attendance worship services such as Christmas and the Choir Music Sundays. [That 2012 peak, by the way, is 86.] As you can see, since Rev Ellis' coming and the launch of the worship associates program, Restoration is experiencing a resurgence of attendance on Sundays – a 10% increase in peak attendance, but a 24% increase in average attendance!

That tells me that our Sundays coming together in worship is increasingly becoming a richer and more enjoyable experience. And more than anything else that bodes well for our future. It tells me that we are revived – reenergized – and at equipoise – still point.

But the title of this sermon is “Still point ... Tipping Point? Which?”

Which indeed? I have to caution us that we've been here before, most recently during Rev. Casey's ministry and once or twice before in the second half of the 20th century. Restoration has never yet quite reached the Tipping Point -- the point at which a threshold is crossed and almost unstoppable momentum is gained.

Can Restoration reach that tipping point? Can we break through old barriers that have kept us small for most of our history?

Some in the denomination say no. When advising Kathy before coming here, one minister told her, "Watch out when they get to 100. They don't want to grow and every time they get close to 100, they have a church fight and lose people."

Another minister echoed that sentiment – though a bit more charitably. He said to her, "Restoration is 100 nice and kind people. They've been 100 nice and kind people for 100 years. And 100 years from now they'll still be 100 nice and kind people."

Well, that's better than being 100 cranky and cantankerous people!

I absolutely reject the proposition that Restoration is pathologically small. I resent it and I reject it! You should, too! But could it be true that we hold what we have among ourselves at Restoration so precious – and are we so selfish and protective of it – that we're not willing to throw open those beautiful new doors and invite more people of good will and liberal belief into our family? I hope not!

Our tipping point will be reached if – and only if – we believe that Restoration is a gift worth sharing. So -- acknowledging Malcolm Gladwell who wrote the book "Tipping Point -- that takes answering three questions about ourselves and acting accordingly:

First, does Restoration enjoy the "Power of Context?" Do we have a message and are we a community that's right for our times? A message that can resonate with a generation of searchers who explicitly declare their religious non-affiliation or who might proudly claim a religious identity but live it in name only. Are we a community that can embrace their apparent rejection of organized religion alongside their paradoxical individualism and need for connectedness?

Second, does Restoration have "Stickiness?" Are we "one of a kind"? Do we have an aesthetic that appeals to a new generation of seekers? Do we engage our members enough and offer engagement to others? Do we proudly and courageously proclaim our values? Do we have appeal to those who want to be associated with a community that stands for something?

Third – and perhaps most important -- for what purpose has the Universe – God -- delivered us -- you -- to Restoration *now* -- you with your unique gifts, talents and life experiences?

We – you and I -- have a call to Restoration today. A call to take up the challenge to be something more than just 100 nice people keeping the gift of Restoration to ourselves. We have an opportunity – a duty I think – to serve up our gifts generously and change that trajectory.

And so I say again, that is the purpose that you are delivered here ... now ... with your unique gifts, talents and experiences. How will you serve them up here ... now ... to the great purpose of moving Restoration to its tipping point? What will you contribute that honors our yesterdays but builds new tomorrows?

Wrestling with that question will put you at your still-point. Like the gymnast ... like the soloist ... will you choose to leap ... will you choose to sing?

Rev Ellis will soon launch a series of discernment conversations that will be important steps toward tipping point. Their aim will be to sharpen the focus of Restoration's purpose and the gift we have to offer to the community and to this generation of seekers.

I like that she's using the word 'discernment.' The word means determining the value and quality of something and going past its mere perception. In a religious or spiritual context – as we have here -- it describes the interior search for an answer to the question of one's calling. And that seems fitting because her conversations won't be just about "what do we want" Restoration to be. Rather, it will be about deeply reflecting on what Restoration is called to be. For this new time ... in this place ... and for a new generation!

I hope that you'll participate when they're announced.

I bring this meditation to a close by quoting another few lines of Eliot, this time from Little Gidding, the fourth of the Quartets – lines that seem so apt to this moment at Restoration:

With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this

Calling

We shall not cease from exploration

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.

In this upcoming week, I would ask that you reflect on those three questions:

- Do you agree with those who said that Restoration is fated to be always small or do you have a different dream for Restoration's future?
- Do we have "context power" and "stickiness"?
- What will be your legacy -- your gift -- toward that future?

Blessed and remembered be!