Reflection on the Theme of Learning by Jessica Sand

As we say farewell to Amy, it has given me the chance to reflect on my own life long learning experience. In the second grade, Mrs. McCracken brought in her guitar and taught us folk songs like Country Roads, and This Land is Your Land. In the third grade, Mrs. Gray’s class adopted a cheetah at the WildLife Safari, and after we learned about them in class, my family took a field trip there and I got to see cheetahs in person. Fourth grade was taught by Mr. Chamberlain, and although I really struggled with long division, I enjoyed learning the basics of ceramics, and I made a bowl and a statue of a dinosaur. We all have memories of the teachers that made an impact in our young lives.

The teachers that I remember the most are the ones that took time to get to know me and made me feel special. Teachers have a calling that leads them to their profession, they encourage students to ask questions and help to shape our minds to learn and grow throughout our lives.

As an adult, I’ve learned many skills from managers and colleagues in the workplace. Amazingly, my stunted math skills continued to grow as I calculated prices and discounts at the jewelry store where I worked after college. There was no end to taking examinations after graduation either. As I pursued jobs in healthcare, I trained to be a Certified Nursing Assistant and learned from accomplished nurses how to care for the injured and sick. Later, my career interests changed to insurance, and again, I went back to school, to study the rules and laws of the State to become a licensed Insurance agent. There were plenty of “teachers” to help me along the way.

Here at UUCV, I continue to ask questions. I have the opportunity to participate in chalice groups and workshops to learn more about my spirituality and the core beliefs that define me and my place in this community and the greater world.

Recently I have been having conversations with friends and family members about social justice issues and the activists protesting the structural racism in our country. I’ll admit it is something that I haven’t focused on much in the past. I am learning about my own bias and privilege as I strive to become an anti-racism ally.

So my education is ongoing. My teachers are members of this church, authors and filmmakers, musicians and artists, community members that share their experiences, and myself when I am quiet enough to listen inwardly. I have found that there is no end to learning and so much yet I still don’t know. That is what makes learning so wonderful, and teaching so rewarding. It really is something special.
On Learning© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

In 2011, I visited that church in Birmingham, and met Carolyn McKinstry, she is a movement veteran and member of the 16th street Baptist Church. She was 15 years old when the church was bombed and wrote a book about her experiences, While the World Watched: A Birmingham Survivor Comes of Age during the Civil Rights movement.

I took a UU Pilgrimage, Civil Rights tour of the south in 2011, at the 50th anniversary of the Freedom Riders. It was also the 150th anniversary of the start of the civil war in America, and the 50th anniversary of the merger of the Universalist church of America and the American Unitarian Association.

Everywhere we went on this Civil Rights Pilgrimage and were introduced as Unitarian Universalists – actually, we were more often introduced as simply Unitarians – the civil rights workers that we met all seemed familiar with the term “Unitarian” and didn’t ask us what that meant, or what kind of church it was, or what we believed. I attribute that recognition to the murders of Viola Liuzzo and James Reeb whom everyone knew as Unitarian. The marker we visited in Selma outside the café that James Reeb had dinner the night he was fatally attacked, clearly identifies him as a Unitarian minister. I was surprised by the name recognition our faith tradition had – I've not experienced that in many places outside of Boston.

It was a huge learning experience for me, this Civil Rights pilgrimage. I was born in Seattle and had grown up all over the west and Midwest. I’d never been south and didn’t know what to expect. I was in full learning mode. For although I had read about the Civil Rights movement, I learned it in a different way being there and meeting people who had been there.

Being human is all about learning. I believe that when we stop learning, we no longer have anything to teach. The two are so related. Another deep learning time for me was in the Peace Corps. I read books by Paulo Friere then. Freire was a Brazilian educator who wrote about learning, teaching, and partnerships. He called it dialogic, and critical pedagogy. He can be dense to read, - some of that is because he wrote in Portuguese and his words have to be translated to English. He is easier to read in Spanish which is closer to Portuguese. But his books can be a tough read. Which is a little ironic. Because what he writes about is something quite universal, not just scholars or graduate students in education or philosophy – but learning ‘to read the world in the word’, as he put it – which people learning to read for the first time can do, as well as all of us, no matter our level of education.

I entered the Peace Corps right after college. I had a degree in linguistics, which is a little like being an English major – that is, not an obvious marketable skill to enter the workplace. So, I was assigned to teach adults how to read and write. I spoke Spanish and was sent to Honduras, so presumably I’d be teaching reading and writing in Spanish. But because of my interest in linguistics, I had requested placement in a Garifuna community – Black Carib, as they are called in English.
I know I’ve told you some of this before; I think that’s because times of deep learning are so memorable.

But to fill you in, if you don’t remember or haven’t heard me share this before: The Black Carib people are descendants of a slave ship that was wrecked off the coast of Honduras, where the captives were freed and mixed with the Carib and Arawak Indians on the island where their ship wrecked. Garífuna is an Amerindian language, with roots the indigenous languages of Carib and Arawak from Central America and vocabulary from Yoruba in Africa, and the colonial languages of English, Spanish and French. I was assigned to a Black Carib community on the North Coast of Honduras, and field tested a literacy curriculum written by another volunteer which used Garífuna culture to introduce reading and writing in Spanish.

Garífuna is primarily a spoken language – its written forms have not been regularized. There are bibles translated into Garífuna – but some of them use the alphabet as in English and others the alphabet as in Spanish – the same alphabet, different pronunciation. Besides Bibles which have been translated by missionaries, there really isn’t very much to read in Garífuna. As far as I know, all Garífuna-speakers school age or older are bilingual. They either speak English – if they live in Belize, or Spanish if they live in Guatemala, Honduras, or Nicaragua.

When I lived in Travesía, the small village on the Coast of Honduras as Peace Corps volunteer, I used to translate letters for my neighbor.

Her sister had moved to Belize and would write her in English, and I would translate the letters for her into Spanish, and she would write back in Spanish where her sister would have a neighbor translate it into English or Garifuna. The sisters had only their spoken language in common, not their written language.

It was another deep learning time for me, those years in the Garífuna village, and that was when I first read books by Paulo Friere. trying to learn how to do this job I had been assigned to do – to teach reading and writing to adults, and not wanting to perpetuate the colonialism and paternalism which describes the US relationship to Central America from early on, and which those critics of the US Peace Corps criticize volunteers for promoting. I wanted first, to do no harm. I knew that I was going get more out of my experience in the Peace Corps as I was probably going to give….and that humbled me.

And so I’d read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *Education for Critical Consciousness* and committed myself to a methodology of dialogue and reciprocity – and that is probably the root of why I believe that we have nothing to teach if we ourselves have stopped learning.

“The education our situation demanded would enable people to discuss courageously the problems of their context – and to intervene in that context; it would warn them of the dangers of the time and offer them the confidence and the strength to confront those dangers instead of surrendering their sense of self through submission to the decisions of others.” Wrote Friere
Though the “situation” Friere speaks of is closer to the context I encountered in Central America teaching adults to read for the first time, the dangers are just as great in my social context here in the United States among Unitarian Universalists.

“Indeed, an analysis of highly technological societies usually reveals the “domestication” of our critical faculties by a situation in which we are massified and have only the illusion of choice.”

Untamed, by Glennon Doyle, a book that came out this year, speaks of the domestication of our critical faculties, if you’ve read that. She’s married to Abby Wambach, Olympic gold medal soccer player. I was struck by how her language about is reminiscent of Friere…. She speaks of how women are tamed from birth by patriarchy, the ways she was caged by internalized misogyny, religious doctrine, and homophobia, and how she “untamed” herself, was liberated from those cages.

This concept of liberation is the reason I spent a career in education and then switched to theology and see my work as similar in both contexts. In education as in church, we are seeking liberation from that domestication of our critical faculties where we have only the illusion of choice.

I wasn’t able to attend as much of General Assembly this year as I’d have liked -mostly because I can still access it, watching recorded sessions later, and I had to prepare for worship this morning, and I was a little under the weather this week. So, my attendance was sporadic, but from what I witnessed, we are in full liberation mode at the national level. We are responding to this continued assault on the lives of Black Indigenous and People of Color – by both continued oppression of colonialism and patriarchy and this virus which disproportionately affects siblings of color.

And we’re on a steep learning curve, I think. taking on some very intentional learning, intentional teaching, and intentional partnerships.

This pandemic has thrown us into a steep learning curve, trying to figure out how to maintain our human connection without being near the bodies of others. If taken seriously – and it doesn’t feel like it’s being taken seriously at the top – but if we can take this thing seriously, we have the opportunity to undergo needed change – untaming ourselves, as Doyle would say, recovering our critical faculties, in Freire’s language, and emerge from this quarantine wiser, more compassionate, empowered, achieving the collective liberation we seek: liberation from the narratives of old, whether they are the narratives of our families which kept us in line, or the narratives of society about gender or orientation or race, whatever narratives we have internalized that no longer serve, may we free ourselves from them, and create new stories in this time. We are in another time of deep learning.

This is the Great Turning, as Joanna Macy, calls it, our shift from the Industrial Growth Society to a truly life-sustaining civilization.
And though I’d rather not we’d been given the “gift” of this pandemic, we are in it, and we may as well aprovechar. Aprovechar is a word in Spanish that I don’t know how to translate into English easily – it means to take advantage, but not in the exploitative sense. It just means to take the opportunity given and use it well. If I say I’m going to take advantage of the pandemic, in English, at least to my ears, it sounds like I’m going to exploit the situation and sell needed personal protective equipment at an inflated price and make money. But I want to convey that we have this situation, which is terrible and horrific and is costing lives – recently between 5,000 and 6,000 deaths a day worldwide, and we can also do something good in this – and that good, in my opinion, is to take the moment we have, and create that life-sustaining civilization, beginning with our own lives.

We don’t know how to do church in a world where we can’t gather. Spirituality, we can do, on our own. But church is corporate, it’s spirituality with others, in community. And so to create that community in a time when we cannot gather...is something we are just learning to do, and we can’t know all the answers because we haven’t invented them yet.

So, in this period of unknowing and learning, we’re going to try something different. Rather than rushing to replace Amy who is irreplaceable, we’re going to “take advantage” in the sense of aprovechar, this moment, and go into deep learning mode. We’re taking on a student, an intern, who is in the midst of their education, someone we will both learn from and teach. I really think there needs to be a word that combines teaching and learning which more accurately describes the dialogic relationship between the two. I’m sure that Mrs. McCracken in second grade learned from Jessica, even as she learned to love music from Mrs. McCracken and her guitar.

If there were such a word as combined teaching and learning, I would choose that word to describe our relationship this next year with our ministerial intern. Because there will not be a single staff person whose portfolio includes families and children, caring for the children and youth will become the portfolio, the responsibility, of us all.

We cannot lose ground on the program Amy has built with our children and youth, and yet... we know, that since March, that program has been very different than what it was when we could meet in person. So, along with everything else in church life, we will be re-imagining how we care for the youngest among us and the families who care for them.

The Commission on Institutional Change – this commission of the UUA begun in 2017 - reiterated this week that lifelong learning – liberatory education - is the standard for all religious professionals and this learning should address generational and multicultural awareness.

They call on the UUA to provide resources and tools to ensure a variety of entry points into the spiritual work of embracing one’s own identity and the identity of others. Healing religious wounds and productive conflict are also needed as a core part of faith development. A
comprehensive path to understanding the work of equity, inclusion, and diversity should be developed and maintained as a part of our faith development.

These are some of the skills and interests our intern will be bringing us this year. What will we learn from becoming a teaching congregation and having a student intern this year?

Well, I know that some of you will learn how it is people get to become ministers in our tradition. You'll learn the difference between fellowshipping and ordination and what the Ministerial Fellowship Committee does, and more about the Unitarian Universalist Association. More importantly, I think we'll learn – all of us – will learn more about ministry – how to do it, what it is, how we all minister to one another, and about the special and distinct role of the trained minister. We may be challenged in the way we communicate, or on our own issues. We may discover our own strengths and opportunities, and we'll learn compassion, because we have to be very honest with one another if we are to grow. We have to learn how to offer critique to one another, to speak the truth in love, and to stay in relationship. We have to learn how to accept critique from another, to hear the truth in love, and stay in relationship.

On a very practical note, one of the things I appreciate most about this congregation is that you know and understand that a minister – or any person for that matter – cannot be all things to all people.

When you called me you were not seeking a minister to solve your problems or fill your gaps or complete you, but rather a partner in ministry. You began as a lay led fellowship with strong lay leaders who wish to partner with their ministers.

Each minister must develop their own style. I hope we will all give our intern this year enough space and practice to hone their skills and refine their style, and I hope we will allow ourselves to be changed by their ministry among us.

We are, all our lives, in relationship. We are relational beings and depend upon each other for our very existence, as well as our identity and development. I also believe that when we stop learning, we no longer have anything to teach.

Or in the words of Paulo Freire, “to assume an increasingly critical attitude toward the world and so to transform it.”

May this be the moment in which we turn, turn greatly, shift to truly life-sustaining lives and institutions and civilizations. Amy’s shift requires her to live in Bend, and we respect her turning even though it means she must leave us. What will your shift bring? What will our collective shift, our collective liberation, bring about? We have only one home, one planet, the earth on which drift with our companions in the wide universe. May we sustain this blue boat home of ours, and one another on the journey.