

Lasting Impact  
Rev. Linda Simmons  
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I recently listened to a youtube presentation by Dr. Robert Brooks. Dr. Robert Brooks is one of today's leading speakers and authors on the themes of resilience, motivation, school climate, a positive work environment, and family relationships. Dr. Brooks received his doctorate in clinical psychology from Clark University. He is on the faculty of Harvard Medical School and has served as Director of the Department of Psychology at McLean Hospital, a private psychiatric hospital. His first position at McLean Hospital was as principal of the school in the locked door unit of the child and adolescent program. He has a part-time private practice in which he sees children, adolescents, adults, and families.

In his presentation given at the Boston Children's Museum, he was speaking mostly about children and what they need to be resilient. He said that children who are resilient have in their lives what he calls a charismatic adult who is an adult from whom a child or adolescent gathers strength. He asks, Is your child stronger because of what you said today or less strong? He went on, Is your partner stronger today because of what you have done or not done?<sup>1</sup>

He asks, Do we as adults need charismatic adults in our lives? Yes is the answer!

This sermon today was won by Phil Lindsay who was the highest bidder at the auction last year and wanted as its topic this one: Why are UU churches not growing? With all that we have to offer, with all the strength and courage and meaningfulness that we have to give, why aren't more people flocking to our open doors? Thank you Phil for the invitation to look at this topic more deeply.

To continue with Dr. Roberts for just another moment, Roberts says that one of the most important roles that we can play in our lives at any time is to be a charismatic adult for other people or that we offer a strength to others that strengthens us in its offering.

When I heard him say this I wondered, Do we as a UU Meeting House offer strength to others?

I could list so many things that give to each other and the surrounding community: the Food Rescue program which has redistributed 20 tons of food to the Food Pantry and other local organizations, the Immigration Resource Center that we opened in the face of this administration's immigration policies and the request of our island's immigrants, our Make it Stop group that works to contribute to creating more common sense gun laws across the nation. All of these programs, though run through the UU Meeting House, include members from across all the island.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fSdwAYIGbWk&feature=youtu.be>

We as a congregation show up at important moments like a few weeks ago when Move On contacted me to help them head up the Families Belong Together rally downtown and I jumped right in and 350 people showed up, including many of you. I am the chaplain with Palliative and Supportive care and the chaplain with the hospital. So many of us are on multiple island boards and contribute to island charities. Our UU Meeting House provides space and community to Shirat Ha Yam, a Jewish Congregation, Faro de Luz, a protestant El Salvadorian congregation and a Muslim Prayer group. Led by Dr. Qureshi and his family.

As UUs we are non creedal, meaning you can come here with all of your beliefs and non beliefs and find a home, a place to rest, a place to create a meaningfulness that meets you where you are, not in isolation, but with this congregation of people who are likewise seeking meaning and reaching out.

And from this pulpit we talk about women's right, Black Lives Matter, hope, meaning making, immigration, global issues, the environment, world religions and philosophies. We explore the world within and around us from this pulpit.

As I listen to people around me, I hear so much despair. There is a corrosion of hope, of meaning, of something so deep within us that we believed in that we are wavering as if the ground beneath is being eaten away. We never believed we would enter a time when the voting rights we fought so hard to win would be questioned and put at risk, when women's rights, civil rights, international treaties, environmental protections, moral and ethical standards that we considered part of our democracy and heritage as Americans would be eroded, traded, compromised, disbanded and plainly disregarded? There is a despair growing within us that I fear as much as I fear the erosion of our democracy.

Why in the face of all of this and what we stand for and what we do, are we not seeing the growth that we all predicted and expected?

Dr. Roberts said one more thing that I would like to highlight. He said. "You will never touch a mind or soul unless when you look at someone you see their beauty and strength. How do I contribute to giving people a sense of dignity, he asks? I will lead with this question for all of us to contemplate as we enter into the meat of this sermon: Does everyone who walks in our doors leave with a greater sense of dignity? Do you? I'll ask it one more time. Does everyone who walks into our doors leave with a greater sense of dignity? Do you?

The book that Phil and I decided to work through for this sermon is called Lasting Impact by Carey Nieuwhof.<sup>2</sup> Carey Nieuwhof is founding pastor of Connexus Church and a Christian minister and inspiration speaker and reader. He writes a lot about church growth. He says some things that people do not like to hear. Phil and I thought they were provocative conversation starters. Here is Neiwhof's list for why churches are not growing. We'll return to each one in turn and discuss later at our talk about in Hendrix Hall at noon.

The first on his list for why churches are not growing is:

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<sup>2</sup> Carey Nieuwhof, Lasting Impact (Cumming, The ReThink Group, 2015).

## 1. You're in Conflict

Nieuwhof says, "If you're constantly bickering and arguing, why would any new people stay?"<sup>3</sup>

I would argue this is not true of us. Though we do get snared from time to time on an issue, I think our process for managing conflict and disagreement is healthy and forthright. So, let's move on.

## 2. You're more in love with the past than you are with the future.

Nieuwhof writes, "This can be true of churches that are in love with tradition and churches that are have had some amazing days recently. When leaders become more in love with the past than they are with the future, the end is near. If your church is a museum to 1950 or even 2012, the likelihood of reaching the next generation diminishes with every passing day."<sup>4</sup>

Is this true of us? What part of this is true of us? I would argue that one must be in love with the past to some extent in order for a church to offer what it needs to offer: a sense of continuity, hope, connection to what has been and so what might be. I think we tread this pretty well but I will look forward to your comments after the service.

## 3. You're not that awesome to be around.

Neiuwhof writes: "Fake. Judgmental. Hypocritical. Angry. Narrow. Unthinking. Unkind. Those are adjectives often used to describe (church people), and sometimes they have their basis in truth."<sup>5</sup>

Who are we as a people? Are we kind, do we walk our walk? Do we welcome people who enter through our doors? Do we seek to strengthen others by seeing them where they are? This takes conscious effort. Do we apply it? I know we cannot do so at every turn. Sometimes we all need to just sit quietly and be nurtured. But as a people, are we seen as openhearted and present?

Do we seek to be loved as much as we offer love to others? Do we give dignity as much as we request it for ourselves?

## 4. You're focused on yourself.

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<sup>3</sup> Nieuwhof, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Nieuwhof, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Nieuwhof, 7.

Nieuwhof writes “Too many churches are focused on their wants, preferences and perceived needs. They are self-focused organizations and self-focused people. It should be no surprise that outsiders never feel welcomed, valued or included.”<sup>6</sup>

Again, I think self focus has to be part of who we are or we would collapse. We have to turn our gaze inward in order to remain upright but do we balance this inward gaze with an outward one that feels right to those who need us, even when those who need us are sitting right beside us?

5. You think culture is the enemy.

“If all you ever are is angry at the culture around us, how are you going to reach people in that culture? (UUs) who consistently expect (non-UUs) to act like (UUs) baffle me. If you treat your neighbor like an enemy, why would he ever want to be your friend?”<sup>7</sup>

Ah, this one then. When we are in the world, how do we treat others? Do people see us as good generous people, people willing to listen, to consider points of view that are not our own, to engage points that we find difficult to accept? Do we turn away, criticize, condemn? Who are we outside of these doors?

6. You talk more than you act.

“Most church leaders love to think and love to debate issues. Effective leaders add one more component. They *act*. Most church leaders I know overthink and underact. If you acted on even a few more of your good ideas, you could possibly be twice as effective in a very short timeframe.”<sup>8</sup>

What is in our overthinking and underacting trunk? Where might we take more action? Is there a banner that we should display? Is there a march we should lead? An article we should write? A position we should vote to stand behind? Where have we grown complacent?

7. You’re more focused on growth than you are on God (or what I would call Love).

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<sup>6</sup> Nieuwhof, 7.

<sup>7</sup> Nieuwhof, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Nieuwhof, 9

“Some leaders get so jacked up about growth that they forget it’s about (Love) and our mission that we gather about in the first place. This is a danger every motivated leader needs to keep in mind.”<sup>9</sup>

What does our mission ask of us? Open doors, open minds and open hearts? What does it ask of you?

Neiuwhof adds a good point, “You can grow a church in a centuries old building. And you can kill a church in a brand-new multi facilities building. You can grow a church with zero media. And you can waste a million dollars on lights, gear and cameras. You can grow a church in a single site. And you can go bankrupt adding venues no one wants to come to. These are hard truths, but they’re helpful because they make us look in the mirror and get on our knees. They help us realize where the issue really is and make us do the homework and the heartwork we need to do...(it starts with love, prayer and a burning desire).”<sup>10</sup>

We as a community had been working on our mission statement. We read the draft the board created over the past year at the beginning of each service. You heard it this morning again: In this UU congregation we support spiritual growth and service toward a more just society with open doors, open minds, and open hearts - open doors to embrace our diverse island communities and visitors; open minds to explore differing ideas and beliefs; and open hearts to deepen our connection to others and ourselves.

We now have a revised mission statement that many of you gave us feedback on. We will be voting on this at the congregational summer meeting next Sunday.

We decided to work on a mission statement a year ago through a series of discussions and disagreements and push backs and misunderstandings too.

Questions arose: Do we need a mission statement? Isn’t it more important to do the work of mission than take the time to write and process and meet and discuss and revise and then meet with the congregation to revise and then vote on a draft at the congregational meeting? What does a mission statement offer us?

I wrote up a purpose of a mission statement paragraph that you have been seeing in your order of service these last weeks. It goes like this:

*A Mission statement should reflect who we are and why we exist. It is a statement about what we mean to each other and the wider community and about the way we live our lives together as Unitarian Universalists in this Meeting House, at this time.*

*It is a living document and should be a guide that we can check our goals and objectives against to ensure we are living within our stated intentions as a congregation. A mission is our signature as this island UU Meeting House at this time in our lives together. It is something that should be revised every 3-5 years as we grow and change.*

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<sup>9</sup> Nieuwhof, 10.

<sup>10</sup> Nieuwhof, 20.

My dear friends, I am not a Christian or an evangelist but I must tell you that I want to scream from the rooftops, I am a Unitarian Universalist and love is my creed and courage in the face of despair is my doctrine and our collective dignity is my sacrament and if we join together we can open one another's minds and hearts and souls and we can change the world. This is our lasting impact.

I left out one of Nieuwhof's reasons that he thinks churches are not growing. I give you my modified version:

8. You think everything you are doing is terrific and use this to keep from looking deeper. Hmm...this one resonates just a little.

What is our work my friends? Where is our work? How do we begin? How do we continue? Where is the love we are missing? What is the love we are missing?

To return to Dr. Roberts question, "You will never touch a mind or soul unless when you look at someone you see their beauty and strength. How do I contribute to giving people a sense of dignity? And then I asked you to consider: Does everyone who walks in our doors leave with a greater sense of dignity? Do you? What are you willing to do to make it so?

I am willing to risk more than I am risking today to make this so. Because ensuring that our faith has a lasting impact, and the beauty and justice and hope that we generate are capable of spreading out into the world, giving dignity in places where there is none, giving light where there is darkness and giving hope where there is only despair is worthy of risk.

I could yell it from a rooftop but the work is on the ground. It always is. It always is right here, between you and me and you and you and you and the next person you meet. The love is always about showing up right here and now. Lasting impact is always about taking the clay in your hands and asking the right questions.

Amen.

