

**To Boldly Go**  
**A sermon delivered by Rev. Kate Rohde**

Last June, at General Assembly, they announced the awarding of a prize to four breakthrough congregations. It is something they have been doing in recent years: giving awards and publicizing the work of UU congregations who have done some things beyond the usual, adding members, but also doing different and creative things in their ministry within and beyond, especially beyond the congregation. The Albuquerque church where my friend Christine Robinson serves as minister was given the award last year. They grew from 450 to 700 members. They went from one to three worship services, including one which is youth-oriented. They have become known for pioneering work in internet outreach to UU groups in small, distant towns in New Mexico. Towns too small to have a UU congregation but large enough to have UU's, as well as having a simultaneous broadcast of their service within their own building. They made some mistakes doing it, which they are learning from, but it was a bold new project that has bourn fruit.

One of the churches awarded this year is in Harrisburg, PA. It had been at a low point eight years ago after a large fight and the loss of their minister, but now is feeling crowded in their suburban building. They took a step that was so controversial that the minister feared losing his job over it. They have purchased a large, old, church building in a downtown location as a second campus for their congregation, a place where they can have large events, do outreach in the city, and, eventually have regular services of a somewhat different style than those in their current building. It was a far from unanimous

decision, a risky decision, but fortunately those who felt it was too risky have united behind it now that it is made and they are trying to make it work.

The church in Summit, NJ, a congregation that has been around about as long as we have and has a similarly historic and pretty sanctuary, was outgrowing its facilities. Its R.E. was in an old house apart from the church and not very attractive. They physically moved the church building on their property so that they could add a modern RE and office wing, they have added more than a hundred new members, and, for their 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary they decided to do a large capital fund drive in which they would try to raise \$150,000 for their church beyond the operating budget. The unusual twist to their proposal is that the money would not go, as a capital fund drive usually does, to something for the church, it was to go to do good work in the community. Even though people had recently raised money for a building, the fund drive for the community was successful and the church is now in partnership with several community organizations making a difference in their local community. In the video about Summit and in their presentation at GA their minister, Vanessa Southern, talked about how one of the things they have brought to their life together is to try to think boldly. She said that at a board meeting when they talk about what they are going to do they ask themselves, “Is it the bold thing to do?” Speaking with her and with the minister in Harrisburg they were both agreed, that a willingness to be bold, to take a risk, was an important part of being a breakthrough congregation.

That phrase, “Is it the bold decision?” stuck with me and is rattling around in my mind.

I thought about whether I think of myself as bold, whether I think of UU's as bold, and why and when boldness is a virtue. Let's face it. We UU's tend to have more of a nerdy image than a bold one. We read a lot of books, maybe. We think. We discuss. We reason. But a big critique of us is often that we are like the narrator about whom Zorba the Greek complained, "You Think Too Much! That is your problem. Clever people and grocers, they weigh everything." And there is some truth to that. We tend to attract more college professors than entrepreneurs, more librarians than explorers. Yet, it is also true that many if not most UU's I have known are unconventional and bold in some aspect of life. Over the past 30 years I have heard a lot of life stories when I have sat down with friends and relatives to talk about a recently deceased loved one and, for the most part, the stories have been either somewhat or very remarkable. Women who were out doing things that women weren't supposed to do. Men who live lives beyond what their parents could have imagined. People who stood up for unpopular causes, pioneered a new idea, were whistle blowers, travelled the back roads of the world. They have all been members of congregations I've served.

If we think of boldness as being the courage to take a risk, then we are all probably uneven in that in some areas we are too cautious and in others willing to take risks. Some of us are cautious when it comes to personal safety, some of us are cautious about looking foolish, some of us are cautious about incurring someone's anger, some of us are cautious about being wrong or making a mistake, and some of us are cautious about engaging our emotions. In my family, we were taught to be pretty bold when it came to expressing opinions on issues even when those opinions were likely to be unusual or

unpopular. We were less than bold in sticking up for ourselves against a bully or an emotionally abusive person.

Looking back in my own life, almost all the best things have come about from overcoming caution, fear, or inertia and taking the opportunity to do something that took a little or a lot of daring. It isn't easy. I love to swim now, but when I was a nine-year-old at camp and the counselor asked me to jump into deep water, cold water, for the first time. It took an hour for me to jump in. I would get to the edge, she would encourage me, but I held back until finally I closed my eyes and jumped. I have always been grateful to her.

As I think over my adult life, most of the really exciting things involved taking a plunge: I accepted an invitation to visit El Salvador in the midst of a Civil War and later to live in a village there for three months. It was frightening and hard and it changed my life. I accepted an invitation to teach convicts in a high security prison, and developed some of the deepest and most life changing friendships I have known. I accepted an invitation from a complete stranger to be the keynote speaker at an event where the guest of honor was Anita Hill and I ended up with fifteen minutes of fame including articles in the national news.

In each case my first inner impulse was to find a reason why I couldn't do it --- too busy, not qualified, uncomfortable with strangers, but I was smart enough to make a bolder choice and each experience turned into a transformative one for me. Those experiences

taught me to be bolder in accepting unlikely invitations that come my way. We always have good, rational, reasons, to stay safe in our little cocoons, but most of the good things and all the extraordinary things that have happened to me have happened when I was bold enough to leave my comfort zone.

I think I am married because of a woman who encouraged me to be a bit bolder. In the early 90's there was an article suggesting that a woman over 40 was more likely to get killed by terrorists than to remarry. This was drastically discouraging bit of news to lots of us unmarried and divorced women who wanted find a man to spend our lives with. About that time on a trip to Guatemala I met Sal, an American woman of about 60 and her new husband, George. I mentioned the article about the unlikelihood of her success in finding a mate and asked her how she had found George. "Well," she said, "I'm in sales. In sales you learn that you have to expect to make fifty contacts for every sale. George, here, was the forty-second guy, I met!" I took to heart her methodology. I realized I needed a way to meet fifty single men who were possibly eligible and to overcome my fears of going out on dates with people who were not a good match for me. I had to risk lots of bad dates. I placed an ad in a magazine. I attended events with a lot of single men. And rather than taking a disastrous date to heart, I just put the name on my list trying as one more step forward in my quest to make fifty contacts. I still have the list, but fortunately I didn't even have to go on twenty dates before I met my husband, but if I hadn't met Sal, I probably wouldn't have been emboldened enough to have failed so many times on the way to finding love.

As a minister, I have often encouraged people to take the plunge into deeper waters. In my first congregation there was an older woman who was still grieving the loss of her marriage. She lived alone. She was timid about doing much—afraid to drive alone to Atlanta which was only about an easy three hour drive. “What if the car broke down?”

The one thing she did out of the ordinary was to take Italian lessons every week.

Somehow, I convinced her to take a big plunge, to take a trip alone to Italy. I helped her find a family to stay with, a school to study at, and so the lady too scared to go to Atlanta by herself, flew to Italy and had a wonderful adventure including a little romance.

Of course not every bold choice turns out well. I had some pretty bad dates on the way to meeting my husband. Some people I’ve chosen to have in my life were bad choices.

Some opportunities and jobs I accepted were duds or disasters. Still, even though I think I may have been above average in making bold choices, I regret some of the bold choices I didn’t make far more than the bold choices I made that didn’t turn out well.

Thinking theologically, I can’t help thinking of the famous quote from Martin Luther, “If the mercy is true, you must therefore bear the true, not an imaginary sin. God does not save those who are only imaginary sinners. Be a sinner, and sin boldly.” Now I don’t know since I am not Lutheran exactly where Luther was going with that, but it reminds me of what my violin teacher used to say to me at almost every lesson. He used to say, “If you are going to make a mistake, make a big one!” Like I say, I don’t know what Luther meant, but I do know what Mr. Culver meant. He meant that I was too timid in my playing, that when I became unsure of myself, my violin got soft and scratchy and you couldn’t really tell if I was missing the note or not. He meant that if I were bold in

my playing the good notes would sound good and the bad ones would be loud and bold enough that we could correct them. He meant that I would have a lot more fun and be a much better fiddle player if I wasn't so afraid of making mistakes." Luther, I know, thought that we were all going to make a lot of mistakes—sinners that we are. Mr. Culver knew that every beginning fiddle player gets more wrong than right. We make lots of mistakes. They both said, "Be bold. Don't be so afraid. There is grace and salvation even when we are far from perfect."

I would have liked to have been the little girl who didn't take an hour to jump into deep water, who played the fiddle without worrying much about wrong notes. I would have liked to have been the grown-up who learning a new language isn't afraid to sound foolish using the wrong words and the wrong tenses and saying she is pregnant when she is trying to say she is embarrassed or asking for cigarettes when she is trying to get oatmeal. That is not my natural temperament. I have to push myself, but when I do, I am usually glad I did and I have come to the conclusion that it does have something to do with religion and theology. Our founder Channing, said that our goal as Unitarians is spiritual growth. We don't grow in our comfort zones. We don't grow when we are only doing those things that are easy or comfortable or safe or conflict free. We grow when we challenge ourselves, when we confront something new, when we risk failure, when we risk discomfort, in search of the transformative possibilities.

Looking at the national scene, I wish that the people I voted for last time had been bolder, less fearful, had really gone for the change I can believe in even if they were not

entirely successful. In our church we have been trying some new things: we are one of the few churches in our district to add an additional service that has a different format than our other service, we are one of the first churches in the denomination to work with the Hotchkiss model of governance. People are calling from all over to find out more about it, and we were one of the churches that founded the Community Meals Project that we featured last Sunday. These are all new things made possible by people willing to be bold. Each of these things has been a stretch for us. We don't know what they will bring us long term, but we have been bold enough to try something new with positive potential. If you participate in the listening sessions sponsored by the church Board, I hope you, too, will think boldly when you advise your board about our church's future.

We fail to be bold enough when we care too much about public opinion, when we are too fearful of making mistakes even those that are easily remedied, when we fear differences of opinion and emotion, when we get too comfortable to have an adventure, But if we seek to grow our spirit we will embrace life boldly. We will gain courage, and jump into the cold, deep water, and swim.