

Katy Lowery's portion of the
White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church workshop on growth
2006 UUA midsize church conference

When Victoria suggested I address the question, "How does a person grow deeper through serving their congregation?" the first thought that came into my mind was, "Leadership and service at White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church (WBUUC) is a come as you are party." Because I was invited to come and to serve as I am, the invitation enabled me to *become as I am called.*"

I share these reflections on my experience of growth not because they are instructive, but because they reflect our church's growth. Also, I don't think it is possible to separate someone's personal growth from her leadership. Because a leader's growth will, in some way, reflect, inspire or limit her community's growth, it is wise for a person leading or making decisions for a community to tend to and take measure of her personal growth.

So, my experience of leadership is a *come as you are and become as you are called party*—sort of a progressive party.

For me there have been three critical and inseparable aspects to learning and growing at WBUUC:

1. Trust --trust that the church really accepts me with all my weaknesses, limitations and strengths, and trust that the church would be up to the task of advising and compensating for my shortcomings.
2. Asking of me A lot is being asked of me. I am challenged every day. I struggle to manage my time so that I can meet my church obligations and not cheat my employer. I try very hard to discipline myself to carefully listen to people. And my capacities to intuit when to push and when to drag a discussion or an decision are continually tested.

Let me interject here that when I first became a member of WBUUC and to this day we are called to worship almost every Sunday with these words:

*Come into this place which we make holy by our presence. Come in with all of your vulnerabilities and strengths, fears and anxieties, loves and hopes. **For here you need not hide, nor pretend, nor be anything other than who you are and who you are called to be.***

Come into this place where we can touch and be touched, heal and be healed, forgive and be forgiven. Come into this place where the ordinary is sanctified, the human is celebrated, the compassionate is expected. Come into this place, together we make it a holy place.

-Rebecca Edmiston-Lange

It knocked my socks off. For months, maybe years this welcome would unlock my heart and the tears would flow. My point is that by the time I was asked to serve in a leadership capacity, I trusted the church and I loved the church. Because I love the church I find I am able to do things for the church that I had not been able to do for myself. Like when I was planning to get pregnant with my first child. I was able to quit smoking virtually overnight. I hadn't been able to quit for myself, but with the love and commitment to a not-yet-conceived child, it became easy.

3. Working together. The third source of fuel propelling me to do and to grow in the work of church is the power of doing worthy work in common with others. I'm talking about the same renewable fuel that powered the union movement, the human power that the civil rights workers ran on and which drives the continuing progress of human rights. The confidence that, *Together we can do it*, the *SI, SU PUEDA!* of today's immigration reform movement. To quote a portion of Marge Piercy's *To be of Use*:

*I want to be with people who submerge in the task.
Who go out into the fields to harvest
And who work in a row and pass the bags along
Who stand in the line and haul in their places
Who are not parlor generals and field deserters,
But move in a common rhythm when the food must come in, or the
fire be put out.*

The bonus of these three gifts: the trust and acceptance, the challenge, and the power of working in common—the two extra knives, bonus dicer and the radish decorator thrown in with my purchase of a church work Vegematic—the super bonus is that because I have been able to do hard things, new and challenging things for the church, I am becoming more able to bring that trust and confidence to other parts of my life. I notice I am more able to let go of inadequate approaches in favor of the learning new methods. More than in the past, I am able to set aside one ideological lens in favor of looking at a problem from a difference perspective. In a fluid accepting way, it seems to be easier for me to trust others and to trust my judgment about when and what to trust. A friend of mine called this “Stepping into my bigness.”

Another friend, the director of a local theater told me once that in her theater, at the outset of every performance, before the curtain goes up, all the cast and crew all gather in a huddle and announce to one another: “I will hold you up.”

It give me chills, knocks me over...unlocks my heart and the tears flow.

When I decided to say “yes,” to serving as the vice-president, president, past president of WBUUC, I imagined the whole congregation saying to me and to

one another, "I will hold you up." And me saying back to each of them, "I will hold you up."

And we have.

I believe our church has grown—spiritually and in interconnectedness, through all our risks, through the heeding the calls, accepting the challenges and experiencing the breakthroughs. It certainly has not been easy, in fact it has been very, very hard for many of us--both volunteers and staff. But it has been more than worth it. I feel that the church as a whole and the members individually have learned to say to one another " I will hold you up."

This puts me in minds of a poem of Thomas McGrath:

*How could I have come so far?
(And always on such dark trails!)
I must have traveled by the light
Shining from the faces of all those I have loved.*

The key has been to be who we are and accept the call to become. To accept the call to continue to be and become evermore our own essential church, even when it meant shedding a shell and fumbling about naked on the ocean floor for a bit like a soft shell crab. Our guiding principal has been to love our essence enough to let it grow and mature. The key for WBUUC is and has always been to recognize that even though it has been harder than we imagined... we need not be other than who we are and who we are called to be and that, **together** we make it a holy place.