

Intro

In Richard Henry Dana's classic: "Two Years Before the Mast", he gives his first-hand account of his voyage from Boston to California and back between 1834 and 1836 aboard a square-rigged ship (two, actually), knowing nothing about what it was like to live a life as a seafarer.

It got me thinking that there were many parallels between this unknown voyage taken around the tip of South America and back and the new adventure that awaited me as I served on the First Parish Board.

But, while it would be fun and indulgent for me to wax poetic about these similarities, I only mean to use Dana's story illustratively along the way as I speak to my own experience. And in doing so, I hope to convey a connection of these experiences to my own values I hold in living a spirited life.

These values are embodied in the ideas of balance, discipline, deep listening, and compassion. But, I'm getting ahead of myself. What I share with you are some lessons I learned on the voyage while serving on the Board and how they shaped, or were shaped by, my spirited values. I wanted to have ten but I only came up with nine. Maybe you can suggest some others to me after the service!

Lesson 1: Channel Your Energy and Excitement

I was and still am very energized about being a member of the senior leadership at First Parish. Having attended General Assembly several times over the years really fueled my sense of commitment and service to my congregation and the wider world and I wanted to bring that energy to First Parish. Just like Dana felt

when he spent his first full days on the deck of his ship, the *Pilgrim*, I felt full of the sense of the possible.

Like a kid in a candy shop, I wanted to do everything: improve the governance structures, fix the finances, get the entire congregation committed to denominational affairs, and a multitude of other worthy causes.

What I found is that to be effective, I had to pick a few things and stick with them. At the same time, I had to listen carefully to many constituents within the leadership and the congregation at large and weigh my goals with their considerations. In short, I had to work to channel my energies into a few core areas if I was going to be effective at all.

Lesson 2: Lean on Others

As the song says: “Lean on me when you’re not strong”. Good words that make a lot of sense. I would go further to say that even if you feel strong, learning to lean on others is a healthy way to maintain balance and perspective. Doing so gives a sense of ownership to everyone in the group and brings a sense of balance to group’s interactions. I had to let go of the desire to “own” things. After several months as Board Chair feeling like I needed to take ownership of most things, I learned that that was a recipe for burnout. Delegation became a necessity as the demands of being the Board Chair increased. Interdependence became the oxygen I needed to breathe every week to be a useful participant on the Board.

Lesson 3: Take the Curve Balls as they Come

One of the most important lessons I continue to be educated on in life is how one responds to unforeseen events...the curve balls. As most of you know, one day

after our 2007 Ingathering service, Rev. Bill Clark went into the hospital for heart surgery. It doesn't get much more curve-bally than that! I found that I had to resist the temptation to react immediately to every challenge this event presented. At the same time, I needed to allow myself to grieve for Bill as well as the congregation and the leadership's goals and plans, which were going to be significantly impacted. While it took doing with a lot of help from the staff and board, we were able to put things in perspective and continue to provide leadership to the congregation. This connection to perspective has been one of the cornerstones of my faith. Holding close to that sense of perspective allows me to balance my life and engage with people and events for the long haul.

Lesson 4: Leading vs. Managing

One of the things I have consistently valued is the leadership training I've sought out over the years. From workshops at General Assembly to district events and books I've read, being on the Board has been a catalyst for strengthening my abilities through rewarding training opportunities.

One of the core things that has stuck with me comes from Gil Rendel, a senior consultant at the Alban Institute. In his book "Leading Change in the Congregation" he makes a clear distinction between leaders and managers. He says that good managers "do things right" whereas good leaders "do the right things". It was important for me to understand the distinction because there were many times in which I was losing focus on the goal, choosing instead to follow a prescribed process instead of seeing another way. A perfect example of this was the budgeting process we went through over the last couple years. The adaptive process that the Board and Communications Team undertook was an appropriate

and healthy response to serious problem the congregation faced. I learned a lot through that process about how to listen more and talk less and at the end of the day have a greater sensitivity for a diversity of opinion.

Lesson 5: Lots of “Noise” – Learn to Prioritize

While this may seem obvious, it continues to take vigilance on my part to understand what’s most important. At any one time I’ve had many issues to contend with and it’s been a real challenge to know what to pay attention to and what to ignore. Having a sense of priority, not only with the church’s business but with my own commitments to my family, friends, work, and myself has been an essential ingredient to my faith practice.

Lesson 6: Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

One of the best recommendations I got from anyone on the Board was from Parker Hirtle who encouraged me to produce regular articles for the Focalpoint. In an organization as matrix-oriented as we are, it is so important to communicate ideas and decisions as carefully as possible. This is certainly one of the areas where I continued to stumble because of the sheer numbers of communication points that exist. Having Melissa Brodrick on the Board along with Elisabeth Jas and Jane Eckert who make up the Communications Task Force are an invaluable resource for the Board to continuously and appropriately communicate with the congregation. As I leave the Chair position, my values are greatly strengthened by this aspect of Board work. I think now I have a much greater sensitivity to the needs of individuals to hear messages at the appropriate time delivered in the right way. These ideas are reflected in several of our UU principles such as “The

inherent worth and dignity of every person” and “Justice, equity and compassion in human relations”.

Lesson 7: Reflecting & Connecting

This was another gem I incorporated into my spiritual practice from Gil Rendel. I learned that most organizations (like Boards) function in a plan-do-plan-do loop. What is missing from this cyclic process is a time to reflect on the “do” part, which usually results in decisions made or actions taken. Without the component of reflection, I learned that it was difficult to know that the right action or decision was made for the congregation. Without thinking about how our choices impact others, we would become completely reactive to the outcome.

Also missing from the cycle is a period of connecting, where we seek to link our actions to our purpose, our values, and/or our sense of self. I found that this concept of plan-do-reflect-connect was perhaps the most important lesson I learned and one that I have to continuously remind myself to do in many aspects of my life. And, when I do it well, I feel much more centered and alive.

Lesson 8: If you Volunteer, You Commit

I was honored to be asked to serve on the Board three years ago, especially since I knew it was in the capacity of Vice Chair and then Chair. I was cautious to be sure. Would my abilities be of value? Did I have enough experience within the church to be effective? Would I burn out?

While all those things were concerns I was also excited about upping my commitment to First Parish. I was hungry to bring my energy for Unitarian

Universalism to the church's leadership and thought this was a great avenue to do it.

What I found was that I needed to take my notion of volunteerism to a new level. I saw that saying I was "just a volunteer" wasn't a valid excuse for not accomplishing something I had committed to, even in those frequent times I dropped the ball on a commitment. I still had a sense that I owned it and needed to follow through. And, in the spirit of open and honest communication, I want to tell anyone who volunteers at First Parish that if you do commit to performing a task or role, you're entering into a covenant with First Parish to participate and complete the job as best you can. Just like being on a ship at sea for two years, you're committed. You can't just walk off the ship while it's under sail.

Too many times I've gotten the message of "I'm just a volunteer" as a justification for backing out of a commitment or not completing a job. I've even been in situations when folks up and quit because the environment got too tense or someone felt attacked, insulted, or slighted in some way. Those are regrettable events to be sure but what I found most regrettable was how quickly the situation escalated to the point of someone feeling the need to step away from that commitment. That's just not acceptable. We have to own the responsibility we commit to and finish the job, while at the same time work with those individuals who slighted us to make amends.

Lesson 9: Don't Sweat the Small Stuff...And It's All Small Stuff...Mostly

Finally, I learned a long time ago from my mother to rely on the adage "what's the worst that can happen?" Boy, that phrase has kept me in good stead for a great many years. Sure, it's true that really bad things can happen if the wrong actions

are taken but in the grand scheme of things, a lot of stuff is pretty small stuff. If you're planning a voyage around Cape Horn for example, not taking the right amount of provisions is pretty major problem. So is not using the right amount of sail when you're battling 50 knot winds and 30 foot seas. But taking white wine on your trip when you meant to take red, not such a big deal.

What I take from this, and I say to all of you, is that we all need to have a more critical sense of what's important and what's not so important and find language and behavior to be able to say so to each other. We also need to be better about receiving those messages so we understand that we're not being attacked or belittled but that there are other perspectives that need to be considered and heard with respect and dignity.

Closing

In closing, I want to say that it's been a privilege to serve on the Board. The leaders in the group are thoughtful, respectful, and embody the best principles of Unitarian Universalism and I'm happy to be working with them. These lessons I've shared with you are a summary of much that I've learned from my work over the past three years. I've left a lot out but I hope that I've conveyed a sense of link between the administrative aspects of the work to a larger sense of purpose and connection to some of my closely held values.

Chalice Lighting

Eric A. Heller-Wagner

Blessed is the fire that burns deep in the soul. It is the flame of the human spirit touched into being by the mystery of life. It is the fire of reason; the fire of compassion; the fire of community; the fire of justice; the fire of faith. It is the fire of love burning deep in the human heart; the divine glow in every life.

Reading

Calvin O. Dame

Acknowledgment of Limitations

We come into one another's presence seeking some part of ourselves, knowing that we do not live alone, knowing that we cannot live fully if we are for ourselves alone.

We come as ordinary people, each with strengths and each with weaknesses, aware of our shortcomings. Our lives set before us many tasks. We are not always equal to them.

Too often we fall short of our best expectations of ourselves; we do not know enough, we are not always patient, we fall into anger, we cannot find strength, we do not wait for wisdom, we lack vision. It hurts. It hurts to acknowledge our shortcomings.

And yet, here we are, not always perfect, not always wise, but always human, gloriously and miraculously alive and breathing, wondrously and mysteriously human.