

09/25/2022

*“My mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive.”*

This quote by Maya Angelou is the most recent addition to my ever-growing list of inspirational quotes. It was also encountered in the most unexpected and—honestly—awkward of circumstances. Last month, when I was in New Mexico, frantically calling around to get all of our services and everything set up in preparation for when we would arrive in California, I had a conversation with a very enthusiastic—and very good at their job—customer service associate at Xfinity who, before I had a chance to stop and take in the entirety of our conversation, had managed to talk me into bundling cable TV along with my home Wi-Fi. To give you a point of reference, I—like the late millennial that I am—have not had cable TV for the past 10-15 years, preferring instead to subscribe to the myriad of streaming services like Netflix and Hulu that are now readily available. The last time I had cable TV was back when there were only about 200 channels.

As I was in the midst of unpacking boxes, I decided to flip through the apparently now thousands of channels to find something to play in the background for noise as we continued to unpack the apartment and make it livable. I happened upon one of the music channels (apparently, that’s a thing now) called “Relaxation” that played a selection of calming, meditative New Age music that I figured would be good background noise and something that would not send my ADHD into over processing territory. What I discovered was that, in addition to the music that the channel played, it also showed on the screen a series of inspirational quotes that would randomly pop

up as they felt so moved, and Maya Angelou's words were the first ones that came up, set across the peaceful backdrop of a cascading waterfall. My first reaction was to glare at the TV, and then look around at the circle of half-opened moving boxes and misplaced furniture that was surrounding me, before looking back at the TV and thinking to myself: *'Really, Maya? Read the room. You're going to give this to me now?'*

” But the more that I thought about it (as I unpacked more and more of the apartment), the more that I kept going back to that quote and marveling at how much it was the message that I—and all of us—needed to hear right now.

As members of smaller congregations, it feels often times like we have resigned ourselves to being in a constant state of just trying to survive. We are always aware of and bemoaning the fact that we are lacking something—be it volunteers, resources, funding, membership, etc., etc., etc. We allow ourselves to fall into the trap of looking at what other congregations have, or looking at what are doing and saying to ourselves: “It would be great if we could do that, if only...” I am aware that the reality of doing this thing that we call church can, and often times is, more difficult and comes with a special and unique set of circumstances for the congregations of 50-150 members that make up the majority of UU churches across the country. But, the more we repeat those words to ourselves *“if only,”* the more that it reinforces that sense of negative self-esteem in our minds, turning into a sense of shame. It makes us feel like we are never quite arriving at the kind of church that we are imagining that we can be.

Eventually, in the attempt of not wanting to seem like we are ungrateful, we end up telling ourselves that we need to just try and get along and do the best with what we have.

I invite you to take a look around at the building that you are currently sitting in (no, seriously, take a look around). For those who are not familiar with the history of this church (as I was not before coming here), this sanctuary was first constructed in the early 1930s; Jackson Hall and the Fireside Room was added in 1954, and the church offices were added in the 1990s. What this means is that the building to which you come to church, and the building in which you are sitting in right now, has been in Stockton on this very same street in this very same location for at least 90 years. And that is just the building. This congregation of which you are a part is the ancestor of the First Unitarian Society of Stockton which was first established by Rev. W. E. Copeland in 1892—130 years ago, and only 32 after California entered the union as a state. First UU Stockton is one of the oldest continually existing congregations—if not the oldest—in the state of California and in the entire United States. The previous congregation that I served in Albuquerque had only been in existence—both the congregation and the building—since 1949.

My point in emphasizing all of this is that the fact that this church building is here and that there are people who over the span of 130 years have poured as much love and support into this church so that it continues to be a presence here in the Stockton community is a testament to the fact that you have survived. I am aware that I have not been a part of this community for very long, but my impression is that there is

enough love contained within these walls to make sure that this church continues to be a fixture in Stockton for another 130 years.

The question that I have is, based on Maya Angelou's words, is *how do we thrive?* Once we allow ourselves to accept the fact that we have survived, how do we come together to imagine what the next 130 years will look like for First UU Stockton? Where does all of the love that we have concentrated into this space take us? How do we come together, as a community of communities, to create the First UU Stockton that we have always imagined; the First UU Stockton that we know that we can be?

One of the other reasons that Maya Angelou's words resonate with me—especially this week—is that Stockton and a number of other Central Valley communities are beginning to have Pride celebrations—something that is commonly done in smaller communities so as not to compete with Pride celebrations held in larger cities in June. Stockton's Pride celebration is actually being held this afternoon from 12-5pm at the Stockton Ballroom. Whenever Pride celebrations come up, it never fails that I have a good natured person with the best of intentions come up to me and ask the question: *why Pride? Why is it necessary to celebrate Pride every year?* My response to this is always the same; I tell people that it is less about what you see at Pride and more about being seen.

What I mean by that is Pride for many of us in the queer community is about emerging--emerging from the margins that society has pushed you to—emerging from the stigma of being told that you cannot be your authentic self—and forcing the world

and everyone else to truly see you front and center as someone who is proud of everything that they are. It is a moment of celebration, but it is also a moment of defiance--being seen as our queer selves is a form of protest against everything society rejects. It is saying with our presence and our existence that we are here and that we are not going away: not any time soon or ever. We are also not only allowing ourselves to be seen for our own sake, but for those of us in the generations that are to come; we not only want ourselves to be seen for the unique and beautiful individuals we are, but that all others to come can be seen for who they were always meant to be.

For us at First UU Stockton—especially as we begin to open back up and resume in-person worship and in-person meetings again in this post-pandemic world—many of the questions are the same. We have survived for 130 years—including three years worth of a global pandemic. How do we now allow ourselves to be seen? How do we manage the collective trauma that we have all experienced and how do we be there and provide pastoral care to our members--our friends? How do we come back in a way that is safe and how do we come together to not only build the church back up, but imagine a new way forward for the future? How do we allow ourselves to not only be seen in a post-pandemic world, but to thrive? How do we take everything that we have learned and imagine ourselves as a First UU Church that is excited to meet and welcome the generation of new souls that will come through its doors?

In Greek mythology, the phoenix was seen as an immortal bird that would periodically die in a show of flames and combustion before being reborn and arising from the ashes of its predecessor into a new version. What does our rising from the

ashes look like? How do we make ourselves into something even more magnificent than before, bringing everyone together in a sense of hope and resilience over the adversities of the past, and make ourselves even more inclusive than before to those that we can bring out of the margins where they have resided for far too long? My hope is that these are the questions that we ask of ourselves, and that these are the kinds of conversations that we seek to have with each other over the next few months. And I am also hoping that we can bring all the love that has contributed over the past 130 years to this space with us and use it to imagine what the future holds for us. Not only this space, but that the words and message of everything we profess here can be brought out into the community so that it can be shared with people who need to hear and experience the love that we have here. There are so many people outside of this church's walls for whom the words we say here every Sunday mean something; we need them to not only hear those words, but to see us live into them through our actions. May they know that this community that has been here for 130 years, this building that has been there for 90+ years on the same street in the same spot, is a place that is guided by the love and support and care for this community of which it is a part. And may the answers to all of the questions that we ask ourselves through our conversations together not focus on the surviving that we have already done, but the thriving that we know that we can achieve.

May it ever continue to be so. Blessed be. Amen. Shalom. Assalamu Aleikum. Namaste. Thank you all so much..