

## **Burning Brightly**

**by Rev. Michelle Collins, delivered June 14, 2015**

They were bouncing everywhere on my kitchen floor!

I can follow my line of thinking pretty well on this one. I had ordered a gross of bouncy balls – that’s 144 balls all together – for a project I was working on here at church. They came in one plastic bag all together. Folk who know a little of how my mind works will probably understand why the first thought to go through my head when I was holding this bag of 144 neon colored bouncy balls was, “I wonder how high they’ll bounce all together!”

I held out the bag and dropped it. And... they didn’t bounce at all.

If the rational part of my brain had been operating at that point, it would have said something like, “Rubber balls both transmit energy and absorb it. And when the bag of balls hits the ground, the energy is transmitted between balls and they each absorb each other’s energy and so there is none left that gets translated into force to send the bag up into the air.”

But no, a joyful bag of neon colored bouncy balls does not reside anywhere near the rational part of my brain. Instead, I said, “I must need to drop it from higher up.” I held the bag up over my head and this time when it fell, it bounced about an inch. It couldn’t help it, not from that height. Of course this only fueled my joyful insanity. Higher! So I threw the bag up to the ceiling, and this time when it fell, the balls did in fact bounce. It hit the ground with enough force to burst open the plastic bag and the balls went merrily bouncing all over my kitchen floor.

What is it that you have that’s bursting to be free, what’s yearning to burn brightly in this world? And, like the plastic bag was to the bouncy balls, what’s holding you back?

This question actually has a theological dimension. Of the many possible origins for the word religion, one is related to the Latin word *religare*, meaning to bind together. I’ve always loved this interpretation. Religion binds us together as human beings and brings our paths and our journeys together, not to be the same journey but to walk together on each of our journeys bound together with common quests. But to take it even further *religare* may have an even more specific meaning. According to some folks, it can also mean literally the binding strap that tied wood that was meant to be burnt into bundles. *Religare* is what gathers us, the burning sticks, together.

I love this image for religion! Religion brings together and binds together these pieces of potential, potential for fire and energy and change, religion brings us together and gets us ready to burn.

This is one of the things that I want most for members of a church, to be able to seek out and live out our potentials, our passions and what brings us joy.

A quote attributed to Howard Thurman sums this up well: “Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.” People who have come alive – that’s what our world needs, what our church needs, and what Unitarian Universalism needs. People who have found the passion and joy that makes them come alive.

Now you could probably accuse me, and rightly so, of getting too carried away with utopian visions of stuff like this and of keeping my head in the clouds too much. I’m an idea person – I have to! This is the kind of stuff that keeps me going, these are the oftentimes simple visions and ideas that I can latch onto and hope for. Ideas are one of my fuels. I can’t help but get carried away with them.

What is it that makes you come alive? What are your passions, the things that are calling from within you?

I’m of a mind that our passions and callings aren’t fixed and can shift and change with time, and that sometimes we know what they are while sometimes they are more elusive. Finding my own passion as of right now has been a rather winding path. Before heading towards ministry, I had a series of shorter term jobs and passions – mathematics, a couple different forms of photography, teaching – but never really settling in on anything for a good while, at least. I recently talked about how I started on my path towards ministry afraid of preaching, but did you know I was afraid of pastoral care, too? My minister told me about the ministry training requirement to spend a summer’s worth of time as a hospital chaplain, and at the time I couldn’t imagine anything more terrifying! Little did I know that I’d like it so much that I’d have an entire year as a hospital chaplain and then take ministry positions with a focus on pastoral care – both my time here and my position next year as well. My other specific passions I’ve stumbled into as well – my work with small groups, with membership, with church communications and social media, and my love of storytelling. And my list will no doubt continue to grow.

Those are slightly more specific things – and some of our passions and callings will be. But there are the larger scale things, too.

As our meditation reading today reminded us, we are all called, to something or some things.

Called by our appetites & gifts, our needs & our challenges.

Called by our wants, our pains, our loves, our hopes, our dreams, by the spirit or spirits of love and hope, by the vision for purpose in our lives.

Now, that sounds pretty lofty, I have to admit. I hear that and think well, what about little old me. I can talk about passions and ideas and callings, but there’s a lot that ends up holding me back too. Thinking back to our rubber bouncy balls – the plastic bag did a pretty good job of holding them back until they couldn’t help but escape from it.

A litany of different things hold each of us back. And some of us (many of us) are pretty good at finding and naming those things – we’re good at it because these are the excuses that we use all the time! You could probably come up with a whole list of possibilities...

Time, other people not doing it too, support, resources, uncertainty, other priorities, just don’t feel up for it, self-confidence, fear, not really knowing your overall direction or your overall purpose, going a different direction – or maybe just missing the fire.

One of our church leaders recently asked me my take on what First Unitarian most needed right now, and that’s what I answered. Fire and passion. What makes us come alive; what can’t help but burst past the forces that are holding us back. Lean into that, and I can scarcely imagine where the church might go.

We’ve had quite a journey together the past three years. Just like they stepped back and took a look at the sand pile in our story today, a time of transition is one to take a step back and look at the time we’ve had together.

When I first started here, I wasn’t a “Reverend” yet. Y’all changed that for me when you ordained me into the ministry. But even more than that, First U has been the first church where I have served as minister, and y’all have made me that in more ways than just one.

And I admit that I had no idea what I was getting into! Before I started here, I thought I was a pretty organized person, and that I could remember things fairly easily and keep a calendar pretty well. But then I experienced what Rev. Josh said was the “big church wow factor.” This was the biggest church I had been a part of, and less than two weeks into my time here, I realized I needed all new organization systems! And I think I could still use some work on that, too.

This is the first place I ever did a child dedication! Before I started, Rev. Alison Hyder, who was the interim in my position, she emailed me to ask for my child dedication materials. Uh, what child dedication materials?? Since then, rites of passage have been something that I have come to cherish – and we’ve done a good number of them together too. Babies and dedications, weddings and commitment ceremonies, memorial services and funerals. One day I realized I was living a joke that gets thrown around about rites also – that we’re sometimes doing all of them at once. There was an afternoon when literally I worked on a wedding, a child dedication, and a memorial service all at once!

Memorial services in particular surprised me. We do them well, here at First Unitarian. They are joyful celebrations and we’re not afraid to talk about them either. I was pleasantly surprised at that. We’re not afraid to talk about death and dying here, and this is part of what motivated me to create my end of life planning materials, the Intentional Conclusions booklet. Did you know that nearly 100 of them have been distributed so far? If I’ve got one hope to leave you with, it’s that you fill them out and share them with your family. Don’t let them just collect dust on a shelf.

There's another part of ministry and about our relationship, too. Before I was here with y'all, I had heard that ministers fall in love with congregations. At the time, I didn't really get what that meant. I mean, sure, I could come up with an intellectually based understanding of it. And we often throw the word love around a good bit in churches, too. But it was here I discovered what it meant to fall in love with a congregation. And I've felt many ways that our feelings and our appreciation and care for each other are mutual as well.

We have loved each other through ups and through downs during our time together. The church has faced challenges, to be sure, but you know, every church does. What says a lot about one's character is how you get through them and what you do next. I think First U is off to a good start there. There'll be challenges, but I can say without reservation that I'm feeling hopeful for the next phase of this church's life. There's a good energy and a good feeling here, and the church is in good hands, both Rev. Roberta's and all of yours. All of your hands. There are good hands holding the church.

I'll be watching from afar, but only from afar. That's one of the hardest parts of leaving – the leaving part. Despite how much we may want to stay connected, it's healthiest to let go – healthiest for the church and for me also – we have to let go of each other. It doesn't mean that we don't care about each other. On the contrary, it's so hard – and I admit it's hard as anything for me – it's hard to let go precisely because we do care about each other.

Thank you for the journey that we have shared together. Thank you for everything each of you shared with me. Thank you for forgiving me when I messed things up. Thank you for the energy and ideas you shared with me. Thank you for your vulnerability and trust. Thank you to those of you who said 'yes' when I recruited you for something, and thank you even if you said 'no, I can't right now.' Thank you for the support and for your high expectations that have helped me to become a better minister. And thank you for the endings that we are sharing together now.

I want to close with a blessing today. I thought back to my ordination service, where Rev. Clare Petersberger shared with us about blessings. Here's a part of the reading from that service:

"A blessing is a circle of light drawn around a person to protect, heal, and strengthen. The word blessing evokes a sense of warmth and protection; it suggests that no life is alone or unreachable. When a blessing is invoked, it changes the atmosphere. In the light and reverence of blessing, a person or situation becomes illuminated in a completely new way." (from *To Bless the Space Between Us*, by John O'Donohue)

I have been blessed by our journey together. I hope that you have felt blessed through my ministry on that journey. I wish love and blessings for each and every one of your lives, for every day of your lives and for every relationship. I wish blessings and passion for you here at First U – both for the big things and for the little ones also. May you all have joy and compassion, energy and enthusiasm, and may that fire be sustained. And I mean all of that when I say, blessed be.