

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

September 1, 2019

The acoustically perfect sanctuary of the First Presbyterian Church in Staunton Virginia was sweltering in the overflow crowd of anxious parents and Heifetz Institute season ticket holders. Four 13-year-old girls filed onstage in long gowns clutching their violins, viola and cello like lifelines. They reminded me of puppies about to be disciplined. In the next 10 minutes they performed a technically perfect string quartet. As the applause swelled they bowed and smiled, more in relief than in joy. I wondered about their lives.

Toward the end of the six-week run of the International Heifetz Institute for string players I met with the Executive Director. I asked about these young musician's expectations for their careers in music. He said the Institute tried to prepared them for the inevitable reality that not all of them will be international soloists like Yo-Yo Ma or Anne Sophie Mutter – a career path for which they all train. Nonetheless that lofty expectation of international acclamation persists. It drives most of these young musicians and, all too often, their parents.

So persistent is this expectation that many of these youngsters arrive at the Heifetz Institute never having played in a group. The Heifetz faculty spends as much time coaching string quartets as they do coaching individuals. Everyone is required to experience playing with others; hence the prevalence of performances by string quartets. The Heifetz Institute also stresses verbal articulation of the performer's art. Each group (or soloist) introduces their piece before they play. Some of these presentations are outstanding. Some are, well ... not.

The Institute faculty have had the experience of having their expectations of a musical career modified in some way. They have experienced limitations, and outwardly at least, seem content. They model alternative paths. The Executive Director noted that most of the students will probably end up playing in the string sections what's left of symphony orchestras and supplementing their income by teaching and participating in the 'gig' economy. The 'dragon' parents will be disappointed, but most will adjust. Likewise will the students.

My summer in the arts-centered town of Staunton, Virginia provided a lot of sermon fodder. The music of participants in Heifetz Institute, the Staunton Music Festival and Bluegrass in the Park fed my soul. The Blackfriars Theatre staging of Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar", "Antony and Cleopatra", and George Bernard Shaw's "Caesar and Cleopatra" fed my mind. The close proximity of the local YMCA pool and the hilly streets reminded me that I still had a body that functioned best when it moved. And the mostly unstructured days gave me time to think about Tri-UU and our shared ministry. There was time to re-visit my expectations for myself and for Tri-UU and plan how we might meet them going forward into a new program year.

I expect. You expect. Our expectations matter. They shape how we perceive the world. Most of us here have been raised with the expectation that if we get an education, find a job and keep it, work hard, save our money, and behave as a responsible citizen obeying the laws of the land we will be rewarded with a comfortable life. For most of us

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

September 1, 2019

here today, that's proven to be true. We can, of course, debate what's 'comfortable'. But I think we can agree that, compared with our kin of a different skin color or accent or gender identification who have conformed to the same expectations, us pink-skinned retired folks have been rewarded for fulfilling our societal expectations.

HOWEVER. And it's a big however for Unitarian Universalists and those who share our values. However, it's jarring to realize that our 'just rewards' aren't all that just. They often don't extend to those who aren't like us. If we claim to affirm and promote 'the inherent worth and dignity of the individual' and believe that "We, the people..." includes ALL the people, then we are bound to be rattled by the current state of these not-so united states. We expect – and have planned our lives – to be governed and supported by those who "support the general welfare and secure the blessings of liberty." When these aspirations fall short -- when reality doesn't meet our expectations we become . . . well, what many of us are today: disbelieving, enraged, depressed, activated, cynical, or simply disappointed. I'm reminded of Pip in Charles Dicken's "Great Expectations" – the one book I read over the summer.

For those of you a little fuzzy on the plot, here's a brief refresher courtesy of my colleague, Rev. Lynn Thomas Strauss. The protagonist is Pip, an orphan raised by his blacksmith uncle, Joe. Pip's early life was one of hardship, and he was expected to follow Joe's path as a blacksmith. Through a series of events, Pip becomes the recipient of a great deal of money. This unexpected reversal of fortunes fuels Pip's grand and unrealistic visions of what it is to "live as a gentleman." Not surprisingly he makes a mess of it. He dismisses his kind Uncle Joe and later his benefactor Magwitch. His infatuation with the seeming ingénue Estella and all the glittering lures of a moneyed life are fueled by the same illusory expectations that come of self-indulgence and disregard for others. When his comeuppance arrives – when his money runs out -- Pip is forced to recognize the error of his ways, how he has disregarded those who cared most for him while currying favor with those whose interests were purely selfish.

One moral lesson of "Great Expectations" is that the way one goes about fulfilling expectations is as important as their attainment. Or to phrase it differently, in human communities the process is more important than the product. Expectations wouldn't matter at all if they didn't influence our behavior. The links between expectation and behavior are key, whether we're talking about the expectations for international climate agreement and the national follow-through needed to fulfill it, or parental expectations for a child's musical achievement and that child's practice habits. Expectations of others and of self influence behavior.

The media is full of stories about people who, like Pip, curry favor with those whose interests are purely selfish. We find them at the highest levels of government and industry. Since we're saturated with their antics I'm not going to give anymore air time to those people and their behaviors. Instead I want consider what behaviors we have – or we will --

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

September 1, 2019

put in place to fulfill our expectation articulated in the Tri-UU vision statement: that of being “an influential voice for progressive religious values in a diverse community.”

To be an influential voice simply means that people will pay attention to you. In order to do that they need to know you exist. A team of dedicated people – Frank Kelly, Trish Schwartzberg, John Seitz, Doug and Lynn Worthington, and Larae Donnellon – have developed a fresh **website** for Tri-UU. It’s easy to navigate and it conforms to the latest thinking in what attracts people searching for a spiritual home. This new website does NOT mean that visitors to it will flock to our doors. We know that Unitarian Universalism is not for everyone. Our expectation is that the design and content of the new website will influence searchers to consider Tri-UU.

What we are expecting people to pay attention to is our progressive religious values. One of the plans for Tri-UU in the next 10 months is to introduce the use of monthly themes paired with theological concepts. The Worship and Lifespan Education teams have subscribed to a curriculum developed by and for Unitarian Universalist congregations called “**Soul Matters.**” During September our worship services and small groups will focus on the theme of Expectations. And just this year the Soul Matters team has linked the monthly theme with a theological concept. This month the concept is Faith. I’m excited about exploring language and terminology which have inflicted such deep wounds on so many. I hope – and I expect! – we will be able to redefine these words and reclaim them as part of our Unitarian Universalist faith.

Our values, codified in our seven principles, are explored in our Lifespan Education classes, workshops, forums, and lectures. But they’re also explored in **small groups** of 8-12 people. This format creates an intimacy in which to articulate questions and observations in a safe and supportive environment. Two groups have emerged from Lifespan classes. I’m excited about expanding the number of small groups at Tri-UU, and will provide more details at a forum in October.

The last part of the Tri-UU mission statement is “...in a diverse community”. We are here in this time and place to articulate our values to a community that encompasses all sorts of people and beliefs. Now, if you define diversity by skin color only you may look around Tri-UU and at the Tri-County area and wonder how diverse we really are. But if we look a little deeper we can see a tremendous range of group identities. Just look at the number of identity-specific activities offered in our retirement communities. There are clubs for almost any interest or identity you can think of.

We have been involved in interfaith work in this area but the divisions among the faith communities are deep. What this last phrase says to me is that we recognize our diversity and frame our expectations and behaviors accordingly. The reality is that not everyone is going to be open to the expression of our free faith. And even if there are groups and individuals who share our values there may be cultural or other reasons they don’t show up in our congregations. A couple of years ago I stopped worrying about numbers. Tri-UU is a waystation. You have a reputation for authentic hospitality to those

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

September 1, 2019

on a journey. You provide a safe place to reflect on life's greatest questions. You provide a supportive place to rest from resisting and challenging the empire's assaults on our values. You model counter-cultural behavior: to meet aggression with compassion. To meet fear of the other with hospitality. To meet destruction with renewal. To meet indifference with engagement. To meet hatred with love. These are our behavioral expectations grounded in our values.

If we expect to be "an influential voice for progressive religious values in a diverse community" we need to do three things. We need to be clear about our values. We need to manage our reactivity to those who violently disagree with us in order to indulge in our righteous anger with focused and compassionate action. And we need to stay connected with each other. These are truly great expectations. May we embrace them individually and collectively from this day forward. Amen.