

To Build and Rebuild
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As we cross the many bridges of life, the people who have the most to teach us along the way are not always who we might expect.

John, the reclusive next door neighbor of my childhood, refused to pump his own gas, kept a silent watchful eye over the neighborhood, and alternated sitting on his patio or in his dimly lit living room chain-smoking, day after day. He only left his house once a week, when he went out for groceries.

You could imagine him as the type to scare and berate the neighborhood kids – “Get off my lawn! Grumble, grumble, grumble...”

You would be wrong.

Instead, he was a dear family friend who taught his redheaded neighbor children most everything they know about planting, growing, building, and rebuilding.

Our parents took us next door often to visit with John. The adults would sit and chat while my brother and I would roam about his property - a carefully landscaped jungle of magnolia and honeysuckle ripe for hours of exploration, dreaming, and mud-pie making.

I don't think John intended to be a mentor or a friend to a couple of insatiably curious neighbor kids. Though he had a heart of absolute gold, he liked to consider himself a curmudgeon, with an acid wit and little patience for people.

But by some miracle, along with invading his gardens, I know without a doubt that our family weaseled our way into his heart.

We loved him too.

In turn, he opened up his yard to us, and with it, many worlds of learning and imagination.

Under his tutelage, I planted my first rosebush, harvested homegrown carrots, and fixed my own squeaky bicycle with an ancient can of oil from his garage.

He helped my dad supervise the building of soapbox cars and crazy school projects, and when my brother and I acted out nonsensical stories in the driveway, John encouraged our imaginations as our audience and critic and adoring fan.

John was a reclusive atheist, and not a Unitarian Universalist (though of course, one can certainly be both!)

But he helped my spirit grow.

He taught me how to coax life and beauty into the world using just a seed and some dirt.

He showed me how to grease a squeaky wheel and encouraged me to think for myself and to keep imagining.

He tasked me with building something that matters. And he gave me practice spending time with a golden-hearted curmudgeon.

All useful skills for a minister.

And, indeed, as this particular neighbor child grew, I found my imagination fixed on the world of religion and the questions of meaning that undergird our lives.

Eventually my dreaming culminated in a call to the ministry, and I entered into this adventure as readily as I had plunged into that honeysuckle-filled back yard.

Over the years I found many more mentors on my journey:

- A minister who named the ministry as a viable path for my life
- A young adult advisor who invited me into leadership
- A college religion professor who gave me a whole new view of the universe
- And ministry mentors who trained me and challenged me and invited me into the institutions of our faith

I wish for our youth many such mentors over the years.

But lately I've been thinking about the simple lessons of my neighbor John, who taught me how to plant, grow, build, and rebuild.

And I have begun to suspect that these are the skills that will matter most to the future of our faith.

In a time of conspicuous consumption and environmental decline, we need people who can coax life and beauty to grow in unlikely places.

In a time when people and things are seen as disposable, we need folks who are willing to repair bicycles and relationships and broken spirits.

In this age of crumbling institutions and shaky ground, we need builders who are clear-eyed and open-hearted, flexible and creative.

As a faith, we find ourselves now in a changing religious landscape where more people than ever claim spirituality and reject religious institution – thereby making our message of

open-mindedness and inclusion less and less unique and our traditional institutional structures less and less relevant.

This new landscape could be scary for people who love Unitarian Universalism and UU churches, but it is also exciting! There is a whole new world of possibility before us, if we will build the bridges to get there.

So this evening I wanted to tell you about someone who inspired me to imagine and to build, because that is what I am here to ask of you, the generation now preparing to lead and transform our faith.

Instead of simply inviting you into our religious institution as it is, tonight I ask for your help re-imagining what our faith and our churches can be and become.

So, this is my charge to you, our bridging youth:

- Find a place that needs more life and beauty, and explore that place with clear eyes and open hearts.
- Then build something there that matters, and use a creative and flexible spirit to keep on rebuilding.
- Keep on rebuilding, because the ground beneath us is not a steady as it once was (if it ever was). Our rapidly changing world demands imagination, collaboration, and experimentation.

Our Unitarian Universalist faith, if it is to mean something, calls each of us to dream a vision of healing for our world, then to draw up plans and see what we can build together, over and over again.

What will be the structures that grow our spirits and heal our world in the days to come?

Will they be congregations in person and online?

Will they be housing co-ops and community gardens?

Will they be coffee shops and community service missions?

Will they be creations already taking shape in your hearts that I can't even imagine to name?

A world of possibility and adventure awaits our faith, just across the bridge.

It is ours to discover and dream and co-create.

It is ours to heal the world.

Together, we will build things that matter, and keep on rebuilding.

Let's get to work.