Got Mission?

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[play clarinet]
I am not a great clarinetist. By many measures, I'm not even a very good clarinet player. But I do love music and enjoy playing. And I can claim to be infinitely better than anyone who doesn't play the clarinet at all.

I started studying the clarinet in fifth grade and continued through high school, eventually reaching fairly high levels of artistry. And then I didn't play it again for over 40 years. I picked it up again a few years ago and discovered, to my delight, that I hadn't lost everything. Well, I did lose all the muscle tone in my lips. Getting that back is like working out in the gym, only smaller. Muscles take work.

But many of the basic skills came back fairly quickly. There's a concept called "muscle memory," that recognizes that learning can take place at a physiological level, that one's fingers can learn to do specific things and remember how to do them again later. While the term points to the muscles, the key element is really the creation of the neural pathways involved in that activity. And these neural pathways can last far longer than muscle tone that fades over time.

The music I played just now was part of a study I learned fifty years ago. I discovered that my fingers still remembered it when I picked up the clarinet again, even though my lip muscles screamed in protest. Such is the enduring power of well-established neural pathways. They give us the ability to repeat what we've learned, even after a long hiatus.

And, obviously, this doesn't only apply to the clarinet. Every new thing we learn to do involves the creation of new neural connections, new pathways in the brain that are specific to that particular activity.

Sports, for example. Swimming, golf, tennis, bowling, and rock climbing all require that we learn new skills, new ways of interpreting our experience, and new ways of using our bodies.

When a child learns how to climb a tree there are some very specific new skills involved, skills that require rewiring the nervous system to develop an enhanced sense of balance as well as new ways of coordinating our eyes, hands and feet.

Just think about all the new pathways we created when we learned to read. Those marks on a page were transformed from meaningless bits of ink into meaningful thoughts and ideas. We learned new ways of moving our eyes. We learned to visualize the events of a story with a vividness only suggested by the written page.

It was a real, often frustrating mystery as we began to learn, but as we gained proficiency, those new neural pathways eventually gave us the ability to read effortlessly, imagining all sorts of things and entertaining points of view that came to us from beyond ourselves.

Think about all the new pathways we had to create in order to learn Algebra, or calculus!

The creation of these new neural pathways is the subject of a new branch of science called, "neuroplasticity," that studies the adaptability of our nervous system. It's been discovered that our minds and brains are not fixed, unchanging things. Every new experience and memory deposits new physical connections in our brain. Each new skill we learn does the same, sometimes in incredibly complex ways.

And it also points to our potential to develop new cognitive functions as well. We're born with a bunch of our more basic connections already in place, and even more develop naturally as a child grows into an adult. These are more or less hard-wired reactions to pleasure and pain, desire and anxiety, survival-based things common to all living beings. We certainly wouldn't want there to be anything optional or elective about how we digest food or make our heart beat. We'd be sure to forget something important and fall over dead!

But when we take a look at the ways our brain functions, one of the first things we find is that established pathways are always used first. This is often a good thing, as it enables us to perform complex activities without too much

conscious oversight. Going to the bathroom or reading a book usually don't really require a lot of thought. We know how to do it and we just do it.

But some of the pathways derived from our survival-based programming tend to develop a kind of autonomy of their own. Problem-solving, for example, tends to follow a primal pain-reduction pathway. Being hungry is uncomfortable, so eating something makes us feel better. Something bothers us or annoys us and we deal with that and feel better.

The pleasure/pain axis can provide us with a template for how to live in the world. But, just like when all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail, when our basic orientation is the pleasure/pain problem-solving axis, we go through life looking for problems we can solve in order to feel better. Everything can begin to look like a problem in search of a solution. Our culture certainly supports this approach.

And it's easy to see why. The problem-solving approach to life is self-justifying. It becomes common sense, and our interpretation of the world comes to be based on this sense of "reality," that comes from following the most throughly developed and most frequently used neural pathways. It can seem even foolish or absurd to suggest that there are other ways of being in the world.

The tricky thing is that learning something entirely new, establishing completely new neural pathways, requires that we have to intentionally stop following our older pathways and allow ourselves to enter into a time of "not knowing."

This is fairly easy to do when it comes to a skill we know we don't have. I've never played the clarinet and want to learn how. So I approach the task with the understanding that the habits and skills I already have won't be useful and that I need to learn something entirely new.

This requires a kind of humility, an acknowledgement that we are incomplete in some way, that what we seek is beyond what we have. This may be fairly easy to do when we're considering a physical skill like playing the clarinet, but what about learning new ways of interpreting and responding to our life experience? Our own

sense of reality can block us from being able to see beyond our problem-solving paradigm.

This is where the "empty cup" metaphor speaks most clearly. It's the classic Zen teaching story that tells of Nan-in, a Japanese Zen master who received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen. Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, and then kept on pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. "It is overfull. No more will go in!" "Like this cup," Nan-in said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"

Our cups are full of our favorite, well-established neural pathways, our habitual interpretations and responses to life's challenges. Creating new ones requires that we find a way to empty our cups of our sense of certainty, sometimes even our very sense of reality, in order to experience a different way of being in the world.

One way this comes close to home here is the question as to exactly what is our church mission. I've found that, when we're immersed in the dominant problem-solving paradigm, no matter how high sounding, spiritual or idealistic a covenant we adopt, we tend to convert it into a set or series of problems to be solved. As I said, when all you've got is a hammer, everything tends to look like a nail.

So we look for things in the world that bother us, annoy us, anger us, and we set about trying to change or fix them. Or we decide we want more members and that becomes a problem to solve. Or we need more money and that's a problem, too. And what about building maintenance? That's an unending series of problems in a facility as old as this.

And so our church, which is founded on noble ideals of love, compassion, and respect, can easily slide into an institution that uses its energy in an attempt to solve all those problems, eliminate everything that angers or annoys us so we can finally be happy.

Except that's not where happiness lies.

Every religion in the history of the world has pointed out that happiness does not come as the result of solving problems. We enjoy the relief we get from that,

sometimes – sure, but real happiness relies on an entirely different set of neural pathways, pathways that exist only in potential and aren't even available for us to use until we have opened ourselves in humility to the realization that we don't have them yet, and spend the time and effort to cultivate them.

Church is really all about the cultivation of neuroplasticity – creating new neural pathways that can give us the ability to experience life differently than we do now; differently from the way our culture expects us to live. This is what those things called "spiritual practices" are all about. And it's why most of us usually react with some annoyance at the concept of spiritual practice. It just doesn't make sense from our problem-solving perspective. It doesn't seem to create anything useful – it seems like a complete waste of time.

It's quite reasonable for us to feel that way. After all, they don't correspond with our sense of reality. But our senses of reality can change. Now that I'm playing the clarinet again, I can feel music in my fingertips as I listen to a recording. I can imagine which fingering I would use to play a specific note or passage and feel what it would feel like to play it on the clarinet. This is something that wasn't there before!

So if church is about cultivating new neural pathways that can help us to live the least fearful, most joy-filled, happiest of lives, it should give us some tools to work with. Ideally, that's what churches should do. Practically speaking, if the project is to cultivate feelings of kindness, compassion, generosity and forgiveness (like all the religions say) one first step might be to find a way to help us let go of our fearful, anxiety-based pleasure/pain pathways that have been the basis of our lifestyle up to now. How to do that? How about the promise of heaven? Whether it's logically supportable or not, it has proven to be a good tool for letting go of fear, at least at its best.

So the point isn't in the logical or scientific basis of whatever it is we do to change the neural pathways, it's the new pathways themselves that we are looking to develop.

Having mostly let go of many of the traditional theological underpinnings of this enterprise, Unitarian Universalists can find spiritual practices in everyday activities in fulfilling their mission.

Now, mission can mean a lot of things, but it always requires clarity, determination, and commitment. I have a personal mission to cultivate my musical abilities and so I practice the clarinet. As I practice, I get better. Getting better is encouraging and leads me to do more.

Church missions should act like that. They should encourage the development of new neural pathways that enable us to see and respond to life differently. As Jesus said, "That you may have life more abundantly."

Now, we've got our mission statement printed on the back of our order of service. It says, "To be a center for religious growth and challenge; to be open to all people; to promote freedom, justice and peace; to respect the earth and all living things; and to be a nurturing commnity of mutual acceptance, respect and love."

Now these are great words, great ideas, but a close examination shows that this formulation is rooted in the problem-solving paradigm. We want to be a center for religious growth because there are other places that are not. We want to be open to all people because there are places that are not. We want to promote freedom because some others do not, and so on. Great ideas, but they do little to empower us to actually develop the new neural pathways we need to make them a reality.

I think the statement we call our "core values" does a better job. It says, "The UUCLV is a compassionate community nurturing personal growth and working for justice." Now these are things we can actually try to do in our everyday lives. Whenever we interact we can be asking ourselves, "Am I being compassionate? Am I nurturing those around me? Am I doing my best to be fair?" Asking ourselves these questions can tend to create those new, positive neural pathways that lead to the happiness and fulfillment we all long for.

And our covenant helps, too, as it encourages us to welcome and accept all who enter, communicate with kindness and respect, participate in our church community with generosity and good humor, work together to resolve conflicts, and

support each other in times of happiness and sorrow." Again, great ideals, but they're difficult to follow if we're working out of the problem-solving paradigm.

Which brings us back to our Core Values statement. Happiness is not the result of solving problems. Kindness creates happiness. Nurture creates happiness, compassion creates happiness.

I know this may sound far-fetched. I know it did when I first started on my spiritual journey. Trying to be compassionate when I didn't feel compassionate seemed like a fool's errand to me. I didn't have the neural pathways to support it. But, over time, those pathways began to be established and it became possible for me to choose compassion.

Imagine what our interactions would be like if we entered into them with the intention of being kind, compassionate, nurturing and understanding? What if we ran our committee meetings like that? Believe me, once an atmosphere of mutually supportive kindness is established, it becomes amazingly easy to get things done, whether for ourselves or the greater good of our community.

I invite you all to consider making kindness our mission, and making kindness your mission, too. Lifting up our hearts in gratitude and appreciation of the amazing gift of life and love and wholeness gives us something to celebrate and share every moment of every day. And it can even make us happy.

May it be so.