

Lessons Learned: From Sidewalk to Sanctuary©
A Sermon Offered by Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz
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All Souls: A Unitarian Universalist Congregation, NYC

What have I learned about you – and New York, since arriving in January 2025? Well, (Begin Singing) New York, New York! It's a helluva town, the Bronx is up and the Battery's down and the people ride in a hole in the ground, New York, New York! It's a helluva town!" Indeed it is and you are. So my reflections today are entitled "Lessons Learned: From Sidewalk to Sanctuary" because the walk from the apartment to the subway, from subway to church and to other parts of the city have provided me with some pretty important lessons not only about the meaning of life, the universe and everything, but also about you – All Souls – about Interim Ministry, and what we've experienced together for these past six months.

As I think back to when I first started with you, I had, shall we say, some assumptions about New York. Although I did live here, and should know better, I didn't realize that I had absorbed some stereotypes about New York that living here full time proved wrong. One of them was that New Yorkers were brusque to the point of being downright rude. One of my favorite scenes from the 1969 film *Midnight Cowboy*, when Ratso Rizzo, played by Dustin Hoffman, nearly gets hit by a cab, and he yells "I'm walkin' here!" in his best NY accent. But, experience has taught me that rudeness is just not true. I have personally experienced dozens of unsolicited kindnesses from strangers; early on with you, when I found myself in Queens instead of the Upper West Side, a man on the subway made sure I got on the right train; another told me my backpack was hanging open, better zip it up; a woman introduced me to the app as to how to find public restrooms in Manhattan. The ways in which New Yorkers are truly kind to each other – and kind to the hordes of tourists – was a delightful discovery.

I wondered, then, why is it seem to be easier to be kind to strangers than it is to people closest to you? Should the opposite be true? When I arrived at All Souls, I told you that my job was to observe you – to listen to your stories – and then to interpret those stories in light of my work as a Transitional Minister. I heard many good, positive and uplifting stories about All Souls – how this place has transformed your life; the life of your children; and why you make this your spiritual home. And I’ve heard hard stories too. Stories of by-laws discussions and congregational gatherings that ended in shouts and the equivalent of verbal fisticuffs. Of people not being especially kind, or thoughtful or restrained in speech with one another. Why is that, when these are our fellow spiritual travelers? Well, the answer is quite easy. Familiarity can indeed, breed contempt. In some ways, it’s easier to be kind to a stranger than to your own family. Because you know Uncle Joe is going to start his old familiar rant at Thanksgiving. Or, to put in the congregational setting, you know Ms. Jones is going to get up at the annual meeting and make the same speech that she’s made for the past seven years about getting rid of paper cups at coffee hour. This is a spiritual community, but it is not Shangri-La or the equivalent of Dr. Suess’s Solla Sollew – where they never have any problems – at least very few.

Church is where we get to bring the kindness from the street into the sanctuary and into our shared life. We talk a lot about developing a spiritual practice and sometimes people ask me “well, what does that mean? Do I have to meditate an hour every day? Get on my knees and pray?” Well, that’s only one form of spiritual practice. Church is the place where we get to practice being human. It’s where we can learn what behaviors to ignore (as New Yorkers are masters at!); and what behaviors must be addressed; and finally, which ones must not be tolerated.

One of the most important lessons I learned from my mother was the distinction between what was merely annoying and what was morally and ethically wrong. Slamming the door or leaving lights on around the house were annoying. Lying, cheating or stealing were morally wrong. Likewise, developing forbearance for your fellow church members annoying habits is one thing; but when speech or behavior, threatens the health of the institution, it must be addressed. In my time with you, I invited Rev. Dr. Terasa Cooley, whose book “The Blessings of Congregational Conflict” to offer a workshop and a sermon on how congregations learn to deal with the inevitable conflicts that arise. I don’t find that All Souls currently mired in conflict, which is great! However, the best time to practice conflict transformation in a healthy and productive manner is when there is none. It will serve you well while you are amid this time transition and when you are finally ready to call you next settled ministry.

Another lesson I’ve learned from the sidewalks of New York is that now I can spot the tourists. You know how I know? They are the ones patiently standing at the corner waiting for Pedestrian signal to change from wait to walk. I get it, because I’m a mid-westerner and we are rule followers. But you New Yorkers, why stop the flow just because the minute counter is already at zero? Unless there is traffic barreling down the street – you just keep moving. You don’t want to stop the forward momentum unless you absolutely have to.

I love that about New York. I love the salmon like flow of human bodies in forward motion as we move in a common rhythm. When I arrived in January, I felt two powerful urges from this congregation. One was a wariness and a weariness. You had been through a very challenging and, in many ways, satisfying conclusion of an important chapter in your congregational life. But not too long into my ministry with you, a second powerful urge emerged to get stuff done; ideas, programs, suggestions, hopes, dreams, strategic imperatives started

popping up – all good! It was as if you needed permission to re-engage with your own church. I didn't give it – I just tried to stay out of the way! You didn't want to stop for that wait sign – but you “keep cruising, can't stop, won't stop moving...”. No need to stand at the corner and wait. This is All Souls and you have got things to do!

But here's where the street analogy may be helpful. Earlier this week, I was walking down 2nd avenue and the pedestrian signal blinked “red.” So, I looked down the street, no traffic coming that I could see, stepped out into the street, only to realize, that I had looked down the one-way street *in the wrong direction!* Indeed, most of the people behind me were wisely waiting on the corner! Fortunately, I didn't have to do a Ratso Rizzo and yell “I'm walkin' here” because I scurried across the street and obviously, avoided a disaster.

All of this is to say that sometimes during periods of major transition, you will need to slow down and look twice before making major changes. You'll need to be patient with periods of time when it appears that nothing is happening. Everything in congregational life takes twice as long as you think it should; and during times of transition, it may take even longer. Learning about your history and how that has shaped the identity of All Souls on the Upper East Side is part of the work, and that takes time.

Exploring all your systems, such as how you welcome new members, how you are nurturing to families with children, youth, how to minister to young adults; how to provide a safe space for groups with marginalized identities, how you understand professional ministry now, in the 21st century, how you undertake a more nuanced understanding of undermining white supremacy culture – oh yes, and how you, as a congregation, fight the rise of classism, unrestrained capitalism, sexism, homo and transphobia, racism, facism, Christian Nationalism, and authoritarianism – well, that's gonna take some time, isn't it? It's a bit corny to say this, but

during periods of transition, the journey IS the destination. Because what you don't want to do is to be looking in the wrong direction and get smacked by that metaphorical cabdriver, setting back your hopes and dreams for an indefinite period of time.

The third lesson I've learned from the sidewalks and the subways of New York is the ways in which New Yorkers make space for each other. Some days I feel like I am part of this enormous ballet, as me and my fellow New Yorkers dance around each other, smoothly avoiding collisions at the corners and crosswalks, navigating joggers and strollers, dog walkers and headphone talkers, scooters, bikers and strikers, all navigating the streets and subways with an astonishing grace. I love the way we scooch over to make way to squeeze in one more behind on the subway; our shoulders and knees touching and not touching, sometimes even falling into each other when the subway lurches, self-correcting with an appropriate apology.

There's a lot we can learn from the streets that we can take into the sanctuary. We make space for each other all the time; but here, in this sanctuary known as a congregation, we also make space for the new, the different, the innovative. We make space for the inevitable changes that new leadership, new members and new ministry bring. One of the assumptions I brought to this ministry was that because you are now over 200 years, and you've had very long, tenured ministries, you would not be open to – or adaptable to change. Part of the wisdom of having a longer process of discernment regarding your next Senior Minister is to examine what aspects of your congregational culture, habits and patterns no longer serve you – or would be less attractive to people who haven't even attended All Souls yet. So I'd encourage you NOT to rush this interim process – whether it leads you into a one or two year interim or into a longer period known as developmental ministry. As Rilke reminds us: "Be patient towards all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves...do not now seek the answers which

cannot be given you, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”

There is so much I wish I could say, but one 15-minute sermon cannot fully capture this intense time in your life – and in mine. We are both entering into another time of transition – me into a time of not serving as a full-time senior minister for the foreseeable future; and you, beginning with a new minister. This morning’s reading “Do You Know My Name” was penned by yours truly – and it was written to capture the feeling of saying goodbye to one minister and hello to the next. I fully expect that this time next year, you will be as familiar with Rev. Elaine as you have become with me – probably even more so.

I came to All Souls not because I needed a job, or because I was enamored of your reputation. I came here because I believe that the health and vitality of Unitarian Universalism is enhanced when our largest congregations are strong and solid. I believe in the values we share and a commitment to live those values in all that we do. I believe in the power of community; to change hearts, minds and lives. I believe that together we can and must bend that moral arc of the universe always towards justice, always towards reverence, always towards the things that make for peace. What I didn’t know until I got here – and got to know you is that I would...come to believe in YOU. In the power of your passion, your vision, your commitment. In the strength of your hopes and dreams for the future of this congregation. I believe in you because...**music begins to play...**

“You have the cool, clear eyes of a seeker of wisdom and truth
Yet there's that upturned chin and the grin of impetuous youth
Oh, I believe in you I believe in you
I hear the sound of good, solid judgment whenever you talk, Yet there's the bold, brave spring of the tiger that quickens your walk. Oh, I believe in you, I believe in you.”

