

## “How’s Our Frame?”

**The Rev. Laura Horton-Ludwig, Minister**  
First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton  
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Today I am on a mission to convince you  
that we can learn a lot about being a member of a church  
by studying the art of ballroom dance!  
This may sound a little wacky, but stay with me for a bit.  
Luckily, we have two very talented dancers in our midst  
who have agreed to help me show you just what I mean.

Matt and Maxine, would you come forward, please?  
I’ve asked Matt Netto and Maxine Schwab to do a little demo for us.  
In ballroom dancing, you have a leader and a follower.  
Traditionally the leader is a man and the follower is a woman,  
and that’s how Matt and Maxine are dancing today,  
but these days you can do it any way you want, at least in this crowd!  
Matt, our leader, is going to communicate to Maxine, our follower,  
about what steps they’re going to do, without any words,  
just by the way he moves his body.  
What makes this all possible is something we call the *frame*.

Matt and Maxine, would you take up a nice dance frame?  
Can everyone see how they’re holding their arms?  
Matt is holding his arms up  
and putting just a little pressure on Maxine where their hands meet,  
and Maxine is holding her arms up and returning that pressure.  
That’s what we call a frame.

Why, you might ask, is this important?  
Well, that gentle pressure is how they communicate!  
If Matt and Maxine have floppy arms without any tension—  
in dance we call it spaghetti arms—

they're not going to be able to communicate very well.  
Can you guys give us a little demo of that?

*(They demonstrate this)*

Or, if they're too rigid, with too much tension,  
instead of a dance it's going to look like a martial-arts match!

*(They demonstrate this)*

But if they keep just the right amount of tension,  
they can communicate easily and dance beautifully.

*(They demonstrate this)*

Thank you, Matt and Maxine!

*(They bow and take their seats.)*

I hope you can start to see  
that dance frame is all about communication as we lead and follow.  
Both people, the leader and the follower,  
have to be paying attention to each other.  
They have to keep that perfect amount of tension in their arms  
so that the leader can tell the follower instantly  
what they're both going to do. There's no communication barrier  
because both of them are present to one another,  
listening to one another,  
the leader cueing and the follower responding,  
so that they both move as one.  
That is the literal, physical reality in ballroom dancing.  
Frame is how communication happens in dancing.  
That paying attention, on both sides, is what makes it all possible.

And this is a perfect reminder to us at church

that communication is a two-way street.  
If the church leadership is talking and writing  
and getting the word out  
about all sorts of fantastic ideas and plans out there,  
but no one else in the congregation  
is actually paying attention and listening,  
then communication is blocked.  
We're not going to be able to "dance" together the way we want to.

On the other hand, if the congregation, down to the very last person,  
is paying super-good attention to its leaders,  
ready to respond and follow when the leadership puts out a plan,  
but the leaders stay silent and don't put forth any information,  
once again, the dance is not going to work.  
For that dance of partnership and teamwork to happen,  
at church or anywhere in our lives—  
at work, at school, in our families—  
everybody has to be paying attention.

Another thing: we talk a lot about leadership in our churches,  
and leadership is important.  
But we often forget *followership* is just as important.  
We *need* followers in our churches,  
people who are willing to take a turn at following other people's lead,  
so that we can move in a common direction.  
It really is true: it takes two to tango.  
Or, in the case of our congregation, about one hundred seventy-two!

And I am delighted to tell you about some new things  
we are starting to do in our congregation  
to keep our dancing frame strong, as it were—  
to help us communicate better,  
and to enable us all to find our niche as leaders and followers  
in our church community.  
Last month we held a leadership retreat at church

with our Board of Trustees and a number of other church leaders. You've probably heard our board did some great work last year on setting some new goals for our church community. At the leadership retreat, we took that work a step further and laid some concrete plans to make those goals a reality.

The goals we are focusing on are three big and important things. The first goal set by our board is cultivating generosity in our congregation, including giving of ourselves to the larger community. We want to be a church that is generous, to ourselves and to our world. And at the leadership retreat, a group got together and said, we want to work on that by relaunching our Social Justice committee. This group has committed to organize six or so service projects throughout the year that we can do as a church and communicate to the whole congregation how we can all get involved.

I am really grateful and excited about this. There has been such a longing in our community to put flesh on those words we say each week: "Service is our prayer."

I thank the team that is organizing us, especially Harry Welte, who's chairing the group, and I ask for *all* of your support, your blessing, and perhaps your participation in this good work. Please stay tuned and consider if you feel called to service with us.

Our second goal as a congregation is creating a sense of shared leadership, an environment where everyone who feels called to leadership is supported in using their gifts for the good of the whole. This isn't something that happens automatically. It's very easy for churches to get stuck, asking the same people to do the same jobs over and over,

failing to notice and embrace the gifts of newer people  
or even longtime people who want to serve in a new way.  
It's also easy for church committees to lose sight  
of how they fit into the mission of the whole community.  
It's easy for our groups to turn into little fiefdoms,  
private domains that don't have a connection to the larger whole.  
And when that happens,  
the life of the whole community is impoverished.  
The mission of the whole community  
is deprived of energy and support  
that we need if we're going to do what we say we want to do.

At our leadership retreat, what came forth to support this goal  
of shared leadership—empowered leadership,  
everyone working toward a shared goal—  
was that our groups and committees  
need more ways to communicate with each other.  
None of us as individuals need another meeting to go to,  
but we do need to set up some formal, organized ways  
for our groups to be in communication with one another  
so that we're dancing *together*, as it were,  
not crashing into one another,  
by working on projects that compete with one another  
rather than collaborate,  
and not leaving the dance floor entirely  
by getting so far away from the church's central mission  
that the work of the smaller group doesn't make sense any more.  
So, we now have a group that's working on setting up ways  
for our committees and groups to be in touch with each other,  
so we can all work together and help one another.  
I am delighted, and I look forward to seeing what comes forth.

The third goal set by our board  
is helping people feel more connected—  
connected to church, to each other, to our communities,

and to ourselves.

So many of us are living such busy lives,  
it's easy to feel like we are caught in a centrifuge,  
spinning us faster and faster, pulling us away from our roots  
and our connections that keep us whole and well.

We want our church to be a place that nurtures connections.

We want service to the church to be a joyful experience.

I was so struck by something I read the other day by Larry Peers,  
a UU church consultant many of us have worked with. He says:

A congregation does not add any significant value  
to the lives of its members if it replicates patterns of deception,  
burnout, overwhelming expectations, and demands  
they are already experiencing elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>

We want our church to be a place  
where we practice balance and peace—  
where people can freely rotate in and out of service,  
both leadership and followership,  
taking breaks where they need to  
and then rejoining the dance refreshed.

We want our church to be open to the gifts we all bring.

We want our church to meet people where they are,  
and to reach out in new ways beyond Sunday morning.

So, to help make that a living, breathing reality,  
we are going to be trying out all sorts of ideas  
to help us connect and share our gifts.

We're looking at using some of the new media  
to connect beyond Sundays,  
setting up a Facebook group  
and possibly redesigning our website to help us communicate  
with each other and reach out to the larger community as well.

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<sup>1</sup> Larry Peers, "From Stressed to Blessed: A Conversation for Recomposing Volunteer Service in the Congregation," *Congregations* Fall 2009, p. 24.

We're looking at using technology  
to help us welcome people into service,  
setting up a database of people's interests and gifts  
so that we don't lose track of what we have to offer each other.  
And we want to work on clarifying the mission of our committees,  
and what we are actually asking volunteers to do,  
so that when you are asked to serve, the expectations will be clear  
and you will know what you're getting into.

All this is in service to our commitment  
to help one another use and develop our gifts and passions  
in service to the church and its mission in the world.  
Because we need one another—we need all of us  
to become the community we dream of being.  
We need leaders, we need followers, we need everybody.

And let us remember that, in a deep spiritual sense,  
we really are all followers, all the time.  
We are called to lead and follow one another in community, yes.  
But, beyond and prior to that,  
we are called at every moment to follow a wisdom beyond ourselves.  
Some call it God, some call it the inner voice.  
It is the voice of our conscience,  
the foundation of all leadership that is worth following,  
the wellspring of our vision, the source of our intuition.

Where it comes from is hidden to our human eyes,  
but all of us know this voice of wisdom  
as a voice that *must* be followed  
if we are to live a life of integrity.  
It is the voice that spoke through Martin Luther,  
saying, "God help me, here I stand. I can do no other."  
It is the voice that spoke through all our foremothers and forefathers  
who staked their faith and their lives  
on what they could not help but believe to be true.

It is the voice that speaks to all of us still, if we can listen,  
leading us from death to life,  
from falsehood to truth,  
from despair to hope,  
from fear to trust,  
from hate to love,  
from war to peace.

We hear it singing to us in dreams, in the touch of a hand,  
in the wind and the rain, in the face of a stranger,  
in the stillness of our own heart.  
When we follow that voice, we are free.  
We are safe in every way that truly matters.  
We are blessed.

May it be so for ourselves,  
for our beloved church community,  
and for the world.  
Amen.