

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
“The Fulfillment of Desire”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore February 28, 2016

Call to Celebration

from: *The Art of Asking* by Amanda Palmer (2014)

Asking is, at its core, a collaboration.

The surgeon knows that her work is creative work. A machine can't do it because it requires human delicacy and decision making. It can't be done by an automaton because it requires critical thinking and a good dose of winging-it-ness. Her work requires a balance of self-confidence and collaboration, a blend of intuition and improvisation.

If the surgeon, while slicing that vulnerable brain, hits an unexpected bump in the process and needs to ask the person beside her for something essential-and quickly-she has absolutely no time to waste on questions like:

Do I deserve to ask for this help?

Is this person I'm asking really trustworthy?

Am I an asshole for having the power to ask in this moment?

She simply accepts her position, asks without shame, gets the right scalpel, and keeps cutting. Something larger is at stake. This holds true for firefighters, airline pilots and lifeguards, but it also holds true for artists, scientists, teachers-for anyone, in any relationship.

Those who can ask without shame are viewing themselves in collaboration with-rather than in competition with-the world.

Asking for help with shame says:

You have the power over me.

Asking with condescension says:

I have power over you.

But asking for help with gratitude says:

We have the power to help each other. (page 48)

Meditation

Spirit of Life and Love,
 Animating energy that got us out of bed this morning,
 Encouraged us to keep calm when the toast burned and the milk spilled,
 And stimulated our heart to open and
 allow kind words to come out of our mouths
 when we encountered someone who was suffering and in need.

May we be free of the Fraud Police that plague artists.

May we be free of their voices in our heads,
 that tell us that we are not enough,
 that we do not deserve appreciation and respect,
 that we are unworthy of support.

May we not doubt our ability to receive inspiration
 and channel that inspiration into creative artistic expression.

May we also consider resigning from the Fraud Police
 if we're already working for them.

May we resist being their voice speaking to others
 telling them they are not enough,
 telling them they do not deserve appreciation and respect,
 telling them they are unworthy of support.

Rather than judging ourselves or others artistic expression,
 May we bring the spirit of curiosity and interest,
 ready to learn and discover
 what others are expressing through their art.

May we all be open to the artistic muses whispering in our ears
 and not worry about
 whether or not we have been gifted with or identified with
 the title artist.

We are all entitled to be artists.

We are all entitled to ask and be asked for support.

And none of us are obligated to say yes or offer that support,
 unless we are moved to do so.

May art and artists be blessed this day
May we be open to receive artistic communication.
May art add greater meaning and purpose to our lives.

Reading

What Amanda Palmer describes in this reading is the secret to building a strong community, what she calls “the net,” what we might call the interdependent web. I dearly wish someone had explained this to me at the beginning of my ministry. I continue to learn how to do this better and better. Reading her book is both a confirmation of what I’m doing and a stimulus to do more. Our best ministers know this by heart. But it doesn’t just apply to ministers. We all are the focus that support creating that net. What she calls “art” is our common purpose that draws us together as a Unitarian Universalist community. Listen carefully to what she says:

The art, not the artist, is what fundamentally draws the net into being. The net was then tightened and strengthened by a collection of interactions and exchanges I've had, personally, whether in live venues or online, with members of my community.

I couldn't outsource it. I could hire help, but not to do the fundamental things that create emotional connections: the making of the art, the feeling-with-other-people at a human level. Nobody can do that work for me-no Internet marketing company, no manager, no assistants. It had to be me.

That's what I do all day on Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram, and my blog. The platform is irrelevant. I'll go wherever the people are. What's important is that I absorb, listen, talk, connect, help and share. Constantly. The net gets so strong at a certain point that I can let it go for a few days-maybe weeks-and it keeps weaving and bolstering itself. But I can never leave for very long.

The net tightens every time I pick up my phone and check in on Twitter, every time I share my own story, every time I ask a fan how their project is coming or promote somebody's book on tour.

The net tightens when someone in the community loses her houseboat in a fire and tweets me for help, and I throw the information out to the fan-base, who go to work offering money, shelter, cat-sitting, and words of kindness.

It tightens when two people meet in line at one of my shows, fall in love, and come to a signing line after a concert three years later, asking me to Sharpie a swelling, pregnant belly.

I feel pride when I see the magic happening: the fans helping one another out, giving one another places to stay, driving one another around, helping one another with comforting words and links in the middle of the night, breaking the boundaries of "stranger" etiquette because they feel a trust and familiarity with one another under our common roof.

And I feel it at my shows, when I see people standing aside to allow a short person to see the stage, or carving a path for a person in a wheelchair, or just sharing a bottle of water. We're all helping each other. Here. Now. (page 122)

Sermon

I'm infatuated with Amanda Palmer. It isn't her music or her performance art that draws me to her, though I find them interesting and stimulating. Reading her book, I discovered Amanda has a gift for forming and developing community that parallels how we do community. She has the capacity to develop relationships and connections. And her commitment to her fan-base is awesome. And their response to her is even more awesome. For me, Amanda is a love guru. Not that she is always perfect at it, but she has the right instincts to correct herself when she strays. And part of the way she loves people (sort of the way Elizabeth does in the story we heard from Leah) is by asking.

Amanda knew from an early age she wanted to be an artist. One of her first sustained performance projects after graduating from college was being the Eight Foot Bride in Harvard Square. She bought a used wedding dress, donned a black wig, put on white face paint and then stood still on a milk crate posing as a statue with a hat at her feet for donations. If someone wandered by and put a dollar in her hat, she would dramatically take a flower from her bouquet and offer it to the donor with an intense loving expression of gratitude. Her act was definitely an unusual way to express herself. And I'd guess most of us would think it wouldn't be a good way to make much money.>>>

She discovered she could make more in a couple of hours, "bridging," as she called it, than she did scooping ice cream for a whole shift ... *consistently* day in and day out.

After about six years of being a statue who didn't say anything, she realized that she wanted to move into a different kind of performance art that was verbally expressive,

writing songs and playing the piano. With Brian drumming with her, they formed the band, the Dresden Dolls.

At the same time the band started touring and developing a following, email and social media started gaining wider interest and acceptance. Amanda faithfully collected emails from every fan that showed up at a concert. And after the show, she would stay and listen to and hug every fan lined up to talk to her and sign whatever they had or any of the CD's and t-shirts they were selling that night. When she discovered Twitter and how to effectively use it, she became a passionate Twitterer. Some like to call her a queen of the Twitter-verse.

This intense relationship with her fan-base helped her build a large, devoted following. So when she used Kickstarter to raise funds to produce a new album, people pledged over a million dollars – the first time an independent musician had done that.>>>

This got the TED folks attention and they asked her to give a TED talk in 2013. The talk was a huge success – I highly recommend it if you haven't seen it. That led to a book deal on the subject of asking.

What I find fascinating about Amanda is her ability to ask for help in a way that builds community and relationships. A lovely example of this was a time she was flying to Europe through Iceland when all the flights got canceled by the eruption of their volcano (volcanic ash messes up jet engines). So she tweeted her situation and asked if anyone could pick her up at the airport and help her set up a free concert in a local club, what she likes to call a ninja concert. In a very short period of time, a grad student was at the airport hugging her and whisking her off to soak in a warm mineral bath followed by a concert in a bar full of local fans in ecstasy that their idol was in Reykjavik. She transformed the moment into a memorable experience for everybody just by asking.

What Amanda effectively demonstrates is just how much people want to help. Not everybody, mind you, but if your fan-base is large enough, there are always plenty of people who are ready to step forward and make a difference. Not grudgingly but enthusiastically. Asking people for help and then graciously receiving that help, makes the givers very happy and fills them a deep sense of meaning and satisfaction. If a performer has given a lot to you, it really feels good to be able to give something back.

Part of this has to do with the difference between begging and asking – a critical difference. Listen to what she writes about this difference:

Asking is an act of intimacy and trust. Begging is a function of fear, desperation, or weakness. Those who must beg demand our help; those who ask have faith in our capacity for love and in our desire to share with one another.

On the street or on the Internet, this is what makes authentically engaging an audience, from one human being to another, such an integral part of asking.

Honest communication engenders mutual respect, and that mutual respect makes askers out of beggars. (Page 52)

One of the biggest barriers for many of us to asking is embarrassment and shame. Who am I to be asking for help? Who do I think I am that I am worthy of help? She talks about her struggles with the Fraud Police who live in many artists' heads accusing them of unworthiness and incompetence. Amanda writes:

Brené Brown has found through her research that women tend to feel shame around the idea of being "never enough": at home, at work, in bed. Never pretty enough, never smart enough, never thin enough, never good enough. Men tend to feel shame around the fear of being "perceived as weak," or more academically: fear of being called a pussy.

Both sexes get trapped in the same box, for different reasons.

If I ask for help, I am not enough.

If I ask for help, I am weak.

It's no wonder so many of us just don't bother to ask.

It's too painful. (page 175)

The Fraud Police are all over Henry David Thoreau. Amanda tells the story that many of us know about him. Yes, he went to live in his little house he built on Walden Pond, but he'd visit Concord regularly to have dinner with Emerson and his family. And on Sunday his mother and sister would show up and bring him a basket of baked goods including donuts.

Now we might be tempted to criticize him for not toughing it out in the woods. But his goal was to be a careful observer of the natural world and write about living a more simple existence that would permit him to be a more careful observer. Emerson and his mother were supporting his writing, his art. We need not shame him for accepting that support. As Amanda likes to put it to her artist friends, "Take the donuts!" She writes:

If you're asking your fans to support you, the artist, it shouldn't matter what your choices are as long as you're delivering your side of the bargain. (Page 177)

And Thoreau did with the excellence of his writing. Part of the bargain for Amanda is authentic relationship. In her words:

It was a massive leap of faith for these [business] people to believe that "just connecting with people," in an authentic, non-promotional, non-monetary way, is so valuable.

But it is, It's invaluable.

Those managers seemed reluctant to believe that if you just trusted and listened to, talked to, and connected with the fan-base, the money and the profits would come-when the time came.

Managers kept telling me to stop twittering and get back to work.

I broke up with a lot of managers.

They didn't understand. That was the work... (page 156)

I knew the ways to keep the fans happy was by staying present-through the forums, through sharing people's art and music back out through the Internet channels, through keeping everybody connected. That's just how a relationship works. And when the time came to ask them to buy a record, to buy a ticket, whatever...if I'd been there for them, they'd be there for me. (page 122)

Amanda's committed relationship to her fan-base isn't that unusual. Just ask the devotees of the Grateful Dead. Their fan-base followed them around the country setting up a carnival everywhere they stopped. What is different about Amanda is she is doing it in a twenty-first century way skillfully using social media. I'm paying attention.

And once you are in relationship, you create a virtuous circle of support. The more you give to each other, the deeper the relationship gets. As she puts it, the net tightens.

Again in Amanda's words:

I'm often asked: How can you trust people so much?

Because that's the *only way* it works.

When you accept somebody's offer to help, whether it's in the form of food, crash space, money, or love, you have to trust the help offered. You can't accept things halfway and walk through the door with your guard up.

When you openly, radically trust people, they not only take care of you, they become your allies, your family. (page 158)

I hope you're hearing parallels with what we do here in our congregation. And while I'm the one charged with Amanda's role of weaving the net of connection together and constantly looking for ways to add more strands and to tighten it, it isn't about me.

- It is about the web of relationships
that create a welcoming community;
- it is about the purpose we serve – which is our art;
- it is about the growth and development
that helps us search for truth and meaning;
- it is about the inspiration and celebration of life
we offer in our services;
- it is about the advocacy for a better world
we embody in our justice work;
- it is about the caring community
we create as we offer mutual support.

Making all that happen requires a lot of asking ... and a lot of people saying yes.

And one of the ways we do that is through a yearly fund raising drive.

This Sunday officially kicks off our yearly fund drive for our budget year that begins July first. We raise those funds through members and friends of our congregation making a financial commitment for the coming fiscal year. Lynne Lekakis, our fundraising co-chair with Chuck Manning, will give you more detail about this in a moment.

This year, my hope is you'll take a little inspiration from Amanda to feel really good both about asking each other for money and also feel good about being asked.

There will be no begging in our pledge campaign. We will not demand that you make a commitment. The reason to offer your support is because:

- you want to be in relationship with our congregation;
- you are in a relationship with our congregation, or
- you want to enter into a deeper relationship with our congregation.

Again and again, I hear from people who make a generous financial commitment: The net tightens when you answer the ask for support.

While we need the funds to keep the lights on and pay the mortgage on this space, most of our budget is for our staff. And your staff is very committed to being in relationship with you. We're raising the funds that pay Matt Edwards who skillfully leads our choir and provides beautiful music for our services. We're supporting our credentialed religious educator Leah Purcell and her visionary work organizing our members to teach our children and support their growth and development. We're raising the funds to pay Amy Lent and Tammy Hathaway who provide critical congregational support in our office. And we're raising funds to pay our building support staff, Cameron and Hadiya. We have an excellent team here who work together really well and are as dedicated to serving our congregation. Not many congregations have the depth of excellence we do.

And you are supporting my calling as your minister. I continue to be honored and deeply committed to continue to serve in that role. And Amanda has been teaching me how I can do it even better, as she confirms and supports much of what I know and have been doing all along.

What is beautiful about how we fundraise here is that we don't demand a fixed amount to be a member or a friend here. There is no one charging an admittance fee at the door to get in. To support the staff and programming our congregation needs, it takes a budget of a little over half a million dollars. That means some of us are giving very generously, at the level of over a thousand dollars a month. There are many more in the one to two hundred dollar a month range. And we have some who can only afford ten to twenty dollars a week. It is everyone doing what they can do that raises the money we need – as most of our income comes from these financial commitments.

So I urge you, this year, not to think of your gift of financial support to our congregation as a burden or an unpleasant obligation. It is the circulation of a gift. Each Sunday Matt, Leah and I offer you the gift of our work. All week long Amy and Tammy give the gift of support to your production team and the congregation. And then Hadiya and Cameron give us the gift of cleaning up after us.

What we're offering you today is a way to be an integral part of it all by saying yes through a financial commitment, or as Amanda says, "Sometimes people just want to help. You never know until you ask." And in saying yes, you may experience the fulfillment of your desire.

Benediction

I'd like to give Amanda the last words:

The entertainment industry, reflecting the world at large, has been obsessed with the wrong question: how do we MAKE people pay for content? What if we started thinking about it the other way around: how do we LET people pay for content?

The first question is about FORCE.

The second is about TRUST.

This isn't just about music.

It's about everything.

It's hard enough to give fearlessly,

and it's even harder to receive fearlessly.

But within that exchange lies the hardest thing of all:

To ask. Without shame.

And to accept the help that people offer.

Not to force them.

Just to let them. (page 304)

This is the time we're going to let you support our congregation.

I encourage you to be generous in that support.