

Between 2015 and 2020, attendance at our Sunday morning worship services was down 9%. Who knows how much more it will decrease in the post-pandemic or endemic era? We don't have a stated goal regarding Sunday service attendance, but if we did, I'm sure a 9% decrease wouldn't be it. Why is attendance down? What's different? Is attendance down because the minister, lay speakers, worship team and livestreaming team aren't trying? I can assure you, we are trying, we are doing the best that we can to engage members, a new demographic of visitors and young families – young families headed by young people who may have never, ever even been to a church before.

Sometimes the UUMAN lawn doesn't get cut in a timely manner. And the garden no longer has been weeded thoroughly on a regular basis. I'm sure that if the Building and Grounds Team had goals for cutting the lawn and weeding the garden, I highly doubt they'd say they're reaching that goal. They recently told the Board that we might need to consider hiring a lawn service to maintain our grounds. Why? Haven't we maintained the property ourselves for the past 25 years? What has changed? What's different? Are those maintaining the property trying hard enough? Again, I can guarantee you that they are trying. They're doing the best they can. Probably doing more than what we should even ask of them.

Today's reading offers an important lesson. The young man can't understand why his girlfriend can't reach her goal. In his mind, she can't seem to garner the discipline necessary to quit smoking. She says to him, "I'm trying. I'm really trying. I'm doing the best I can."

The young man's response is anger. He says to his spiritual advisor, "I know I shouldn't be getting so angry about this. I know I should be more compassionate. But I just can't help it. It gets under my skin. I want to be more understanding, but she's so stuck." Then he says, "I'm trying. I'm really trying. I'm doing the best I can." He then gets the message when he hears himself saying her words. "He understood what she was up against, and it humbled him."

This young man had been on a spiritual journey most of his life. He was likely doing something he instinctively felt called to do; something he loved to do. Now his girlfriend may have loved smoking yet realizing that it was unhealthy for her, she tries to quit. The

demands of her task are different than the demands of his. Rather than do something she loves, she's trying to stop doing something she loves. Although discipline is required to reach the goal in both cases, the quality and quantity of discipline required of the young woman is far greater.

My point here is that the young man is judging his girlfriend unfairly. He is criticizing her for lacking discipline yet, in actuality, she may be quite disciplined, yet the mountain she must climb is much, much higher.

How does this apply to us here at UUMAN? How does this apply in the ministries we practice within our walls and beyond?

The thing to remember is that we all have mountains that we are climbing. Everyone does...no one is spared. Everybody, everyone you know, every person at home joining us virtually, every person in this room, the very person sitting next to you. We are all climbing our mountains. That, you can safely assume. Yet, despite knowing this, we don't know the heights, the pitch or just how many mountains each one of us is climbing. You may be an expert at climbing certain mountains; to climb these may not require much discipline; but I bet you're not an expert at climbing them all, some mountains require much, much more.

In a way, we are all inadequate and incomplete when it comes to climbing our mountains. Psychiatrist and theologian Gerald May has a healthy way to look at our inherent inadequacy and incompleteness. He writes, "we [should] recognize our incompleteness as a kind of spaciousness into which we can welcome the flow of grace. We can think of our inadequacies as terrible defects, if we want, and hate ourselves. [Or] we can also think of them affirmatively, as doorways through which the power of grace can enter our lives (Gerald May, *Addiction and Grace*, p31)."

So, when you're frustrated with the inadequacies of someone and they say something like "I'm trying. I'm trying. I'm really trying. I'm doing the best I can," believe them. Why not? They're not you. They're not climbing your mountain, the one you know how to climb; and, you really can't know their mountain, and you don't know what else they're

up against; but you can know, because they're human, that they're up against something.

So, why not simply believe them? And let it be a spiritual practice of yours, let it be a way for you to personally to live UUMAN's mission of nurturing one another's spirit by extending grace, extending forgiveness into that inadequate, incomplete spaciousness inherent to the person who is really trying; doing the best they can.

So when it comes to our decreasing Sunday morning attendance, or our inability to keep our building and grounds looking their best, or our newfound inability to do...whatever...the question to ask is not whether they're trying or not. The question to ask is what has changed with the bigger picture? What is different today, within our walls and beyond, from 25 years ago? And then we must ask ourselves: what are we going to do about it?

Unbelievably, we are now entering the 4th church year that has been disrupted by the pandemic...and it's not over yet. Yet despite this, and despite some of the things I've just talked about, we have a new roof on our building and new solar panels on our new roof, we just hosted our Family Promise guests for three full weeks. We're on our way to becoming a Good Trouble Congregation with our first UU the Vote initiative of this election cycle that will take place after today's service. And you continue to generously give financially to support this congregation in these difficult circumstances. Thank you! We should be very proud of our efforts. And we still have fun together. We've had close to 30 people kayak together this summer; and 23 of us went to SUUSI.

We may not be reaching all our goals but we are climbing some very steep mountains in difficult terrain. We are trying. We are really trying. We're doing the best we can.