

Sermon “Building Deep Connections” Sarah Oglesby-Dunegan

I have discovered over the last few years that the two values often guiding and lighting my way are **collaboration** and **capacity building**. No matter where I am or what I am working on, these two values are reflected in my approach to both work and play, both on my own and with the communities I have been serving. In developing a vision for ministry for myself and for the work I will do here in Laramie I find myself asking—who can I work with and how will it contribute to our growth as individuals and a community?

Looking back on the path that has brought me here, I can see many of experiences that contributed to these core values, beginning with watching my mom lead the El Paso County N.O.W. Chapter in Colorado Springs nearly 35 years ago as they worked for the Equal Rights Amendment, reproductive justice, and other’s issues of the women’s movement at that time. My mother worked for justice for women by connecting and collaborating with individuals and organizations, building her own capacity and building the capacity of the groups she led to bring change and justice to the lives. I sat in the background of these

meetings and rallies, not knowing that someday I would be the one leading similar meetings. *My* capacity was also being changed.

In college I found momentum in working with a grassroots organization called RESULTS that worked for funding of programs that address the worst aspects of hunger and poverty. I fell in love with this organization because they were non-partisan and they always sang songs together before they went to lobby in D.C. This is collaboration and capacity building at its best-- Really. At their national conference, Results members gathered in a large room on the hill to sing things like “Shower the people you love with love.” [song]

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2_0x6TVUJ0

Then, they would go to the meetings they had scheduled with aids and representatives to talk about why they should fund Headstart, WIC, UNICEF, microcredit programs, and more. They showed up as so much more than a group of citizen activists—they showed up as people of spirit and love, much like our current UU civil rights campaign’s motto “Standing on the Side of Love.” Results taught me that writing a letter to the editor is powerful, but having

10 people write on the same thing is even more powerful; and that the wider you cast your circle, the more people you have singing, the more likely you will be heard.

Later, working as an organizer in HUD apartments in Dallas, I found that the tenant group I liked to work with most was a group that started and ended their meetings with prayer and sometimes even a song. My organizing partner, who also loved this group, was as mystified of their theology as I was—she was Jewish—but we held hands and prayed with them because we understood there was something life affirming and connecting in this act, something which made this group and its commitments run that much deeper than other groups we worked with. The AME minister who gave our tenant group sanctuary for our meetings—allowed us to meet off property where management couldn't harass us—was pivotal in my formation as a minister although I had no idea I would be going to seminary 13 years later. His commitment to our group, to that neighborhood, and later to prison ministries, made him a hero to me and an example of what ministry could be. He modeled collaboration in the work he did at the church and encouraged us to do the same. So we had block parties that simultaneously highlighted our work to improve housing conditions while dancing with a local DJ and asking for

help from elected officials—our events had press, prestige, and pop music with prayer as a back-up.

When I began working with low income, first generation college students in downtown Dallas I was moved by my students and their daily struggles. I knew their neighborhoods, but now I also knew intimate details of their stories. I met their families and I knew when they didn't have enough money for rent or utilities, when they were in crisis because of violent relationships or were in recovery for drug and alcohol addictions, or couldn't afford needed medications for chronic illnesses. I knew when they were up all night getting homework done because their duties to a job or children kept them from it during the daytime. I knew which ones were documented and which were not, who had family support and who had no one but the college staff and other students to help them keep a dream alive. My students were amazing. They came to college on a wing and a prayer. They came from neighborhoods where it was easier to buy crack cocaine and have a baby at age 16 than come to college. They came from families where they were the first to graduate high school, and no one had even considered college. They came from all over the world, too—Ghana, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda,

Nigeria, Liberia, Bangladesh, Mexico, Central America, South America, ...

My students—they were so brave! They had dreams, beautiful dreams. They dreamed they would be nurses and teachers and engineers and business owners. They dreamed they would make money and have families and support their parents. In order to get there, they needed a lot more than little ol' me. The work we did together included support from organizations and individuals all over Dallas, collaborating for funds for scholarships, special needs, emergency assistance; and building capacity for life's new challenges through tutoring and mentoring, connecting to new friends and allies and enriching experiences.

What kinds of enriching experiences you might ask? Well, for starters, we did Karaoke together. My song was “Joy to the World.” Always. [song]

They taught me to line dance. Kind of. We learned to write affirmations and use creator language rather victim language. We went to concerts and speakers. We heard the Dallas Symphony and Spike Lee. We read poems and did retreats. We cried together and we laughed together. I told them “a goal is a dream

with a deadline.” Don’t live in someday oneday. We had graduation banquets and luncheons. We visited universities and sang in the college van. Some of my students became colleagues. Some of them have become friends and mentors to me. Collaboration and capacity building...

One unusual place I learned about collaboration and capacity building was in El Salvador, when I travelled with RESULTS to learn about microcredit programs. I met a woman who had gone from being a homeless single mom to being a landlady whose daughter was headed for university; and she managed to bring a whole community of women with her. She had started a micro-enterprise with \$50 and bought two pigs that she bred. The pigs gave her money to invest in a home, and then to build an extra room to rent, and then extra property to rent. But she didn’t stop with her own well-being. In micro credit, borrowers work together in circles that act as support and replace having collateral. They provide each other assistance when a payment can’t be made. The circles borrow in cycles—usually about 16 weeks. At the end, new circles form, often with new women participating. The woman I met—Maria Elena—told us that she wanted to reach **100** new women over the next five years with these circles. She told our group of listeners this—she, dressed in a torn dress, with no

shoes, while cooking over a wood burning stove in a house with a tin roof, one light bulb, and chickens running at our feet. Her daughter played in the middle school band and dreamed of university. No one told her not to be audacious. Unlike the success stories of many in our own country, her success was not defined by personal change, but rather communal change.

The phrase that moves me the most, that ties each of these moments in my life together is “Courageous love can and will transform the world.”

There are some times in my life where I felt brave. Marching through downtown Dallas with half a million friends and neighbors to protest immigration policies. Knocking on doors in HUD apartments to organize tenant groups that would fight for changes in their housing and in housing policy. Writing letters to the editor about funding for programs I care about. Setting up appointments and visiting congressional offices in D.C. to talk about programs I care about. Teaching in the Dallas County Jail and encouraging students there to dream a new life on the other side of their time in jail. It takes courage to share your dream and to ask for help; it takes courage to admit we are still growing and don't have it all

figured out already. It takes courage to invite others to join you and courage to accept new ideas and partners.

What I learned is that courage is not just about overcoming fear. Courage is not just about overcoming fear. Courage is about tapping into a life-affirming energy—for some people that is God, for some the collection of our efforts on behalf of one another—and falling in love with Life. Courage is really about love. In her TED talk, Brene' Brown talks about the essential quality needed to access deep connection: the ability to be vulnerable and authentic, to feel deeply and to acknowledge all of what life brings to our doorsteps. Courageous love comes from a place of vulnerability and mystery, where we don't know how things will turn out and we can't avoid suffering. In each of the stories I have shared with you today, vignettes about the places I have been along the path, I faced heartbreak and loss as well as connection and expansion, both for me and for the wider group I was working with. For every door I knocked on as an organizer, many were never answered, or answered by someone hostile or indifferent to me and to their neighbors. Change was excruciatingly slow and could be reversed at any moment. For every student that graduated, many others dropped out or were struggling to move forward, caught in a complex web of challenges that were

pervasive and pernicious. Gains made by women in small villages in El Salvador were destroyed by Hurricane Mitch and stood in stark contrast to the road that lay ahead for their communities. Programs that were well funded one year and helping so many could be and sometimes were wiped away in a new congressional session. Students could finish degrees but still not be able to work because they were undocumented immigrants. Sometimes crisis itself forces us to find vulnerability and to be honest. “Vulnerability is our most accurate measure of courage”

And so I made the leap of faith to come to Colorado to go to theological school and now to be with you here in Wyoming. I have learned to garden and compost, I have connected with the mountains of my youth and I have I learned to lead retreats and to pray. I have learned about queer theology and liberation theology and process theology. I have learned to sit in a hospital room and stroke a dying woman’s hair; I have learned to celebrate the end of a hospital stay. I have received care from my community in times of intense need—when my child was in the Intensive Care Unit at Children’s, when my husband was out of work for several months, when my uncle was in hospice dying of cancer.

Sometimes crisis forges integrity by asking us choose from our hearts and our deepest selves in order to effect our own salvation. Crisis can also challenge our integrity, masking our deeper selves in a surface of fear, pain and stress. There are many tools that allow us to clear away the fog and reveal our true nature help us deliver ourselves out of crisis and to be vulnerable. These might be prayer or meditation, or walks or therapy or art or close friends or writing or worship. Sometimes crisis forces us to ask for help and look for resources outside of ourselves—to collaborate and co-operate in new ways in order to build our own capacity. Ultimately, this changes the capacity of the communities we are in, too—when we reach out to each other we may find a wholeness that we never knew before, whether we are offering or receiving.

My vision for my ministry, which continues with you all, is that we will collaborate and build capacity—for each of you individually, and for all of us together. I hope we will begin and end in song, or prayer, or meditation, or quiet empathy, or dancing, or hugs...no matter what our task is, no matter what our disagreements, no matter how vulnerable we may feel in that moment. I ask that we will begin and end as loving friends whose love for ourselves, each other and the world unites us in work that

is fulfilling if hard. That when the going gets tough we will schedule a little extra time to sing together and share stories, a little extra time to breathe and reflect. And we will know that this IS the work, because **courageous love will transform the world**. As UU minister Rebecca Parker says, “we are called to both save and savor the world.”

And so today I invite you to consider what Love is calling you to be and do; Will you open your hearts? Here are the four things Brene Brown says we must do to access the fullness of ourselves and our capacity for life:

- 1) Let ourselves be seen--our mistakes, our passions, our values and concerns
- 2) Love with our whole hearts even though there's no guarantee we'll be seen/understood
- 3) Practice gratitude and lean into joy
- 4) Believe that you are enough

And I would add: Find a buddy, a circle, a community to engage life with you. Maybe you will find those fellow collaborators here, and perhaps some more in the surrounding community; just don't go it alone. This work, like good food, was meant to be shared.

AMEN, Blessed Be