

“A Time to Learn”
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Elizabeth Kübler-Ross wrote those words (“A Message from Elizabeth”) in 2000, five years after suffering a debilitating stroke. She was in her 70s and near the end of her life. If her name is familiar to you, that’s because of her ground-breaking work with death and dying, and her five stages of grief.

In a book she co-authored called Life Lessons, which is the source of the reading, she shared many of the life lessons she had learned over her lifetime. She was a true life-long learner. She was a highly educated psychiatrist, but she believed that all life is our teacher. Her life is proof of her belief. Because of her basic approach to life, Kübler-Ross did work in the areas of death and dying that have had enormous impact on how Americans and Europeans address end-of-life issues.

Elizabeth Kübler-Ross had many of the characteristics that make a life-long learner.

She maintained a child-like curiosity about everything, which enabled her to see with new eyes. She was an insatiable knowledge seeker. She didn’t just take in information; she analyzed it and synthesized it, and gained deep insights into the nature of death and dying. She was a teacher herself – she shared what she had learned through her writing and speaking. And as with the best life-long learners, she never considered herself to be the ultimate expert.

Life-long learners are interested in everything but follow what they have a passion for. Kübler-Ross was motivated by the injustice and lack of care she saw in the treatment of the dying. It fueled her passion.

And one more characteristic of life-long learners. They tend to be playful. Swiss-born Kübler-Ross believed in play, even though in Swiss society, play was not encouraged. If we approach life playfully, not worrying about making mistakes, it can lead to all sorts of discoveries—physical, emotional and spiritual. In an interview Kübler-Ross said,

In Switzerland, I was educated in line with the basic premise: work, work, work. You are only a valuable human being if you work. This is utterly wrong. Half working, half dancing - that is the right mixture. I myself have danced and played too little.

How many of you consider yourselves to be life-long learners? I do, too. One of the privileges I have because of the generosity of this congregation is an opportunity to take sabbatical time. Time dedicated to concentrated learning. Right now I've accrued almost 6 months of sabbatical time. Andrea Lerner, who by definition is a life-time Lerner, is our Regional Lead person, and she's here today to talk a little bit about the idea of sabbaticals and what it might mean for us in this congregation.

Then I'll finish with some closing thoughts on ministerial sabbaticals and share some ideas for what areas of learning I might be able to pursue. How I might grow professionally, personally and spiritually, and why that would be good for the congregation.

Part Two

So, as a minister and as a congregation, we are both part of the larger movement of Unitarian Universalism. When the congregation supports its minister, it also supports that minister's work in the larger realm. When the congregation makes an investment in sabbatical time, it allows the minister to engage in concentrated learning that not only will directly and obviously benefit the congregation they serve, but also will contribute to the positive impact that Unitarian Universalism has in the world.

On a sabbatical (or more likely a series of mini-sabbaticals), I could: learn more strategies for helping small congregations grow; learn more about different worship styles; immerse myself in a spiritual program, something that I could then teach the congregation; visit other congregations and bring back some of their ideas; read some of the books I bought to further my professional development and the quality of my ministry to all of you. And I will continue my work on antiracism.

We life-long learners gain knowledge and understanding because we find the world so interesting; and, because we're social creatures, we also want to share what we learn with others. We want to give back to the world. As someone who has devoted her life to ministry, I want to provide the best leadership I can to help this congregation be a vibrant and thriving community. And, as I gain spiritual insights and understandings about life, I want to share those with you.

Going back to Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's reading, I want to help you find your Gandhi self, your compassionate nature. As she said, "we are here to heal one another and ourselves." I am here to help you "heal your spirits." To help you learn life lessons and really live life. My wish for you is that when you get to your end, you can say, "God, I have lived!"