

FIRST UNITARIAN
CONGREGATIONAL SOCIETY
BROOKLYN
A UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION

Transforming Lives

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(Member since January 14, 2018)



Zen Master Maezumi Roshi said, “Please do not forget that your life itself is the practice. Practice is no other than your life.”

For my husband James and I, early experiences with religion didn’t satisfy our desire to live by this perspective. Sundays at Church seemed very separate from the rest of life; politics were politics, and church was church, but the two really shouldn’t overlap. As we began building our lives together in Brooklyn a few years ago, we found that although we found strength and comfort in our individual spiritual practices, we missed the sense of community church life provided - but how could we find that sort of community without the inconsistencies we couldn’t reconcile?

In December 2016, we walked into First U thirsty for opportunities to practice what we believed, but not sure exactly what to expect. Almost immediately, we recognized that this was an incredibly special place - a place where, finally, we saw spirituality, politics, and social justice intertwine in a way that felt purposeful and made sense to us.

Not long after we started to attend, the Phoenix Rising program was announced. The program, created by the Beck Institute on Religion and Poverty, would help formerly homeless women on their journey to rebuild their lives, most after a lifetime of trauma. After orientation, I decided to commit to serving as a mentor...although I wondered how my many privileges really qualified me.

During the orientation and training sessions, there were, rather unsurprisingly, a LOT of questions from us First U volunteers. What exactly would we be doing as mentors? How exactly does one mentor someone ‘correctly’? We quickly learned that there is no guaranteed formula - but mere presence of attention, follow through with commitments, and active listening - things many of us take for granted - would give our participants a safe space in which to continue healing their trauma. As mentors we were not there to give advice or instruction, but rather to partner with our participants in identifying goals, affirm their strengths, normalize the struggle that comes with change, and celebrate their accomplishments along the way.

On the first night of the program, I met Shirley, who had been proudly sober for 8 years. She was quiet at first, but we connected instantly. Shirley had been homeless at different points in her life; she’d started using hard drugs in her teen years and quickly became addicted. She had two sons, both of whom started selling drugs in their late teens. She and I bonded over one of the most common forms of suffering there is: loss. Me, the loss of my brother from leukemia at age 12, and Shirley, the loss of both of her sons to drug-related gun violence.

Over the course of the next five months, Phoenix Rising met each week, starting each session by enjoying a delicious family meal lovingly prepared by members of First U. We started our work by co-establishing group guidelines for mutuality and respect. Together, we listened to guest speakers sharing their personal stories of resilience, of finding their voices, of recovering from mistakes. We learned about The Four Agreements. We set goals. We made vision boards, we shared stories, we had art therapy.

The more comfortable Shirley and I became with each other, the more she shared pieces of her story and her trauma. We were not the mentor/participant from that first evening; we were friends. Together we discovered that what Shirley wants to do most is use her story to help other people. Many of the women in the group expressed a similar goal; there were so many people that had helped them in each step of their journey, and they wanted to be able to do the same for others.

By the end of the program, it became clear that our first ideas of what mentoring might be were not what had unfolded each week. It wasn't about having the answers or checking off boxes; it was about togetherness and building relationships.

At the start of the program, we were each given a mentor manual. "If you have come here to help me," its cover read, "you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us get to work." First Unitarian has changed my life. Working together, we can change the world.

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