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As part of my former career in book publishing, I sometimes got to attend sales conferences, where authors and editors spoke passionately about their new books. The subject matter and the people ran the gamut. At the same Spring 2005 meeting, we had actor John Lithgow talking about his series of rainy day activity books for kids...and a young National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League executive discussing her ideals and the lived realities of her role as a NARAL activist... On that day, it was *this* author, Cristina Page, not John Lithgow, who made a real impression on me.

Her story began on the eve of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion. In preparation for that event, Ms. Page sought out a counterpart from the other side of the debate. Her goal was to transcend divisiveness and uncover some common ground. Now that may sound like a noble, but impossible, feat, particularly given the ugly rhetoric that flies across the aisle to this day. But Cristina Page found a partner in Amanda Peterman, media director of Right to Life of Michigan. Putting their heads together, the two women were able to acknowledge that they--and their constituencies--shared the objective of reducing unwanted pregnancies and abortions. And that they could share responsibility for an 11% drop in abortions over 7 years. They agreed that health insurance should be within reach at all income levels. And that affordable, high quality child care and family friendly workplace practices should be normative. And they courageously co-authored a New York Times op-ed piece to commemorate the anniversary, stating all of these things and reaching the following conclusions:

Instead of just focusing on our differences, we need to acknowledge the surprising number of important issues on which we agree...

The only way we will have the chance to explore these mutual areas is if we feel comfortable doing so. Both sides must unite publicly against the use of violent measures in the movement and must isolate extremists who employ them. The language we use to argue our positions must change, too. We can no longer tolerate inflammatory terms that serve only to divide us further and create conflict...

We accept that we will never find a solution to the most fundamental disagreements we hold on abortion. And we should never compromise our strongly held beliefs. Outside of them, though, we can find a path to escape this endless cycle of division. We hope the next generation of activists will join us in seeking areas of common ground and merge the power of both movements to serve Americans in a meaningful way.<sup>1</sup>

A pretty inspiring, collaborative vision, no? Yet the reception these women's words received was somewhat less than enthusiastic. Those on the pro-choice side found the sentiments admirable, but naïve. While on the pro-life side, there were loud, angry rebukes. Page discovered what we now know more fully: that the abortion debate runs long and deep. Not just about the welfare of a fetus or its mother, but also about history-- the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution and the ways that, for some, they continue to threaten to shred the sacred veil of myth and mystery shrouding religion, human sexuality, and reproduction.

Of course, eight years later, issues Page and Peterson addressed in their op-ed piece are still on the table, and perhaps more divisive than ever. A bit like a soap opera that can be turned off for weeks at a time, then turned back on, with the plot having barely advanced an inch. Under such conditions, it can sometimes be challenging to stay hopeful, engaged, or tuned in. At times, a news fast can be just the thing to keep faith and perspective alive.

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<sup>1</sup> Page, Cristina and Amanda Peterson, "The Right to Agree," *New York Times*, January 22, 2003.

But, at least on a global scale, this was not one of those weeks. I don't know about you, but as I followed coverage of Egypt's 18-day revolt and the ultimate toppling of its 30-year autocracy, I was taken back to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. And a song of that era ran through my head:

*...you know it feels good to be alive*

*I was alive and I waited, waited*

*I was alive and I waited for this*

*Right here, right now*

*there is no other place I want to be*

*Right here, right now*

*watching the world wake up from history*

*I saw the decade in, when it seemed*

*the world could change at the blink of an eye*

*And if anything*

*then there's your sign... of the times...<sup>2</sup>*

Watching the world wake up from history--its mistakes and its heartaches. Watching the Egyptians shape their own future. Watching religious tensions take a backseat, replaced by -signs scrawled with crescent embracing cross and the words, "We are all against the regime;" -a human chain of Coptic Christians formed to protect Muslim protesters as they said their noon prayers,

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<sup>2</sup>Jesus Jones: "Right Here, Right Now," *Doubt*, 1991.

-and all of us, trying to trust the process, but not yet knowing for sure whether the military will live up to its promises of peace and democracy;

-for the moment sharing joy and solidarity with the Egyptian people, even though we who have breathed freedom like air can't possibly know what it feels like to suddenly wake up to it brand-new; pregnant with hope, possibility, *and* trepidation. Young in the grand scheme of things, we look on as our own government struggles to enter uncharted territory: learning to be helpful, but not overbearing. For now, at least, we can all be Egyptians, if clumsily so. Like JFK, whose 1963 "*Ich bin ein Berliner*" statement of solidarity at the Berlin Wall rendered him, not Berliner, but a jelly donut. Sincere sentiments, imperfectly translated, but seeds of goodwill nonetheless.

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I can't help but wonder how the Corinthians received this letter from Paul. Probably we each know of a Peter Pan who wears immaturity like a badge of honor. But I don't think anyone likes to be called a baby, especially not the young who are *trying* to be grown up in the best way they know how. I've often thought that Paul was not the most tactful or diplomatic man in the world...or the bible. But, then, I didn't know these Corinthians, who were said to be quarreling, flaunting their sexuality, and dividing the church by idolizing their favorite teachers; instead of simply worshipping and serving their one God. There were many distractions and ideas to chase in this Mediterranean port city, whose Greek history had been born anew in the Roman Empire's image. Maybe turning up the volume was what it took to get the Corinthians' attention. Or perhaps Paul was applying reverse psychology, calling them to defiantly live into more mature identities...or, at the very least, to acknowledge their youthful ignorance. Then again, he could have been reading the signs of the times, sensed a shifting of opportunity's tectonic plates, and discerned God's call to them to serve amidst seismic change and aftershock.

Our own UCC denomination is a relatively young fifty-four years old this year. And yet, despite that youth, it was built on a foundation of four rich traditions, which came together as two and finally a single, united denomination. This wasn't a marriage of convenience or an indication that the diversity of previous identities was no more. It was accepting an invitation to live into what they shared: an overarching theological belief that God not only calls us to oneness, but to serve as gracious midwives of unity: United and uniting. And so we have formed a partnership with the Disciples of Christ. And we maintain a formula of agreement with United Methodists, Presbyterians and others that allows us to share ministers. We actively participate in not only the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches, but Churches Uniting in Christ, which brings together traditionally black and white churches to fight racism. We produce a progressive Sunday School curriculum with Unitarian Universalists. And now we prepare to review the Catholic Church's recent offer to honor our baptisms as their own...

Do you feel the tectonic plates shifting yet?

Then there is our own church and community,

-where a socially and theologically conservative leader came to us for help in supporting and protecting LGBT high school students.

-where a human services leader seeks the input of that church's minister on the basis of their readiness to serve the community in such a meaningful, much needed capacity.

-where local ministers have begun to study the scriptures together and are focusing less on theological differences, than on serving the community's needy.

-where in April we will host an ecumenical Lenten breakfast for the first time in almost two decades, and our sister churches are excited about that.

Now do you feel the plates shifting?

We have built foundations, planted seeds, and watered over the months and years, as have people in many places and ages. There will always be more work and more dialogue to do. Ultimately the results and the timing rest with God. But let us savor these moments when they do arrive and live into them as we are called to do, as united uniters. Not part of a competitive team that shuns the major leagues, but with the naïve maturity of a man who said to the world, “Can’t we all just get along?” And two idealistic women who wrote, “Instead of just focusing on our differences, we need to acknowledge the surprising number of important issues on which we agree...”

Amen.