

Birddogging**A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation****By The Rev. CJ McGregor****Delivered on May 17, 2020**

Are you a bird dog? Are you trained for birddogging? There are a few meanings of the term birddogging. Perhaps the most familiar is the noun bird dog referring to canines who are trained to smell, pursue, and point hunters to fowl. When I asked you those questions, if you were a bird dog and if you were trained for birddogging, I was using bird dog as a verb meaning to doggedly seek out someone or something or to hound or pursue something. Yes, birddogging is a human behavior. Think of the people in your circle. Do any of them chase after something with determination? Do any of them, as they say, beat a dead horse? Perhaps you are the one in your circle that is a birddog and hounds after someone or something unable to stop the pursuit.

Congregations are full of bird dogs. Many of us in this congregation are in pursuit of justice. Whether it be finding justice for people experiencing homelessness, justice for people of color, the hungry, the poor, the marginalized we are bird dogs and refuse to turn away from the pursuit. Then there are bird dogs in the congregation that get an idea or a felt need and are relentless in the pursuit of serving that idea or felt need. I remember serving a congregation where I had to manage a bird dog. This congregant believed that we UU's believed nothing and wanted to paint the sanctuary walls with the solar system. Week after week I fielded phone call and emails from him. He was relentless. He truly believed in his idea and his pursuit of making it happen. Sanctuary walls will never have the solar system painted on them on my watch. His birddogging strained our relationship, his confidence in me and the congregation and he eventually resigned his membership. A negative consequence of birddogging.

Living in a pandemic has taught us a few truths. We realize we might be wasting a lot of our time and energy on the wrong things. The only things you should chase in your life are cakes and puppies, right? Or is that just me? Well, yes — but there are a few other things that are worth our while, too. Whenever we chase after something, we take ourselves out of the present moment where life actually happens. The future doesn't exist yet and the past is gone. The only really meaningful place to live is in the now and that's generally where you'll find what you're looking for. Others may say you should be chasing other things to be happy and successful. They tell us that we should be chasing the dream. Not chasing your dream, but the dream they think we should be chasing. I've found that most people don't get what they want in life because they're playing out someone else's idea of who they should be.

Benjamin Franklin wrote, "In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes." We all chase security. The problem with chasing security is that there is no such thing, and if you trade your soul for it, you pay a big price. I have a friend who's buying a house with a woman he doesn't love, who treats him badly, for "security's sake." Another friend is applying for work way beneath her potential to collect a steady paycheck, even though the last time she did so her job made her sick and it took her out of the job market for several months. The truth is that fear of change and staying in our comfort zones stunts our growth.

Author Colin Wright once wrote, “Chase your passions and money will come. Chase money and you may never find your passions.” We all need to make ends meet, but beyond that, chasing after the green stuff doesn’t make us happier. Research by the Nobel laureate psychologist/economist Daniel Kahneman and Princeton economist Angus Deaton found that happiness maxes out around \$75,000 in the United States. Additional studies reveal that people are happier when they spend their money on other people rather than only themselves.

Some of us chase material things. Many think we’ll be happy if we live in a big house, wear brand-named clothes, drive a new car, and stuff our closets full of shoes. But that’s simply chasing things to fill the hole in your sole (forgive the pun). Research shows that we’re happier when we spend money on positive experiences—like vacations—rather than material things. So the next time you feel like redecorating your living room or upgrading your car, think about flying to France or taking a road trip instead. We’ll be able to do that again someday.

Some of us chase work. Socrates wrote, “Beware the barrenness of a busy life.” Americans put in the longest work hours and get the shortest paid vacation time in the developed world. Those of us “lucky” enough to have jobs have added another day to our work week because we now check work emails and calls from home. It’s no wonder we try to stuff everything we can’t do at work into our off hours. Even though it’s countercultural, research shows that taking breaks leads to greater productivity than putting in long hours. You come back refreshed and able to do more in less time when you give yourself a chance to recharge.

Some of us chase approval. Chasing people’s approval is a waste of time and effort; what we should be chasing is our own approval. There’s NOTHING wrong with you. Some folks love you just the way you are; some don’t. The wonderful side effect of self-acceptance is that those little things you want to improve about yourself tend to right themselves effortlessly. Self-hate keeps you stuck. Self-acceptance heals.

Some of us chase people. If you have to work hard to keep an acquaintance or friend in your life, it’s probably best to let that person go. Not all relationships are healthy. Learn to tell the difference. According to George Simon, author of *In Sheep’s Clothing*, tells us to beware of people who try to control you, stroke your ego to get what they want, tell lies, ignore you, make you feel guilty, put you down, play the victim, or cause you to doubt yourself. These energy vampires leave you feeling drained. If you take an honest assessment of your current friendships and family members, chances are you’ll find one or two there. Rather than chasing them to make the relationship work, distance yourself. That should be no problem these days.

Some of us chase happiness. According to Tal Ben-Shahar, author of *Happier*, chasing happiness by working hard today for the rewards that come tomorrow does not make people happy. Nor does engaging in momentary hedonistic pleasures without thought of the consequences. Happiness is a choice. To find it, do what brings you pleasure in the moment AND helps you reach meaningful goals in the future.

Some of us chase only what seems possible. We chase after what seems possible instead of what we’re really capable of doing because our aspirations are too limited. Don’t be too quick to mentally figure out how to follow your dreams. If the answer falls outside the range of what

seems possible, the route you choose may actually hold you back from getting the best life you can have. Slow down. Every step you take provides another piece of the puzzle, until the big picture eventually snaps into focus.

I've found that it's easy to get caught up in nonsense and distracted by the drama of life. You'll fall down while going after someone else's goals, or give everything to a love story that just wasn't meant to be. Please don't waste your time and energy on what never deserved it in the first place. Put your focus on chasing what really matters. Chase whatever makes you happy in this world. Maybe you love traveling, or just snuggling up on your couch and watching endless episodes on Netflix. You get excited about freshly picked flowers, and the smell of coffee in the morning. Surround yourself with these things as much as possible, and you'll live a meaningful life. Remember: You create your own happiness. It doesn't just fall in your lap.

Chase alone time. Spending time alone is key. This, also, won't be hard these days. You learn a lot about yourself in the process. Learn to chase after the times spent in solitude. Sometimes, peace and quiet can be refreshing, and remind you of what really matters in life. What are your priorities? Are you doing this for you or someone else? Ask yourself those questions, too. Chase the sunshine. Wherever you go, chase after the sunshine. Life can be dull sometimes, and you may find yourself in a funk. During those times, I've found that nothing cures me like some sun. Get outside, breathe in the fresh air, and look toward the sky.

Chase that feeling of courage in your life, because it doesn't always come around. Sometimes, you really let your fears get in the way. You forget that you're capable of turning your dreams into a reality and taking that leap of faith. But, other times, you get a little spark in your soul. Truth is, you'll never feel entirely ready. So, take those moments of courage and run with them. That's the only way you'll get to where you want to go. Facing your fears can feel scary, but it will be so rewarding in the long-run. Now, I'm not suggesting that you should befriend a bunch of spiders. But if you're afraid to say, "I love you," or dancing in public, then please give yourself a try. These kind of fears are healthy to chase, because they're not harmful. You'll grow as a person, and will be more ready to take on the next adventure. What are you waiting for?

There are going to be conversations in your life that you'll wish you didn't have to have. You're going to want to run in the other direction when you and your best friend are having your first fight, or may choose to grin and bear it. In those moments, chase after what feels tough and uncomfortable, because it will likely lead to a better outcome. Now, you don't want to cause unnecessary drama. But, if there's a situation that needs to be solved, then face it head-on. Be respectful and understanding, while speaking your mind. Chase after the things that make you feel alive. This may be your passions, the people in your life who constantly inspire you, or the music that makes you want to dance. These things make you love your life, and realize that living is always better than simply existing. Right now, you're settling for drama and nonsense that's just weighing you down. But, it doesn't always have to be that way. Focus your time and energy on the things in life that truly matter.

Someone asked me the other day if there was a silver lining to all this we are presently experiencing. I was able to answer, "Yes" instantly. We are learning many truths during our time in isolation. We now know what is meaningful and what is not. We now know the power

of human relationships. We now know that we just might be able to do something for our environment. We now know what we need and don't need to feel truly alive. We know now that we can eat our weight in groceries each week. We now know that we can binge watch 4 to 5 series on Netflix each week. We now know that we can finish jigsaw puzzles in record time. Let us take the time to figure out what is worth chasing, what is meaningful, and what brings us genuine happiness. When we are on the other side of this pandemic we will be changed. Then we shall live in a way that makes us whole.

May it be so.