



# The CommUUnicator

Newsletter of the Unitarian Universalist  
Fellowship of Waynesboro

## Death of a Paradigm

By Ann Majure

In the early 1990s, I was a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin, Madison working on my doctorate in special education. My major professor was one of those brilliant thinkers who seemed to see things that took the rest of the world about another 20 years to see. She was always challenging us to question, question, question. Allowing the questions to keep coming was as important as finding answers. At that time, most of us in the disability professions were quick to label people and conditions (e.g., mental retardation, mental illness, autism, cerebral palsy, developmental disability, etc.). The list of labels kept growing. One of the assumptions associated with most of the labels was that the disability was “mental/ cognitive.” While many of us worked to give “these people” a good quality of life and protection from abuse, we also saw them as not very intelligent and not very capable of making good decisions.

The problem with this thinking—this “paradigm”—was that we wanted every observation, every bit of data obtained from research to fit into the paradigm. When we could not make it fit, we classified the information as an outlier or artifact and just ignored it as meaningless. My professor reminded us of the Eugenics Movement of the early 20th century when many researchers already assumed a hierarchy of intelligence and capacity in human beings and set out to

“prove” this assumption with all sorts of bizarre research based on head circumference, skin color, geographic origins and more. She reminded us that we now see how bogus this all was - just an attempt to justify everything according to the paradigm the researchers held so dearly.

Around that time, a few people in the profession were beginning to consider that some disabilities, disorders, delays were much more than just in the brain. We might need to take a look at what was happening in the entire body to begin formulating new questions. Occupational therapists, physical therapists, kinesiologists, and even some neurologists were beginning to consider a whole-body perspective and allowing themselves to consider a new set of questions.

As more and more information became available through more advanced technological imaging and testing, we began to see more clearly what was happening in the brain and whole body. The old paradigm of mental incapacity began to crack. We began to suspect that a person’s inability to say and do things might be as much physical as cognitive. What if they understand what is happening around them and want to respond in typical and expected ways? What if it’s a problem with the signaling in the nerves and muscles? All these “what ifs” have continued to expand the crack in the paradigm over the past 30 years. That crack is now a chasm, and most

current research is allowing the new questions to surface. For some of us, that old paradigm is now totally destroyed—dead.

These days I seem to be seeing paradigm cracks all over the place. I think paradigms provide a safe haven for human beings to avoid looking at anything that makes us fearful or feel less powerful. It gives us justification, sometimes righteous and sometimes economic, to do and say some horrible and damaging things—and maybe, more egregious, to simply look away and not do or say anything to stop the horrible and damaging things. How we see color, race, gender, age—even animals and the environment—seem to be tied to paradigms. We need those familiar and comfortable frameworks. Anything that doesn't fit makes us uncomfortable. We often just ignore what doesn't fit and maybe outright deny it.

As I go deeper and deeper into my learning about systemic racism, white supremacy and deep-rooted value judgments about color, I realize a lot of paradigms are about power and control. It is about an us/them dichotomy. It's not me - it's not us. It's "them" "those people." These paradigms encompass all forms and aspects of prejudice toward anyone who does not look like us, act like us, worship like us or share our views and opinions. For many, the unknown is a scary place to avoid at all costs. It's no wonder there's mass avoidance behaviors going on around us.

During this past year like none of us have experienced in this life time, I've thought so often about my professor's words of many years ago "death of a paradigm is painful." I keep trying to make some sense, to find something familiar to hang on to, to come up

with a new paradigm to give me some structure, security. Nothing seems to work right now. I'm realizing that for me there really is no paradigm for now. This is a time and place where I have to accept a deeper level of mystery, of not-knowing and learn how to be at peace with that not-knowing. And, yes, it can be and often is painful. As I have come to understand, the healing does not happen unless and until we allow ourselves to feel what we really feel. So go as deep as you can go - and then deeper still. Very tough work. Heavy lifting.

### Reopening News

Members of UUFW should have all received an email with a questionnaire about returning to in-person services. Your responses will help the Board make a plan that will be comfortable for as many of us as possible.

In the meantime, the Fellowship facilities are available for small-group meetings of people who have been fully vaccinated. If your group includes unvaccinated attendees, all must observe masking and distancing. You may make a reservation and obtain a door code for our new security system by contacting our administrative assistant at [administrator@uufw.org](mailto:administrator@uufw.org).

### Community News

The Beverley Street Studio School is hosting a memorial exhibition of the works of our deceased member, Mary Echols and her contemporary, Virginia Deane from April 30 through May 30 at the BSSS and the Co-Art Gallery. [This flyer](#) has details.

