

A Community Worth Building

A Sermon Delivered on February 7, 2010
by
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrman

*“There is no hope of joy
except in human relations.”
-- Saint-Exupery*

Unitarian Universalist Church
of Urbana-Champaign
309 West Green Street
Urbana, Illinois 61801-3221
(217) 384-8862
uucuc.org

Meditation: by the Reverend Max Coots (from *Leaning Against the Wind*)

I have witnessed a miracle, . . . I have seen God! I saw God last spring, underground, pushing seeds up into plants; between the rows, pulling beans and tomatoes and squash out of blossoms; and, after frost, wilting it all down to give it back to soil - as all are given back.

I saw God. I saw her with her arms around her child, laughing. I saw him talking to his child as if the child were as real as he.

I saw God dressed like a clown in this fall's leaves and know God will come back as April and as buds . . .

I touched God and was touched: in the wood and the words I worked; in whatever it was that moved me to do what I should, but didn't want to do; in the hands and hugs of a very small boy I know and from a very old woman I know, and so many in between, in the sun of summer and of hope, in the wind of autumn and of grief, in the snow that creeks cold under my feet but warms the roots of grass and the lives of mice, until spring lets them out again . . .

And, maybe, in a week or in a year, I will think back to now, and maybe I'll realize that I saw and touched and heard God here. Maybe not. I never know.

Reading: by the Reverend Peter Morales, who currently serves as president of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations (*UU World*, Winter 2009)

We usually think of our needs in terms of things we want to receive from others—nurture, respect, understanding, love, support. Yet we also need to give.

I want to be clear. We don't just "want" to give of ourselves. We need to give of ourselves. One of the great lessons of all religious traditions is that we only find ourselves when we lose ourselves in service to something that transcends us.

We think of people coming to a congregation because of their spiritual needs. True enough. Yet one of the greatest needs people bring is a need to give of themselves. When I served as a parish minister, it took me a while to fully appreciate this. However, as I spoke with hundreds of people joining our church over the years, I came to see that their need to give was perhaps the greatest need of all. As we spoke with people at our new membership classes and after they joined, we heard over and over about how they wanted to find a place in the church where they could roll up their sleeves and get involved.

This need to give expresses itself in many ways. I remember one woman who had a passion for connecting with the elders of the church. She wanted them to feel connected and respected. She loved to hear their stories. What a gift she was to our church! I know others who feel called to human rights work. The pain of the most oppressed people in our world calls to them, and they work tirelessly for compassion and justice. I know a number of adults who love children and find joy in nurturing our children as they grow.

I am convinced that we too often fail to recognize how much our children, youth, and young adults need to give. Hanging out is not a spiritual practice. Joining hands to work for something we care about is.

Reading: by Jack Kornfield from *A Path with Heart* (p. 215)

Near the great Temple of the Buddha's Enlightenment in Bodh Gaya, India, is a long line of beggars who seek money from the stream of pilgrims who visit each day. Years ago on the first day of a month-long visit to Bodh Gaya, I naively gave money to beggars. As a consequence, each day after that, as I walked from the market to the temple, I would be surrounded by beggars yelling at me, pulling at my clothes, and even crying for money because they knew I was one who gave to them. It made it a difficult month, and I felt quite sad, as I had really wanted to give them support, but not in this way.

On my next visit, I made a new plan. I decided to wait until just before leaving and then give to the beggars all the money I could spare. The morning of my departure I changed forty dollars to one- and two- rupee notes and planned to give four rupees to every beggar in a respectful way. I began to walk down the line of the hundred and fifty beggars in front of the temple, offering money into each hand, feeling pleased with how sensible this was. But then, as I neared the middle of the line, pandemonium broke loose. The beggars at the far end of the line were afraid I would run out of money before I reached them, so they all charged toward me at once, hands outstretched, angrily grabbing my body, my clothes, the money, whatever they could touch. I quickly turned to run and be free of their grasping, and I threw the remaining money over their heads into the air.

Looking from a safe distance, I saw a painful scene quite different from what I had intended. All the beggars were on their hands and knees in the dirt, fighting one another for the rupees that had fallen there. I realized that I had much to learn about skillful generosity and the art of giving.

A Community Worth Building

A Sermon Delivered on February 7, 2010

By

The Reverend Axel H. Gehrman

“If you build it...” “If you build it...” “If you build it they will round up the usual suspects.”

These are the words that can be found on our fridge at home, posted amidst a colorful variety of magnets, newspaper clippings, cartoons, and calendars.

“If you build it they will round up the usual suspects,” is the creation of a member of our family, who put our recently acquired “Movie Lines Magnetic Poetry Kit” to good use. The poetry kit contains 220 magnetized words and word fragments, perfect to practice your creativity and imagination on fridges, file cabinets or any available steel surface.

On the other side of our fridge someone placed the words, “Houston we have a failure to communicate every time you can't handle to truth.” Those of you who are movie buffs,

may recognize the several films from which these memorable lines were borrowed. You may even know the actors who delivered them.

“If you build it they will come,” is a line associated with a movie from 1989 entitled “Field of Dreams,” which starred Kevin Costner. The line in the movie was actually “if you build it *he* will come.”

The film is based on the novel *Shoeless Joe* by W.P. Kinsella, which tells the rather strange story of a novice farmer in rural Iowa who, while walking through his cornfield one day hears a voice whisper, “if you build it, he will come.” The farmer has a vision of a baseball field, and comes to believe he is called to build one, right there in the midst of his Iowa cornfield. Though highly impractical, he does just that. With the support of his wife, he plows under his corn and builds a field.

Now, as the story unfolds, the plot gets rather complex, involving the magical appearance of baseball players from the 1919 Black Sox team, including Shoeless Joe Jackson, and several other characters, as well as a looming financial crisis. Suffice to say, after many twists and turns, the movie does have a happy ending. The farmer’s strange dream is finally understood, and successfully realized.

The closing shot shows hundreds upon hundreds of automobiles approaching the baseball field, with paying visitors, who seek to experience a bit of the farmer’s dream.

“Field of Dreams,” though in many ways an odd movie, was remarkably successful. It struck a chord with so many viewers, that it was nominated for Best Picture at the Oscars that year (though, as the movie buffs among you remember, it lost to “Driving Miss Daisy”).

* * *

Following our dreams, heeding our inner vision, always involves a leap of faith. It involves going out on a limb. It means taking risks, and making sacrifices for the sake of something that - when regarded from the outside - may seem rather questionable.

I imagine it must have felt like a daring leap one hundred and forty years ago, when the members of the recently formed Universalist Church of Urbana decided to erect a church building on this very corner, inspired by their radical religious message of hope and love.

They didn’t have the money to build it. But they built it anyway. They figured “if we build it, people will come.” And people did come. At the building dedication in the summer of 1871, the church was filled to capacity with some 200 people, and an overflow crowd of 300 outside the windows. During the ceremony a collection was taken and almost \$15,000 were raised. With this money the building was completely paid for.

I don't know whether the people who organized this church 150 years ago, in 1859, could have imagined that we would still be worshipping here today. I don't know if they could have imagined that generation after generation would gather to carry on their dream, and continue to make it a reality.

Money is always a difficult subject. If you peruse the pages of our history books, you will learn that overcoming financial challenges has always been a struggle. But through the civil war, through drought and even through the Great Depression, our forebears rallied together and carried on, providing us with this fine sanctuary, and this vibrant community. Thanks to their generosity, we can gather here today.

* * *

Today is Stewardship Sunday. We are in the midst of our annual effort to reach out to all our members and friends, encouraging each other to think about what it is we value most about this religious community, how we want to see it grow and develop in the future, and how we hope to generously support our on-going mission and vision financially.

Being generous isn't easy. I am sure each of us know only too well that our personal resources are limited. We can't support every worthy cause. In recent weeks here, we have heard about the plight of the homeless in our community. We collected funds for those in Haiti, whose communities were devastated by the recent earthquake. We have supported social justice outreach and advocacy on behalf of those who are marginalized in this country by current immigration policies, or because of their sexual orientation.

I know some of us wonder how much financial support this church deserves, compared with other worthy causes. Sitting here, in this fine building, taking time to ponder lofty religious ideas can seem like a frivolous luxury in these troubled economic times. When there are people in Urbana-Champaign who don't know where they will get their next meal, or where they will be able to spend the next night, shouldn't our generosity should be directed toward fulfilling these most basic of needs?

It was Abraham Maslow who conceived of a hierarchy of human needs, beginning with the most basic physiological needs for air to breathe and food to eat; which is followed by the need for shelter and safety, the need for social support and love, the need for self-respect and the respect of others, and finally the need for personal self-actualization.

The hierarchy of needs makes a lot of sense. But it is also somewhat misleading. Yes, it is true that if we don't have air to breathe or food to eat, we cannot live for long. But in the long run, we need much more than the basics in order to survive.

Yes, we need shelters for the homeless, and soup kitchens for the hungry. But we also need hospitals for the sick, and schools for our young. We need a whole network of social agencies that serve body, mind and spirit, of all. Our survival and our sanity depend on a supportive social network, loving family and friends, who help us maintain a sense of health and wholeness.

Religion and spirituality are concerned with these over-arching aspects of what it means to be human. We need a place like this in which our spirits are lifted and our consciences pricked. It is so easy to be blinded by promises of short-term gain, and superficial solutions. We need a place where our vision is sharpened and our moral compass is constantly being honed, that we may be reliably guided toward greater good.

No one should be asked to choose between the needs of the body and the needs of the soul. As humans we are both physical and spiritual beings. It is not a question of “either/or.” It is always “both/and.” Likewise the needs of those within the walls of this church are inseparable from the needs of those beyond these walls.

And that’s why I think there is real value to the idea introduced by our Stewardship volunteers a few years ago, offering us guidance on how to give. As a model of generous giving they introduced the “Unitarian Universalist Tithe.” The UU Tithe is similar but different from the traditional idea of tithing conveyed in the Hebrew scriptures. The people of Israel were asked to contribute one tenth of their wealth to the Temple. A devout religious practitioner knows that everything we have, we have received from God. Giving ten percent back to God seems like a modest amount. After all, we get to keep 90 percent.

The UU Tithe takes this idea and adjusts it to our more individualistic sensibilities. We are encouraged to give 5 percent of our annual income to the church, and 5 percent to charities of our choosing. We are encouraged to give generously both to the community within this building, and to the community beyond.

I was pleasantly surprised when I was told last week, that among the early contributors to our Stewardship Drive this year, the majority are indeed practicing the UU Tithe.

* * *

Being generous isn’t easy. Sometimes the needs of those around us seem overwhelming. Sometimes the worthy causes, clamoring for our attention can seem like a desperate mob, with hands outstretched, grabbing at our clothes, our arms and legs, and our money. In the midst of this pandemonium, we may be tempted to simply turn and run away as fast as we can. And we may imagine that the generous thing to do, is simply to throw whatever money we happen to have in our hands over our heads behind us.

This is a tragedy because it makes us act as if we were reluctant to give. It is a tragedy because deep down we really do want to be generous. Deep down, we *want* to give. Deep down, we *need* to give.

We long to open our hearts to others. We long to share of our lives. We long to join hands with others and work for something we deeply care about. We long to be fully human and fully alive - and we know we can’t do this alone. We come to this church to share our vision of life abundant and join together to make it a reality.

Ed Harris was a minister at this church a generation ago, throughout the 1970s. He wrote, “This church is not a place of right convictions, a fortress of truth or even a bastion of philosophy. [This] church is a community of those who have suffered loss, lived through it, and learned true compassion. They have a sense of awe and mystery about this world and this enterprise of living. Our church is where we... serve one another, where the strands of our beliefs, our lives and hopes are WOVEN in a cable strong enough to bear us across the valleys of pain [and] grief, doubt and disillusionment. Each has experienced these, or will. We learn from each other, and for those reasons we come to this special place, infusing it with hope.”

May our dreams and the dreams of those who have gone before us be woven together,
that they may guide us safely through the days of our lives.
May we dare to open our hearts freely and give of ourselves generously,
that through our efforts today,
some day our dreams of love and justice will come true.

Amen.