

“Principles of a Free Faith”
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
“Stewardship Sunday,” March 30, 2008
Bruce A. Bode

Quote in Order of Service

“If we agree in love, there is no disagreement that can do us any injury, but if we do not, no other agreement can do us any good. Let us endeavor to keep the unity of the spirit in the bonds of peace.”

(Hosea Ballou, 1771-1852, Universalist minister)

Lighting the Chalice

I'd like to introduce our Lighting of the Chalice this morning with a little background on its origin that I came across in my reading this week.

I had previously known that the flaming chalice began to be used as a symbol for our liberal religion during World War II. What I hadn't been aware of was that it had a history going back to the late 1300's when a Czech priest by the name of Jan Hus, believing in the equality of all persons, offered the communion wine from the chalice to all the parishioners of his congregation. Prior to this the wine was served *only* to the priests.

Because of this radical departure from tradition, Jan Hus was burned to death at the stake, and thus the flame joined the chalice with the flaming chalice being a symbol worn secretly on cloaks.

For us the flame of the chalice, beyond signifying the flame of martyrdom, symbolizes the fire of the human mind, the light of reason, and the fire of life in general.

We are ever bound in community:
We build on foundations, we did not lay.
We warm ourselves at fires, we did not light.
We sit in the shade of trees, we did not plant.
We drink from wells, we did not dig.
We profit from persons, we did not know.
We light this chalice in thanksgiving
For those who have passed their light to us.

(Freely adapted from Deuteronomy 6:10-12)

Opening Words

This is a resplendent new day that has been given to us.

Let us then rejoice in it and be glad.

And let us count our many, many blessings:

Let us be grateful for the incredible gift of life,

And for the capacity to see, to feel, to hear, and to understand.

Let us be grateful for this time of fellowship, for work to do, and service to render.

And let us then be especially grateful for the ties of love which bind us together, giving dignity, meaning, worth, and joy to all our days.

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: This house is for the ingathering of nature and human nature.

CONGREGATION: It is a house of friendships, a haven in trouble, an open room for the encouragement of our struggle.

MINISTER: It is a house of freedom, guarding the dignity and worth of every person.

CONGREGATION: It offers a platform for the free voice, for declaring, both in times of security and danger, the full and undivided conflict of opinions.

MINISTER: It is a house of truth-seeking, where scientists can encourage devotion to their quest, where mystics can abide in a community of searchers.

CONGREGATION: It is a house of art, adorning its celebrations with melodies and handiworks.

MINISTER: It is a house of prophecy, outrunning times past and times present in visions of growth and progress.

CONGREGATION: This house is a cradle for our dreams, the workshop of our common endeavor.

(Kenneth L. Patton)

A Time For All Ages (by Kathy Stevenson)

We call this our Stewardship Sunday. Stewardship means to take responsibility for something. This weekend we begin our commitment to another year of supporting our Fellowship. Each of us decides how much money we can promise to pay to run QUUF. It is called a pledge. Because we want it to be a place where anyone can belong, there is no set amount we ask of people.

It is not like when we get charged for music or sports lessons, or going to a concert, or joining a club. It is more like how a family makes money decisions. The questions are: How much do we have? What is most important to us? What are the ways we benefit from QUUF? How do we help the world by our commitment to QUUF?

But it is also about our hopes and our fears. How we spend money is tied into hopes and fears. For some, the hope wins out and the sharing of wealth is easier. For others, the fears cause us to hold on a little tighter. Neither is right or wrong, or for always. It is just good to be aware of how we make decisions.

I have a simple story for you, from the Hindu religious tradition. It is about what makes something easy or hard to give away. It is about what is truly valuable. Maybe you will talk about the story with your families.

The Ruby: A Parable from the Hindu Tradition, by Jim May
(from: More Ready-To-Tell Tales From Around the World, adapted)

The old man had slept the night at the edge of the village. He awakened at his usual time, just before sunrise, as a warm wind moved over the land, gathering up faint aromas that sweetened the air.

He sat up, looked to the east where the sky was beginning to lighten, and began his morning devotions, starting the day with prayer as he had done almost every day of his life. It was during these prayers that the sound of hurried footsteps greeted his ears, and then a voice behind him: "Master, master, where is it?"

The old man turned slowly, and there standing behind him was a young peasant, dressed in rags. The young man was excited, his chest heaving up and down, his eyes intense and piercing.

The old man studied the young man for a long moment. "What is it that you ask of me?"

The young man bowed slightly to his elder, seeming to calm himself a bit, and spoke: "I had a dream last night, and in my dream I came to the edge of the village and met a holy man. And now here you are. In my dream that holy man gave me a precious jewel."

"Ah," replied the old man as he reached down and retrieved from a clump of grass a ruby the size of a fist.

"You must mean this. I found it... I don't know where, but I have no use of it. You many have it."

With that the old man handed the ruby to the young peasant, a man whose hands had never held more than two copper coins at one time.

The young man took the ruby. He could not believe his good fortune. He held it up to the sun, his face awash in red shadow. He walked home slowly, holding the jewel in his hand, his arm outstretched in front of him. He could not take his eyes off of it.

Returning to his small cottage he placed the ruby on the table, pulled up the one chair that he owned, and sat all day admiring his treasure. He turned the stone this way and that, slowly, reverently stroking his great gift over and over as the hours passed.

That night they young man had difficulty sleeping.

The next morning he was traveling to the fields, the ruby secure in his pocket, when he came upon the old man.

It is said that the young peasant approached the old man, took the ruby out of his pocket, and give it back.

"I do not want this. I want what you know that made it so easy to give it away."

May we be so wise.

Congregational Announcements

I'd like to call your attention to a new Fellowship group that will be meeting here beginning on the evening of April 20. This group is calling themselves the A-HA! Group, an acronym for Agnostic, Humanist and Atheist. Initially, they plan to meet for dinner and discussion twice a month on the first and third Sunday evenings of the month between 5 and 7 p.m.

As I wrote in my ministerial column for this month, when I first came to QUUF in the fall of 2004, the first sermon series I gave was titled "Four Faiths," a series based on an adult religious education program by a long-time Unitarian Universalist minister, Fred Campbell, who had identified what he described as four different faiths or lifestances within Unitarian Universalist congregations, namely, Humanist, Naturalist, Mystic, and Theist. And, in giving a companion adult religious education class along with this sermon series, I found that, indeed, all four faiths were present at QUUF – pretty much evenly divided.

As I also said in this ministerial column, it's a bit of a challenge as a minister to develop Sunday services that fully speak to the perspective of all four of these faiths on any given Sunday. And, actually, if I were to design a Sunday service with each of the four groups specifically in mind, I would create four very different services.

So the formation of this new group is opportunity for persons who identify as Humanist to have a time to focus more specifically on the kinds of interests, concerns, and points of view that speak to them. If you are interested in giving this group a try, the organizers of this group, Judy and Jim Tough, ask that you contact them so they know how many persons to plan for.

Reading

My reading on this Stewardship Sunday is the text of the “testimonial talk” of “Stewardship Schtick” that was given by Sarah Walker from this pulpit two Sundays ago on March 16 at the first service.

When I heard Sarah speak at that time, I was particularly struck by her sense of stepping up into a more grown-up role with respect to this Fellowship, and so I asked her if she’d be willing to share her text with me. When I read her text I thought, “This is something it would be worthwhile for everyone to hear, even though for some it will be a second time.”

Sarah has been with this Fellowship for sixteen years. In those years she has seen dramatic changes – an evolution from what church consultants call a “family-size congregation” to a “pastoral-size congregation,” and now a “program-size congregation.” The dynamics of each of these differently-sized congregations are distinct and challenging to those going through them. And, of course, now that we are on the cusp of a major building expansion, we can expect there will yet more changes in the offing.

So let me read for you the statement of a person who was present here before this Fellowship built this lovely sanctuary and the RE buildings. I will be reading the text that Sarah prepared for that occasion, but when she actually spoke it, it was a free-flow – and with the flow of a tear or two as well – but she did speak from her notes. So what I will read this morning is what she had prepared as a written text. Thus, you will have an opportunity to attend fully to its carefully prepared content:

Stewardship “Schtick,” given Sunday, March 16, 2008 by Sarah Walker

I am honored to be invited to share some of the reasons I participate and support this Fellowship. The occasion has caused me to reflect on my relationship with the Fellowship—past and present and future. It is a relationship that I am grateful for. Having been part of QUUF for 16 years, I have accumulated a wealth of experiences and relationships and affection and attachment to this Fellowship. There is so much to tell about what I value and respect and admire here. I have only a short time available to express my connections and motivations for making commitments of time and money to this place. But thinking about the upcoming Stewardship

campaign, and its challenges brings back memories of my first uncertainties about involving myself in financial obligations to QUUF. I now anticipate the yearly commitment I make with serene confidence and pride about what I am doing and why.

I began my relationship with this group as a parent seeking community and support in the guidance of two daughters. Having come from experience in other Unitarian Universalist churches, I enjoyed community, stimulation and inspiring ideas offered in humble circumstances—rented facility, minimal RE, few other programs. I was trying to adjust to the setting and lay-led nature. I was focused on the Sunday morning experience. I had very little awareness or involvement in the workings of the church. Although I contributed to the offering plate, I knew nothing about the financial arrangements of the church.

A turning point came when the leaders of the Fellowship presented the desire to promote the development of our church. They spoke of creating a church home and hiring a minister $\frac{1}{4}$ time. Looking around the room in a gathering of 35-40 individuals, these goals seemed very ambitious, risky and costly to me.

It was a challenge for all to learn to communicate more openly and practically about money—it was awkward and uncomfortable. The financial implications if we were to proceed were of a new order of magnitude. To pay a minister's salary, we would need a reliable flow of income every month. To acquire space, we would be soliciting financial gifts and borrowing money and creating a financial need and obligation stretching into the future.

Not all members agreed with the goals or expenses. The aspect of risk was unsettling. There was more of a notion to approve than a plan to follow—we might buy another church, we might buy something we could renovate for our purposes, we might buy land and build, maybe the Jewish community would form a partnership, the timeline was unknown. Could we actually pull it off?

I wrestled with the concept of being part of the WE and understanding my part of the obligation and responsibility. What they proposed involved a new level of personal commitment on every level.

I began to look to the leaders' knowledge and talent and commitment in the Fellowship in a new light—to see the energy and potential. I began to imagine my relationships with the people around me stretching into the future. I began to grasp a sense of group identity and align myself with it. The group was family-like with strong “parental” leaders.

They inspired me. I put my trust in the leadership and decided to lend my efforts in order to create the future for the Fellowship. I stepped up to be one of the grown-ups – to fill more of a responsible and committed role in the organization.

My voluntary efforts and financial support for this community has flowed naturally from that decision. Along the way over the course of subsequent years I have made incremental decisions to accept more responsibilities and increase my financial pledges in order to support the needs of this rapidly developing community. And it has been a gratifying and sometimes mind-boggling experience to see what has come of it! QUUF exceeds what we imagined or provided for. We could not have anticipated that we would quintuple in membership going from 60-275 over 10 years. This has required many community adjustments and accommodations as our identity grew beyond the “family” metaphor into a bigger community. It has been a fast learning curve with challenges and inconveniences and organizational restructuring and growing financial commitment to our operating budget. Our communication about money has grown to be more frank and explicit. And the scope of my relationships, participation, leadership and financial contribution has grown and deepened beyond what I imagined.

I have been amazed to see the capacity of this Fellowship to attract and welcome people who bring new energy and creativity that contribute to the synergy that generates new ideas and programs. The interaction that we have with the community and beyond this community keeps growing. But here in this room I am touched by the children we nurture, the parents we encourage, the elders we revere.

I take none of this for granted!

The magnitude of all this purposeful community activity astounds me, delights me, enriches me, inspires me. I am proud to belong to this Fellowship and to support it. I have enormous gratitude and appreciation for my opportunities to enjoy a rich experience!

I am happy to share the responsibility to create the future. I invite you to join me.

“PRINCIPLES OF A FREE FAITH”

Introduction

This is “Stewardship Sunday,” the Sunday on which our Stewardship Committee begins asking you to consider what monetary contribution you are willing and able to make toward the financial support of this Fellowship for this coming church year. The Committee has set up neighborhood meetings to which you have been, or shortly will be, invited, in which you will have the opportunity to hear what the needs are and what the approach is.

This year is an especially important year in the life of this Fellowship. It is also somewhat different in regard to our financial commitment, because this year you will be asked to consider not only pledging toward the annual operating budget as usual, but also to consider an additional pledge to the building project, which, it appears, will need about \$200,000 to build what is currently on the drawing board. \$50,000 of that amount has already been raised as matching grant.

Because of the importance of this year, the Stewardship Committee asked me if I would speak directly to the subject of stewardship, which, as they knew, was not something that I have done before here at QUUF.

And, actually, perhaps a little surprisingly for a minister of some thirty years, I have never spoken from the pulpit on the subject of financial stewardship. I have testified on many occasions to the value and meaning of the liberal approach in religion – and this is what I had set myself to do this morning, under the title, “Principles of a Free Faith” – but I have never before talked directly about money, what place it has in our lives, and what that this might mean with respect to this Fellowship.

Three personal reasons for not addressing financial stewardship

Part of the reason I have never talked directly about money is because I didn't have to. For most of my ministerial career I was an associate minister in a congregation of about 1800 members that had both a senior minister and

one or two other associate ministers beside myself. My responsibilities were primarily in parish work, adult education, and in the pulpit, so I didn't have to directly worry about the finances of the organization, which, quite frankly, suited me just fine. The senior minister ultimately had to be concerned about the financial health of the institution, and one of the other associate ministers – not me – worked directly in that area.

The approach of one of the senior ministers with whom I worked for some years – and I worked as an associate minister with three different senior ministers in all – the approach of one of them, who probably influenced most in this area, was basically: “If this is your place, your religious community, and it means something to you and you believe in it, then, by God, support it – financially. And if this place doesn't mean much to you, then don't.”

And that has been pretty much my attitude and approach. I'm not keen about trying to talk people into believing things they don't really believe, or in ramping up support for things they don't really want to support.

And then a second reason why I have never spoken about money and the financial stewardship of a religious institution before, I suppose, is because my own livelihood was largely dependent upon the money that was raised. And to encourage people to give to the organization that financially supported me could easily be construed as being self-serving. We have enough bad examples on television and elsewhere of clergy enriching themselves at the expense of those who could ill afford it.

However, as I have considered this reason, I find it isn't quite as compelling as I have assumed it was, and I may have been using it more as a way out of getting out of something I preferred not to do. Countless people raise funds for the organizations that pay their salaries. And if you believe in something, and if you believe your labor has value with respect to that, why not be willing to put yourself on the line for it.

And then perhaps a third reason why I haven't spoke on the subject is that I didn't think I had anything in particular to say about the subject. Money, at least so I have thought, has not been of particular interest to me. Certainly, I didn't go into this profession to accumulate financial wealth. I have been happy enough to be able to do something I liked to do and to have enough money to live on from that work. How many persons are so privileged?

But, again, as I have reflected on this third reason for not speaking about money and our stewardship of it, I also don't find it a very compelling reason – and, again, more likely a dodge than anything else. My reason for not talking about money is probably the same as it is for a lot of people – it's a taboo subject, and perhaps just because of it is so important, relating, as it does, to almost every aspect of our lives. Probably, I have all kinds of thoughts and opinions about money and our use and stewardship of it, I've just been reluctant to explore the subject.

But this morning, with the encouragement of the Stewardship Committee, I'm going to start exploring it. And I feel in doing so, as in my reading from the text of Sarah Walker, that I'm stepping more fully into a role of adult responsibility, a process, it seems – I'm sixty now – that never quite ends.

Money as a measure of value

In considering the subject of money, money, as my Webster's Dictionary says, is a "measure of value" for us. Typically, money is the primary means in our society by which we seek and obtain what we value, whether that be basic necessities for our survival or, beyond that, those aspects of life that have to do with greater self-development and self-realization, including reaching out to a larger community of life and being.

The word "money" itself comes from an Indo-European root word – "*me*" or "*men*" – which means "to measure." Says David Appelbaum:

Money is the yardstick of value in the exchange of one thing for another.... Money brings things of different value together without becoming one or the other." (Statements originally from the magazine, Parabola, here quoted in The Abundance of Our Faith, p. 149)

So money is a measure of value – and a measure of what you value and of what your values are.

And, thus, one way of determining what you actually value – not what you profess to value, and not what you might like to think you value, but what you actually value – is to look at your checkbook, or look at your credit card statement.

Look at yourself, in other words, through the lens of money. How do you spend the money that you have? And how *would* you spend your money if you had more of it? This will give you a measure of what you value and what your values are.

Money and religion

And this is where religion and money meet ... because religion, as I have defined it on numerous occasions, has to do with what is of greatest value for us. And it has to do with the sorting out of values and priorities in our lives.

Says philosopher of religion Frederick Ferre, “Religion is one’s way of *valuing* most comprehensively and intensively.”

(Basic Modern Philosophy of Religion, p. 69)

Thus, whatever it is that you value most comprehensively and intensively, that is your real religion – whether or not you profess it, whether or not it is connected to some organized or institutional religion.

Indeed, you sometimes hear it said of a given individual, “Making money is so and so’s real religion” ... which is to say, this is what the person values above all else.

I have argued from this pulpit that as a species we humans are religious beings – all of us – in this broad sense of needing to determine what values we will live by, what we will devote ourselves to, and what our highest allegiances and ultimate loyalties will be.

And this is where religious organizations and institutions, such as ours, come into play. Religions organizations come into being, first of all, as an attempt to deal with our concerns about what we should we ultimately value and how we should live in the face of that.

So far as I can see, religious institutions are the only organizations in society that are designed to deliberately take on these questions of value. Now whether they do that well or badly, and what particular answers they give to those questions of value – those are different issues. But religious institutions are those organizations that set themselves, first and foremost, to ask:

What are we in this vast reality, and how should we live our lives in the face of this?

What does life ask of us?

To what should we devote ourselves?

How do we serve life?

What should we value?

Now, religious organizations are much more than that as well, for they not only ask these questions of value, but as communities they also try to live out those values to which they aspire.

But ours is a religious community that is quite different in some respects from most other religious communities ... so much so that some people, both without and without, do not wish to think of this as a religious community.

But certain it is, given my definition and understanding. But the difference in a *liberal* religious community, such as ours, is that ours is a community not based on common theological belief but rather on a covenant of practice – “covenant before creed,” “right relations over right belief,” we say.

Ours is a “free faith” – perhaps not what the “Stewardship Committee” had in mind for me to say today, and I’ll come to the financial cost of such a “free faith” in a bit. But probably the most important principle and value in our religious communities is the freedom of the individual in asking and answering life’s most important questions.

Religiously liberal congregations, of which Unitarian Universalist congregations are a prime example, are formed to provide a structure, a container, and an environment in which individuals are granted the largest possible freedom to reflect, to think, to ponder, to probe, to question, to doubt, to search, and to re-search. Here we seek to build, guard, and defend the structures that allow for freedom of thought and individual conscience.

And, personally, it is this freedom of religious and philosophical exploration that has drawn me to the Unitarian Universalist approach – the give and take that I find here, and the freedom as a minister to take that exploration into the pulpit, and not to have to lock it up on Sunday mornings.

In the brochure that the Stewardship Committee has sent out for this year's Annual Campaign, there is a lengthy quote from The Rev. John Wolf that gives a number of reasons why one would join a Unitarian Universalist congregation.

He begins by saying that one would join such a congregation to support it. And one of the reasons you would support it is because "... it has a free pulpit. Because," as he says, "you can hear ideas expressed there which would cost any other minister his or her job."

That doesn't mean, of course, that a minister can intemperately say whatever comes into his or her head to say, nor that a minister may cavalierly disobey the canons of common courtesy, but what it does mean is that ministers in our congregations are encouraged to bring to their congregations what is in the deepest places of heart, soul, and mind. This is a rare privilege and, believe me, I value it a great deal.

A little story

I have a little story to tell from John Wolf, the author of the Stewardship campaign brochure quotation I just gave you. John was for many years the senior minister of the All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, one of the largest congregations in our Association. And now for many years he has been the emeritus minister there. In 2001-2002 I served as the interim minister of the Hope Unitarian Universalist Church, also in Tulsa, a congregation that John Wolf organized.

So while I was there in Tulsa, I had the opportunity one day to have lunch with John. And the main thing I remember from that lunch is a joke John told on his colleague, Bill Gold, who a number of years before had been a much beloved minister at the Hope Church, where I now serving as interim minister.

Bill Gold was a confirmed Humanist, and had not much patience for the theistic approach. And so, as John Wolf tells it, when a visitor would stop in at Hope Church, Bill would meet the visitor at the door, and the first thing out of Bill Gold's mouth was the question, "Do you believe in God?" "Uh, no," the visitor would reply. "Too slow," Bill would say, "go to All Souls."

This is not exactly the spirit of theological inclusiveness one would hope to foster in our communities, but it's too good a story to pass up – and I doubt that it's literally true, anyway.

Financially supporting QUUF

So what we're talking about on this Stewardship Sunday is financially supporting the organization that has to do with addressing our questions of highest value and concern, of encouraging a free and open exchange on those values and concerns, and in creating a living, loving, and vibrant community that lives out the values of freedom and toleration that we corporately share, and which seeks to foster the highest, the deepest, and the best in all persons individuals and communally.

And the question today is what value does this community have for you and how much of your money, which is measure of value for you, are you able and willing to commit to this community.

One of the tensions in determining this – a necessary and healthy tension, I believe – is the tension between self-reliance and community, or between independence and interdependence.

Thus the question is: How much of your money and resources should you properly devote to maintaining and developing yourself and the life of your family, and how much should you devote to the larger community?

Individually, of course, we are little without a larger community; and, conversely, a community is in trouble if the individual members are not maintaining and caring for themselves.

Sometimes it is suggested by religious leaders and others that the quest for financial security on the part of individuals and families is a bad thing. I was, therefore, struck by a statement by a ministerial colleague of mine who wrote that such a notion goes against our nature. He says:

“If our religious or political ideologies have suggested that the quest for financial security and well being are misguided, wrong, or sinful, I submit that such ideologies violate a realistic understanding of human nature. They will inevitably fail. It is not money – or the quest for

money – that disrupts and distorts us. It is the idolatry of money, and the gain of money by corrupt means.”

(Rev. Gary Blaine, The Abundance of Our Faith, p. 45)

And, further, as this colleague suggests, having some financial security provides a base out of which we are able to be generous. He says:

“One of the most devastating problems with poverty is that it limits or denies the poor the opportunity to be generous.”

(Rev. Gary Blaine, The Abundance of Our Faith, p. 46)

Now, obviously, not every person who has financial security will be generous to the larger community, and not every person of little means will be tight-fisted with respect to the larger community – far from it. The point here is that it is not wrong to seek and to be concerned about financial security for yourself or your family. It is natural. It is healthful. It is part of the polarity of self and community.

Community values

And now to turn to the other side of this polarity; the community aspect, the aspect of interdependence.

Ours is a Fellowship that is, and has been, concerned not only for itself, but which has seen itself as part of the larger community.

As I read the history of this Fellowship, at each step along the way where there was a choice of pulling back and becoming insular or of reaching out and extending ourselves, the choice has been made to reach out – to provide a home for those seeking a “free faith,” and to provide a center from which the values of liberal religion could make their way into the larger community.

Our religious principles and values are not to save ourselves from the world, but to cherish and appreciate this world, and to try to leave this world a little better for our having been here.

In my preparation this past week, I came across a strange, little story of generosity. It’s the story of a woman on a subway train in New York City, where, as she was entering the crowded subway station having just left the

subway train, she realized she was holding only one of her gloves. She looked back into the subway car and saw the matching glove on the seat, but it was too late to rush back and retrieve it. Then, suddenly, just as the doors began to close, she flung out her arm and tossed the remaining glove onto the seat alongside its mate. The doors shut, and the train pulled away.

(The Abundance of Our Faith, p. 55-56)

The author of this little story says of it:

That looks like a frivolous gesture – gratuitous, spontaneous, spur of the moment. But you know she must have lived a long life of generosity, a life of wild and creative generosity of spirit, to be able to think so quickly, to act so urgently and healthily, to know precisely in that moment what would bless the world right then and there. It happened in an instant, but that was planned giving, through and through.

(Rev. Victoria Safford, The Abundance of Our Faith, p. 56)

Here in this Fellowship we would strive to embody, individually and corporately, such a spirit of spontaneous generosity and liberality – where our core identity is not a given set of theological beliefs but instead a “radical hospitality,” and where we are known by the quality of our relationships.

(The Abundance of Our Faith, p. 86)

Conclusion

In my earlier reading from Sarah Walker, she spoke of the risk she felt a little over ten years ago when the Fellowship decided to reach toward the future. At that time the Fellowship decided to build something together – not for themselves alone – that involved commitment and risk. And they found in the process that there were many in their group willing to join in that venture and adventure, that they came closer together during the process, not without conflict, and that indeed there were many others in this area who did want to be part of such of a spirited community – many of you here today.

It seems to me that this Fellowship is now at a similar juncture, with many new faces and in some respects a different Fellowship. But again we are looking to build toward the future and wondering in these uncertain economic times whether we have the resources to pull this off.

With regard to what your part might be in this future, let me end with a final story that I came across in my preparation this week.

Typically, I don't like to think of a congregation as being a "flock," and certainly not a "flock of sheep," but this is about a flock of geese, like Canada geese that fly in a V.

For years, aerodynamic engineers wondered why they flew in this formation, until they conducted wind tunnel experiments in which they discovered that each goose, in flapping its wings, creates an upward lift for the goose that follows. Thus, with each goose playing its part, the whole flock has a 70 per cent greater flying range than an individual goose flying alone. Further, when a goose begins to lag behind, the others encourage it to continue by honking it back into place. And when the goose at the head of the V gets tired, another goose simply comes forward to take its place.

(Illustration from Rev. Virginia P. Knowles, [The Abundance of Our Faith](#), pp 95-96)

I don't know if this image of a congregation being compared to a wedge of flying geese works really, but what I got from it was that we are all parts of one body with different aptitudes, different financial resources, and different roles to play at different times. And that all of us need each of us if we're going to get anywhere. We need whatever each has to contribute, whether that be little or much financially.

Let your decisions on what financial support you can offer to this Fellowship this year be made in full freedom. If you're in a position to provide a bit more financial lift to our Fellowship, that, of course, would be wonderful.

But if, on the other hand, you find, after consideration, that you are not in a position to meet the increase that the Stewardship Committee is recommending, please don't drop out of the flock. If you find you have to decrease your pledge from previous years, don't drop out of the flock. If you find you can't pledge financially at all this year, don't drop out of the flock.

This is not who or what we are. I trust it is not who or what we want to be. I absolutely hate it when individuals consider leaving this Fellowship because they can't make the financial pledge that they might like to make, or have previously made.

This Fellowship is not based on who can or cannot contribute financially. Obviously, it can do more things for itself and the larger community if it has financial resources. But this is not what this community is. Its membership is not based on financial capability, but rather on wanting to be here, wanting to be part of a welcoming, loving, caring, sharing, exploring, experimenting, and responsible liberal religious community.

Let each of us, and all of us together, bring our individual skills, our individual concerns, and our individual financial gifts to the community as a whole.

Thus, we grow. Thus, we change and develop. Thus, we meet the future, whatever that future holds for us.

Closing Words

Love is the doctrine of this church,
The quest for truth its sacrament,
and service its law.
This is our great covenant:
To dwell together in peace,
To seek the truth in love,
And to help one another.

(James Vila Blake, adapted)

Extinguishing of Chalice

We extinguish our chalice
But not the light of truth,
The warmth of community,
Or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon given by the Rev. Bruce A. Bode on Sunday, March 30, 2008. The spoken sermon, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ somewhat in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)