Lighting the Chalice (in unison)

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.

(Adapted by Peter Raible & Bruce Bode from Deuteronomy 6:10-12)

Opening Words

This day is a new day that has been given unto us,
Let us then rejoice in it and be glad;
And let us count our 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 that bind us together, giving
dignity, meaning, worth, and joy to all our days.

Responsive Reading

This past year the Board has led us in a “Charting the Future exercise.” Part of that
exercise has involved looking again at our vision and mission statements. And what you
have before you this morning in the form of this Responsive Reading is a draft version of
what they have been working on. They welcome any comments or suggestions that you
might have for them, which you can send to Nils Peterson of the Chart the Future Task
Force.

MINISTER: The mission of our Fellowship is to create a sacred space that sustains a just
and caring community. We strive to be a congregation in which:

CONGREGATION: We are a Welcoming Community that invites all interested people to
join in creating and maintaining a liberal religious congregation.

MINISTER: We are a Thoughtful Community that provides a safe and nourishing
environment in which to address life’s ongoing questions and deepen our personal
religious philosophies.
CONGREGATION: We are a Worshipping Community that gathers to reflect upon and celebrate our lives and through our services awaken a sense of gratitude and wonder.

MINISTER: We are a Caring Congregation that lovingly attends to the physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and social well-being of our members and friends, marking and celebrating the passages of our lives.

CONGREGATION: We are a Teaching and Exploring Community that blesses and supports our families, transmitting to our children our rich religious heritage. From childhood to older age, we offer a wide variety of educational, musical, artistic, social, and recreational opportunities for enriching lives.

MINISTER: We are an Involved Community that reaches out to the local community and world to engage and support social, ethical, environmental, artistic, and spiritual endeavors and concerns.

CONGREGATION: We are an Environmentally Responsible Community that understands in a deep way that we belong to the Earth, striving to walk with reverence upon it, promoting sustainable living, and seeking to heal its wounds.

MINISTER: We are a Connecting Community that covenants to deepen and strengthen our ties between our members and friends and that engages with both other Unitarian Universalist congregations and the interfaith community, local and beyond.

CONGREGATION: We are a Self-Governing and Self-Supporting Community that adheres to a democratic and deliberative process, encouraging participation from all our members and friends.

(Draft Mission Statement of the Chart the Future Task-Force, March 2015)

Reading

I will be speaking this morning about where we have come from, who we are, and where we are going as a religious community. As I read the history of this Fellowship, and as I’ve experienced it personally, at each step along the way where there has been a choice between “circling the wagons” or extending ourselves in a larger embrace, the choice has been made to try as best we can to open our Fellowship to others who, like ourselves, seek a liberal religious faith, and to provide a place from which the values of liberal religion can make their way into the larger community.

In my preparations for our service this past week, I came across a delightful, little story of “passing it forward,” a story that I had related a number of years but had since forgotten, the story of a woman in a crowded subway station in New York City who has just left her subway train, but then realizes that she is holding only one of her gloves. She looks back into the train car that she has just left, sees the other matching glove on the seat, but knows it is too late to rush back and retrieve it.
Suddenly, just as the doors begin to close, she flings out her arm and tosses the remaining glove onto the seat alongside its mate. The doors shut, and the train pulls away.


The author of this little story says of it:

“That looks like a frivolous gesture – gratuitous, spontaneous, spur of the moment. But you know [this woman] 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)

SERMON: “Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?”

Introduction

Next Sunday is “Stewardship Sunday,” the Sunday when our Stewardship Committee makes available the stewardship packets that include our financial pledge cards for the coming fiscal year that begins on July 1.

And the Sunday prior to Stewardship Sunday – this Sunday – is the Sunday that I am asked/expected to give a “Stewardship Sermon.”

At the beginning of the church year when I look over the sermon schedule for the year, this is not a Sunday of which I say, “Wow, I can’t wait to give that sermon.” A “Stewardship Sermon” for me falls into the category of: washing the dishes, vacuuming the carpet, or scrubbing out the shower.

I realize that if I were more evolved and, Zen-like, truly lived in the moment, these everyday chores of necessity would also have their depth dimension. It’s just that I’m not quite there yet.

Typically, I don’t like to spend a lot of time in our Sunday services talking about this religious organization and what it takes to make it operate. In these services I want to “do religion,” and I’d rather not deal with the organization that is supposed to assist you in “doing religion.”

Medieval philosophy

Not to put off getting to this sermon, but by way of some fun, let me say a word about where this phrase “doing religion” came from for me.

Many years back when I entered college, I was interested in philosophy. Think of it, the opportunity to be in college and take philosophy courses with learned professors who spent their time pondering, reading, and discussing the great philosophical questions of
Entering college, I was so eager to engage philosophical questions and issues that I was either going to major in philosophy or at least minor in it.

But how disappointing, then, when I started taking my philosophy classes, because, so far as I was concerned, they didn’t engage real philosophical questions. They talked about philosophy, or gave the history of philosophy, or taught the logical rules for doing philosophy, but for me they never really dug into the philosophical questions that I was so interested in and curious about.

Well, then, one semester, late in my college career, I had to take a “Medieval Philosophy” course, a class I had put off, because of all the philosophy courses, this one looked the least appealing of all … “Medieval Philosophy – how, how … “medieval.”

But, for a college philosophy major or minor, it was, of course, a required class, so I had to take it.

And I remember, then, coming to the first day of class. Apparently, the regular college professor of medieval philosophy was on a sabbatical leave, or perhaps no one else in the philosophy department wanted anything to do with medieval philosophy either … because the professor sent to teach it was an old man borrowed from the theological school that was on our same campus as the college. He was an old guy, probably just a few years younger than I am now, and he was going to be our instructor in medieval philosophy. Great!

So this old guy comes into the first class, and the first thing he said to us was something like, “In this class, we’re not going to talk about philosophy; we’re going to ‘do philosophy.’”

I was electrified! My eyes flew open. “Yes! This is what I’ve been waiting for. I want to ‘do philosophy.’”

And “do philosophy” we did. We engaged – we tore into – the questions of those old and odd medieval philosophers. Who could believe that medieval philosophers had questions and concerns that might have relevance for our “modern” age?

But in the hands of this old man – a man who had perhaps himself lived in medieval times – the great life-questions came alive, and we “did philosophy.” It was the philosophy course I enjoyed more than any other.

“Doing religion” on a Sunday morning

So this is where the phrase “doing religion” came from for me – an adaptation of “doing philosophy.”
And, normally, as I say, on a Sunday morning, I want to “do religion.” I want us to enter as deeply as we can into the questions, concerns, and issues of heart, mind, body, soul, and spirit, questions like:

  How are we connected and related to the infinite power of all being, and how should we live in the face of this?
  How do we live a meaningful personal life, and how do we build a decent community, society, country, and world?
  What are we called upon to serve, and to whom or what ought we give our reverence and allegiance?
  And how are we part of the whole, and how is the whole part of us?

These are some of the essential religious issues and concerns to be wrestled with, responded to, sung about, and celebrated on a Sunday morning; and I prefer not to have to deal any more than I have to with the organization that supports this enterprise.

**The religious organization as a vehicle**

I make this comparison: I think of this religious organization as a “vehicle of transport” – like an automobile or a ship or an airplane. The purpose of such vehicles of transport is to get you somewhere.

And so you want to spend as much time as you can in actual travel, movement, and transport. You want to move, not tinker any more than you have to with the vehicle that will help you move.

**The necessity of the vehicle**

And yet, of course, there’s no movement without the vehicle. The vehicle is a necessity, a prerequisite, for going someplace. No vehicle; no movement.

And so, joking aside, truly the care of the vehicle ought also to be part of “doing religion;” it also ought to be part of one’s “religious practice.”

**An “institutionalist”**

I was recently impressed with something that Carolyn Salmon, our Board president, wrote in one of the Stewardship missives that has just come out. She described herself as “UU institutionalist,” consciously recognizing that for herself her primary form of service and devotion was related to tending to the infrastructure of this Fellowship … which, incidentally, she does beautifully. In other words, this kind of attentive devotion and care is a large part of her “spiritual practice.”

So I try to learn from Carolyn and from so many others in this congregation who are devoted to the organizational aspects of this place.
And, since a great deal of my time is also spent tending this “vehicle of transport,” I, too, would endeavor to see and experience this institutional care as being as much a part of “doing religion” as leading these services, facilitating adult religious classes, visiting the sick, doing counseling, and so forth.

**Care for the religious organization**

So let me talk for a bit about the care of this “vehicle of transport,” and what it needs to keep running, and perhaps even what will allow it to run a little more efficiently.

I’m dividing our “vehicle-care” into three parts, based on the questions from an 1897 painting by the French painter, Paul Gauguin, the questions that were sung in the first hymn of our service today: “Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?” And I’m applying these questions, not to our species, but to this religious organization, the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship.

1) **Where do we come from**

So, “Where do we come from?”

This religious organization is relatively young, not quite forty years old.

And its history, it seems to me, can be divided into four main parts, each of them of roughly ten years duration.

1) The first part dates from 1976 when 15 persons, averaging in their late 60’s in age, responded to a newspaper ad in the Leader that read, “Unitarians? Come for coffee and conversation, Sunday February 8.”

This group began meeting, then, monthly, in Port Hadlock, 4pm, in the living room of Jeanette Earhart. They listened to recorded sermons and discussed Unitarian history and matters of current interest.

2) The second part dates from January 1985, when the group began meeting twice monthly, still in the afternoons, in the Tri-Area Community Center in Chimacum. They named themselves the “Quimper Unitarians” to indicate that they came from all over the Quimper Peninsula.

In September 1986, they affiliated with the national organization of Unitarian Universalists when Lars Watson, our first Board President, traveled to Boston with his wife, Lucille, to pick up the QUUF charter from the offices of the Unitarian Universalist Association at 25 Beacon Street in Boston. There were 22 charter members.

In 1987, they held their first religious education classes and within a year, to accommodate families, moved to Sunday morning meetings rather than in the afternoon.

In 1988, Kathy Stevenson became the first paid staff member, very part-time.
3) The third part – moving quickly – can be marked as beginning in 1995, when the membership of 54 persons committed to building both a sanctuary and a religious education building and to hiring a ¼ time minister. Rev. Tim Haley, commuting from Portland twice a month, became their first minister in September 1995, and the building project, with a tremendous amount of volunteer labor, was completed in May, 1997 here on this spot where we now reside.

4) The fourth part – moving even more rapidly – can be marked as beginning in the fall of 2005 and lasting to the present … the fall of 2005 being the time when serious discussions began to be held relating to expanding our overcrowded buildings. By September 2009, we moved into our present office spaces, and then we moved into this, our new sanctuary, on February 7, 2010. We started the service that Sunday in the original sanctuary and, before leaving it, dedicated it as a Fellowship Hall, saying in unison:

“Grateful for all we have experienced in this sacred place, we now dedicate it to new purposes. We dedicate this room to social, artistic, educational, and recreational purposes – to coffee and community, lectures and laughter, music and merrymaking. May this room be enjoyed by members and friends, guests and visitors, serving children and adults alike. May friendship and fellowship flower abundantly in this Fellowship Hall.”

And then we processed into this new sanctuary space, singing, “Enter, Rejoice, and Come In,” led by our Board President at that time, Betty Oppenheimer, who was carrying the chalice. Putting the chalice into place, we spoke a “A Litany of Intention upon Entering Our New Sanctuary,” saying together:

INTRODUCTION (spoken by minister): In this room that has been built by our love and labor, we would speak of our vision and intentions for this place:

NORTH: May this sanctuary be a place of welcome, open and inviting to all who seek to deepen the life of the spirit.

SOUTH: May this sanctuary be a place of worship, where we awake to wonder, and in which we lift up our hearts in words of gratitude and songs of praise.

NORTH: May this sanctuary be a place of deep quiet, where we come to restore our souls, and in which we gather to seek the stillness.

And then, following a number of statements similar to the statements from this morning’s responsive reading, we said:

ALL: Grateful for the privilege and opportunity to be part of this religious community, with humility we enter this sacred place.

Hallmarks of the past forty years
The hallmarks of these past four decades of QUUF history, to my mind, include the following basic aspects:

- a can-do attitude on the part of the membership;
- an emphasis on financing youth religious education;
- a generous spirit of looking to the good of the whole before the needs of the individual parts;
- outstanding volunteer lay leadership;
- a dedicated staff, most crucially, Kathy Stevenson, who has been, as I refer to her role, the “tent-pole” through major transitions.

2) What are we?

This brings me to the second question: “What are we?” … which is largely answered in what I just said. I think the responsive reading we read this morning also speaks to this question of what we are, or what we try to be … it speaks to our sense of vision and mission.

That vision has caught on with many people, and the congregation has grown because of it. Because of that growth, this congregation as gone through a lot of transition in a fairly short period of time.

Let me put this rapid development in typical organizational terms, as I have before. Congregations are typically divided into the following four divisions based on the size:

1) the Family-sized Congregation (up to 50 active members),
2) the Pastoral-sized Congregation (50-150 active members),
3) the Program-sized Congregation (150-350 active members),
4) the Corporate or Resource-sized Congregation (350 active members or more).

And one of the points made with respect to these four divisions is that the needs and interests of the members of these differently-sized congregations are met differently at each different size level. Scale makes a huge difference!

A fifth type of congregation

And this past fall, Laurie Stuart, our ministerial intern from last year, attended a conference related to her work this year as a consulting minister for a congregation on Long Island, New York. She called me and said that at this conference they were talking about a fifth type of congregation, which they called a “Transitional Congregation.”

This was described as a congregation that was in-between Pastoral-sized and Program-sized; or, actually, more accurately, it was described as a congregation that functioned as both a Pastoral-sized and a Program-sized congregation. It was 75% Pastoral and 75% Program … figures that don’t add up mathematically, but which I understood immediately at a feeling level.
And, apparently, those who study these things found that there are quite a number of congregations who fit this transitional description. And this, it seems, to me is how we are functioning: 75% a Pastoral-sized congregation and 75% a Program-sized congregation. And the question is: how long can this be sustained?

Again, Carolyn Salmon put her finger on it for me when, in the second installment of the QUUF Stewardship letter, she wrote:

“We [QUUF] are at a crossroads today where we must recognize that our infrastructure, which was built for about 200 adults, is now trying to serve almost 600 adults.”

3) Where are we going?

So this brings me to our third question: “Where are we going?”

Well, we shall see. Our Personnel and Stewardship Committees, our Staff and Board have put forward a 3-step plan that would go a long way toward bringing our infrastructure up to where it will support and sustain the current level of membership, activity, and programming.

You can find that plan in Volume II of the Stewardship E-News that I mentioned earlier in my Congregational Announcements.

The increased funding that is being requested is largely related to increased staffing.

And the increased staffing is needed to coordinate and anchor the work of the volunteer members and friends. As the programming gets more complex, an organization needs more staffing to enable the volunteer members and friends to find their place.

Also, some of our hard-working volunteers are at a point where it is time for them to take a break.

And so our infrastructure staffing hasn’t kept up with our increased numbers of members and friends and our increased programming.

**Congregational Administrator**

For example, Deborah Carroll, our ever-so-competent and dedicated Congregational Administrator, was originally hired in 2009 as the Office Administrator. However, she also brought with her skills in the financial area, where she had previously been volunteering; and so she has, from the start of her time here, been functioning in both roles.

But since then both of those areas have been ratcheted-up to the point where it is simply
too much, and we have to try to break the job into two pieces, where it would have been from the beginning except for Deborah’s skill and commitment.

**An adjustment in vision/mission**

Before I close, I also want to say a word about my own sense of where we are going … my sense of what this organization is and what it can and should be about.

From the beginning of my time with you, I’ve operated with a phrase in my head, which I’ve mentioned occasionally, of: “QUUF: A center for liberal religion on the Quimper Peninsula.”

And, to my mind, our congregation does largely fulfill that role. We are, and have been, a center for liberal religion on this Peninsula – liberal religion characterized by the principles and purposes of our Unitarian Universalist Association (and, again, this morning’s responsive reading also relates to that).

But last year and this year, as the Board has been leading us in a “Charting of the Future” exercise, I’ve come to adjust that short statement of QUUF vision/mission that I’ve been operating with over the years.

Here’s how I would now phrase it for myself – and note that this is my take on things; it’s not in any congregationally-adopted statement. But for myself I now think:

“QUUF: A liberal religious congregation engaging global change,” or: “QUUF: A liberal religious congregation on the Quimper Peninsula engaging global change.”

This adjustment for me has to do with a felt need to more directly engage the massive changes that our world is facing, and particularly as they are related to “climate disruption,” such as last week’s guest speaker, Dahr Jamail, so poignantly spoke about.

What do these massive global changes mean for us, both inwardly and outwardly? That is:

- How do we find and hold our center in the midst of such global change, and what spiritual disciplines will be helpful for us?
  - What theologies will be meaningful?
  - What rituals will steady us?
  - What songs will we sing?
  - What poems will we recite?
  - What actions will we take?
- What will these changes mean for our children and the coming generations?
- And what part can this congregation play in addressing these global concerns?

It’s not up to us to save the world, but we can do what we can do here and now and in this place to address and engage these concerns.
So this adjusted statement helps me in pointing our liberal religious community in this direction of attending to these global changes, which I regard as the defining concern of our times.

**Back to business**

But now, back to the business at hand: tending the organizational vehicle that would assist us in engaging in our tasks.

I realize that we have jumped our budget steadily over the last decade, even in the midst of a major financial downturn. And I don’t really have a good idea of what is possible for us.

And I want to say as I always do on these occasions that one’s connection here is not dependent on one’s ability to contribute financially – that’s not the kind of community we are or want to be.

At the same time, of course, to go forward, we need the financial support of all those who are in a position to financially contribute.

**Conclusion**

In the eleven years that I’ve been your minister, I’ve always been reluctant to ask for money for the support of this organization, since, of course, it directly impacts my own salary, and that has felt somewhat self-serving to me … and so I have shied away from that.

But this year, at the urging of the Stewardship Committee, I’m coming out a little more to talk about my own financial support of this place, because I’d like you to know, with perhaps greater assurance, that I do also financially support the vision and mission of this place that I talk about.

So to close this “Stewardship Sermon,” I’m going to read the brief testimonial statement that will come out in the Stewardship Brochure that you will receive this coming week. Here’s what I wrote for that brochure.

**Statement for Stewardship Brochure 2015**

“From the beginning of my time here in the fall of 2004, I’ve felt so very fortunate to be part of a community of soul and spirit that I could give my heart to – and I have. I hope it’s been obvious that this is not just a job for me.

“So while I am the minister here, I’m also a member, as is Flossie, and as members we have financially supported QUUF – it’s the organization we financially support far beyond any other – steadily increasing our financial support over the years at the visionary level of the QUUF Fair Share Giving Guide.
“I believe we are at a place in the evolution of this congregation where there is the potential to become even more than we are. That potential relates to being in a position to enable our increasing number of current members and friends, as well as our potential members and friends, to find their place of connection, interest, and service in this congregation. And to do that requires more staffing. And more staffing, of course, requires more funding.

“Toward that end, I ask you to thoughtfully consider what you can contribute financially to QUUF in the coming year, even as Flossie and I will.”

Signed: Bruce Bode

Benediction

May the faith we nourish here
And the memories we gather here
Give us hope for the future.
May the love that we share
And the companionship we feel
Strengthen us and bring joy to our hearts.
And may the blessings of our fellowship rest upon us,
This day and forevermore. So may it be.

Extinguishing of Chalice

We extinguish this 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 service given by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode on “Stewardship Sunday,” March 8, 2015. The reading and sermon, which you can listen to on this website, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)