

Oh, the Places We'll Go!
The Rev. Paige Getty
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia
Sunday, February 10, 2008

Story for All Ages: *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* (Dr. Seuss)

Reading: *The One Reason to Join a UU Congregation* (The Rev. John Wolf)

Sermon:

When it comes time each year to quantify my dedication and commitment to this congregation by writing a dollar figure on a pledge form, it feels so arbitrary. It's like trying to express the value of a *life* with a dollar figure, and of course we all know *that's* impossible. So, each year I wrestle with how to make it concrete for myself and for you. And this year, as you know from the sermon title and the Dr. Seuss book, my reflections have been focused more toward the future, our potential, where we might go, should go, need to go...

But before we go there, it's important first to recognize where we are now, to celebrate our congregation for all we are already, just as we are. To say thank you to one another for our successes.

And I'll start first with a bit of the personal, as I've been revisiting the question of why *I* am a Unitarian Universalist in the first place. Incidentally, last week I had a new insight into this question as I was reading Hallie one of her favorite books—*The Okay Book*, by Todd Parr.

It's okay to be short.
... to be tall.
... to wear two different socks.
... to have freckles.
... to eat all of the frosting off your birthday cake.
... to wear glasses.
... to come from a different place.
... to be scared.
... to wear what you like.
... to share.
... to laugh out loud.
... to cry.
... to live in a small house.
... to try new things. (chocolate covered bugs)
... to have no hair.
... to hang out in the rain.
... to be skinny.
... to be big.
... to be a different color.
... to put a fish in your hair.
... to sing out loud.
... to dream BIG.

And I realized, as I read those words—that “it’s okay to come from a different place”, “to live in a *small* house”, “to be a different color”, “to put a fish in your hair” (for goodness sake!)—I realized that I am a Unitarian Universalist because I really do believe those things, and—perhaps cynically, but perhaps merely realistically—I see evidence in the world that not all people agree with me. I believe it’s important to affirm and promote those values in the world, because I believe those values are at the heart of what it will take to civilize our society, to create peace, to *make the world better*, as our mission states. I realized that I want actively and deliberately to affirm those values for my child and to have her, in turn, affirm them in the world. And I realized that I need help affirming those things... that Hallie (and her parents) need to have those values affirmed not only in our home and our family, but that we need to immerse ourselves in a community of persons who believes that each person—*that’s you, uniquely you*—is okay in all her uniqueness, and worthy of being *fed* and *clothed* and *loved*. A community that will affirm and promote those values over and over and over, so that we have the strength to live out those values when we’re isolated and feeling alone in a crazy, sometimes hateful, chaotic world.

And if we’re going to civilize our society, transform lives, make the world better, then it’s going to take our combined and concerted effort, our sweat, our tears, (and last Saturday, some of your blood), and of course, our dollars.

If we are dedicated to a real mission in the world, then that mission has broad implications: It means we must have adequate opportunities for children, youth and adults to explore our tradition, our values, *their* values. We must provide consistently inspiring and renewing worship and other experiences that nourish our individual and communal spirits. We must be genuinely warm and welcoming to those who walk through our doors seeking that nourishment, that healing, that witness. And we must reach out and be visible and prophetic, so that those who need that nourishment, that healing, that witness, don’t have to find us by accident or happenstance.

And look at all the ways we already are doing many of those things:

- We have formed a strong Karuna Ministry team—a team of lay caregivers who are holding hands, offering hugs, listening attentively, and helping us genuinely and more consistently care for one another.
- We are challenging one another to live our values by having meaningful discussions about divisiveness and discrimination and justice-making in our world. About 60 people participated in the film and discussion series about race last month—and they brought their hearts and minds to that discussion—and now we’re in the early stages of developing a formal ADORE group (A Dialogue on Race and Ethnicity) to continue the conversation.
- You are demonstrating real commitment to this community by saying “yes” when someone asks you to contribute your time and energy to our shared ministry by being a volunteer. And we are working to better organize ourselves to be effective in running the operations of the congregation so that we can live out our mission in the world. Councils are well organized and fully functioning. This weekend, four of your Trustees on the Board committed their Friday night and Saturday to leadership training—and you are going to see a difference in their leadership as a result.
- We have gotten serious about deepening our commitment to our youth, sponsoring them on a service trip to New Orleans last year, strengthening their Sunday evening programming, and providing dedicated staff support.
- With arguably one of the best music programs in all of the UUA, Tom and Michael and an army of volunteers nurture our hearts and spirits by making music for us in worship on Sundays and at

special events; they help us to be more visible in the community with the Chalice Concert series and other performances; and they make it look and sound effortless. (It's not, of course.)

- We have reiterated our understanding of the importance of lifespan religious education by critically evaluating curricula, by reviewing that ministry's staffing needs, and by encouraging our Interim Director to try some new things... like children's chapel, which we launched last week with great success.
- We now have an endowment that helps secure the congregation financially over the long haul—with memorial gifts and a couple large bequests, it stands at a quarter of a million dollars right now. And while the goal is for at least a full million, \$250,000 is a lot stronger than the essentially-nothing we had less than a decade ago.
- Under the leadership of a small but tireless team of visionary volunteers, we launched the Cradlerock Children's Center. That was less than three years ago, and I can tell you that I agree with quite a few of you who have said it is arguably the best outreach program this congregation has ever contributed to our community—and you *contributed*, with your time and energy and labor, and start-up gifts and loans to get this business off the ground, literally from scratch! And your dollars have been well-spent. In this short time, the center has positively impacted the lives of at least several dozen children and their families, including mine, as Hallie spends four days a week with children and teachers from a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and who are, in large part, far less privileged than she. That's the kind of environment we want for her. And she loves it—every morning she says, “Going to school today?” (She's not so fond of Saturdays, actually.)

It is true... *We have brains in our heads. We have feet in our shoes. We can steer ourselves any direction we choose.* (Seuss, adapted)

From the firm strength and foundation on which we already stand, where might we go? The first place I hope we'll go is inside ourselves—individually and as a congregation—and face our fears and ask some hard, provocative questions, whose answers will demand action:

What difference do we, UUCC, want to make in the world?

Are we committed to being a fair and just employer?

What does ‘interfaith’ mean to us as a congregation, and what is our commitment to its ideals?

What does the answer to *that* question mean about our physical space?

What is our relationship with and commitment to the Cradlerock Children's Center?

And once we answer those questions, then what do I see? I see us embodying the essence of our response to the first question, *What difference do we want to make in the world?* That question lies at the heart of it all for me, and I believe for all of us who are called into relationship with one another in religious community. In general terms, I think we already have a sense of the broad response to the question, if not its particulars—we want to civilize our society, to cultivate peace on earth, or, as our mission says, to make the world better. For all. Period.

And *that's* about deepening our own sense of belonging and spirituality, so that we can bring light to the world; it's about building solid, healing relationships with one another inside the congregation; it's about growing Unitarian Universalists from birth to death; it's about recognizing our “place in the family of things”, as Mary Oliver says; it's about laughing and crying and exploring and making music with one another.

It's about *growth*. Individual spiritual growth, so that we are not complacent non-beings in that family of things. Congregational growth, as we deepen and broaden our understandings of what religious community means. And the growth of Unitarian Universalism, because it offers a healing message in a world that is broken and hurting.

I see the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia growing into a congregation of persons who all have fully embodied a vibrant Unitarian Universalist identity as a proud and enduring mark of faith, where as a result, the congregation is well-known as a principled religious community. I see that, upon hearing our name, outsiders don't say, "Huh? Unification What?", but rather say, you're the congregation that folks were talking about in the cafeteria last week; you're the ones who led the effort to secure affordable housing for service personnel in the county; I saw your signs on my commute the other day; you led a media effort to re-institute full religious freedom in our schools and government; my kid is 20th on the waiting list to get into your awesome childcare center; I saw the sign on your building that says, "This is a hate-free zone", and am going to bring my family to worship services next week!

A small group of lay leaders aren't going to sit around a table one evening and just decide to do some or all of these things, snap our fingers, and have them done. No, they will take time, and introspection, and veritable spiritual struggle. We will disagree; we will face difficult choices in distributing resources; *and* we will compromise and laugh and cry and work it out without raised voices or raised fists.

*I'm sorry to say so but, sadly, it's true that Bang-ups and Hang-ups can happen to you.
You can get all hung up in a prickly perch. And your gang will fly on. You'll be left in a Lurch.
[Then...] Somehow you'll escape all that waiting and staying. You'll find the bright places where Boom
Bands are playing.*

Do I believe that growth is part of our mission? Yes, absolutely. Because if we are making music, having fun together, wholly celebrating the transforming message of our tradition and our evolving worldview, then we won't be able to keep people away. Are we really ready for that? If we say, yes, then we've got some work to do to be truly welcoming of those newcomers.

And all of *that* is why Graham and I choose to place value on UUCC with our dollars by investing more each month to the congregation than we do to our total cable and phone bills combined, and more than we do even to Hallie's educational fund (although we contribute to it religiously, too). And in so doing, we know we are making those dollars truly sacred.

Thornton Wilder wrote (in his play "The Matchmaker"), "Money is like manure; it's not worth a thing unless it's spread around encouraging young things to grow." I'd say that at a mere 44 years old, UUCC is a "young thing", as are its children, its youth, and its 90-year-old babes, and all the hopes and dreams we have among us—hopes for transforming lives, and making a *real* difference in the world, and in my case, knowing, for our child and for ourselves, that here she and we will worship and sing and struggle and be challenged and be affirmed in all our quirky uniqueness.

If you believe that, too, then "There is only one reason for joining a Unitarian Universalist Congregation," as John Wolf said. "To SUPPORT it. Will you?"

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