

Growing In Spirit: A Homily by Rev. Roberta Finkelstein©

Sunday January 31, 2016

When Dr. Seuss was invited to give the commencement address at Lake Forest College in 1977, he must have thought long and hard about what to say to the idealistic young graduates about to leave the walls of academia and enter the real world. The poem which served as our Call to Worship this morning was his entire speech. And you have to admit, he pretty much gave them exactly what they needed – a lens of discernment to distinguish between what is genuine in life and what is hot air.

In our liberal religious search for truth and meaning we need those lenses of discernment. We may not always have Dr. Seuss to guide us, but we have something better: each other. One of the enduring legacies of the Protestant Reformation is the idea of the whole church as ministers - the priesthood of all believers. This morning we celebrate a particular embodiment of that legacy by lifting up the Connection Circles – the small group ministry in our congregation. This program is the embodiment of our ability to nurture each other, to learn from each other, to teach each other, to risk vulnerability in each other's presence, to care for each other. Small group ministry is an experience of the diversity of spiritualities, theologies, and ways of relating and being that make us the congregation that we are.

What exactly is small group ministry? On one level it is the practical application of organizational development to congregational life. Churches grow best in small groups that divide and multiply to allow for the continuous welcome and inclusion of new people by experienced church members who value healthy intimacy and have learned the art of hospitality.

On another level small group ministry is an opportunity for participants to grow their souls. Glen Turner, in a paper he wrote several years ago said, "The generic name for the concept . . . is the Meta-Church. Meta means, simply, transforming"

The fundamentals of small group ministry are simple. Set up groups with fewer than 10 people in them. 10 seems to be the ideal number for fostering both personal intimacy and a strong group identity. Convene each group with the understanding that there is always an empty chair – that is, there is always room to welcome a new person into the group. When the group gets too big, it divides into 2 new groups. This insures that people new to the church or to the program are not segregated in an 'all new people' group, but are immediately welcomed by a circle of seasoned veterans who are willing to share their group, and by extension their church,

with new folks. I'll be honest – this idea of dividing and welcoming is hard for groups that get really bonded. It is aspirational. But as I keep reminding people, that it is part of the deal when you are practicing shared ministry. It is not about me, it is about we.

The structure of the group meetings is also simple. A brief opening ritual, personal check in, introduction of a topic and a lively discussion, a check out based on each person saying, “What I liked . . . “ and “What I wish . . .”, then a closing ritual. Groups are facilitated by trained volunteers.

This structure allows all who participate place in the church where you will be known well and deeply. By checking in honestly and in trust, the group learns what is on the mind and heart of each member. From month to month the group follows the progress of heart breaks, illnesses, blossoming romances, and other life adventures. As you risk trusting each other, as you respond to each other, as you take discussions of spiritual topics to deeper levels, you grow in your UU faith.

But the real magic of the small group ministry concept lies not in the trusting or the growing or the meeting of needs. The magic is that at the very same time that you are being ministered unto you are becoming ministers yourselves. Your meaningful participation in a small group is a ministry.

At the New Member Recognition Ceremony last fall I used this quote from Napoleon Lovely. “Though our knowledge is incomplete, our truth partial, and our love imperfect, we believe that new light is ever waiting to break through individual hearts and minds to enlighten our human ways, that there is a mutual strength in willing cooperation, and that the bonds of love keep open the gates of freedom.”

A small group ministry experience can be, for you, an experience of having that new light break through, it can be an experience of finding the gift of mutual strength in willing cooperation. What a gift this practice of small group ministry is – to ourselves, to each other, to the people waiting just outside our doors for an invitation to come in! I invite every one of you to get involved in small group ministry. The registration table will be open in the Parish Hall after the service.

You heard Lisa and Barbara speak of the importance of ritual to UU's. One of the ways we embody our values in ritual is by making formal and explicit covenants. I invite you not into

covenant with the members of the stewardship team. My job as your developmental minister is to walk with you on your journey towards revitalization and renewal. I know of no better way to accomplish that than to create multiple ways for you to talk honestly with each other about your hopes and dreams for this beloved community. That is why we are vastly expanding the program of one-on-one stewardship visits this year. I wish every single pledge could be made in a one-on-one conversation. Why? Because we know that this is the single most effective way to insure that the programs and mission of the congregation will be generously funded for the coming year.

We have recruited enough visiting stewards this year to journey to approximately 100 households. They will be happy to journey to your home, a nearby coffee shop, or a quiet corner of the church to talk with you. If you are one of the households lucky enough to have been selected, please welcome the call from your visiting steward. Set up a time to get together. Engage deeply in the conversation. And then pledge generously.

We would love to increase the number of visiting stewards each year, until every single household in the congregation has the opportunity to have a one-on-one conversation.

I would now like to ask all of the volunteers involved in this year's Stewardship Journey to stand – committee members and visiting stewards. And would you all please take out the insert in your order of service and honor each other with these words of covenant?

Stewardship Volunteers: We stand before you committed to doing our best to make our shared dreams come true by asking each of you for your help in supporting the mission of The First Unitarian Church of Wilmington.

Congregation: Committed to the dreams and hopes of this congregation and understanding that nothing buys nothing, we accept the responsibility for turning those hopes and dreams into reality.

Stewardship Volunteers: We commit ourselves to preparing for each Stewardship conversation by having already made our own financial commitment and becoming knowledgeable about the goals of our annual budget drive. We further commit ourselves to contacting each of you to set up a convenient time and place for our conversations or meetings, and we commit to arriving on time.

Congregation: We commit ourselves to make time in our busy lives to have a one-on-one Stewardship conversation if asked. We commit to prepare in advance by reading the materials you have sent us, reflecting upon our relationship with the congregation, and including our partners and children, when appropriate, in a decision making process that will allow us to engage in a stewardship visit in an honest and direct way.

Stewardship Volunteers: We commit ourselves to listen respectfully to your dreams and concerns. We promise to keep private what should be private and pass along only that information that you have asked us to share.

Congregation: We commit ourselves to generosity of spirit and promise to make a financial contribution to the best of our ability.

Everyone: And together, we commit ourselves to enjoy each other's company, to respect each other's ideas, perceptions, and beliefs, and to have a good time while raising money to ensure the future health and grandest dreams of our congregation.