

Shaping the Next Generation—Together

Delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware

March 20, 2011

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A few years ago I became friends with the UU minister in Studio City California. That is right—a UU church smack dab in the middle of Hollywood. Like many place throughout the country, and especially in the state of California, the economy is hard for the struggling actors that make up that congregation. My friend told me the story of a member in the church who was desperate to find work as an actor. He would go on audition after audition and nothing would come of it. In his most desperate hour, this actor was searching the want ads in the paper, when he happen to see an article from the local zoo talking about how the zoo couldn't afford some of the most popular animals. This gave him an idea.

So the actor went to the zoo, and offered to be their monkey. It wasn't all that different from the stage really. You get into costume, you have your dialogue, and you give the people who pay their money a show. Soon he became the most sought after monkey in the zoo. All of the other monkeys seemed to want to sleep or groom each other. But

this actor got into it. He would swing on the tire, hoot and holler, and eat bananas.

One afternoon, the crowd was really into this actor's performance. He was hamming it up big time. He got on the tire swing and was taking it for a ride. He would swing out further and further, so that the tire would hover beyond the confines of the enclosure. Little did our actor friend know that beneath him was where the lions were kept. And he swung faster and faster, and the crowd was into it; loving everything he was giving them. Then the inevitable happened. He was swinging so fast, and putting so much centripetal force on the tire, that the rope snapped and the actor went flying. He landed with a thud, and when he got his bearing he noticed that he was surrounded by lions. He had fallen in, and like Daniel, he was surrounded. Most of the lions simply lazed about and paid him no mind. But one particularly active and large cat was making its way over to him. He scrambled for the exit. The lion let out a roar and charged. The actor finally broke character, and started yelling and shouting for help, for anyone to get him out before he was eaten alive. The lion was right up to him. The actor was beside himself with panic. Then the lion looked him right in the eye and said, "Hey buddy, shut up before you get us all fired."

A true story—or so I believe. Well, perhaps not by the letter of the truth, but like all good stories it is true in what it is trying to teach us. Namely that we all wear masks, our monkey suits if you will, as we go

through our day to day lives. Sometimes it is a suit that says, “I am the parent or I am the boss.” Maybe it is a suit that says, “I have it all together. My life is working out perfectly.” Even though beneath that suit you know how things are really going. Our gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered friends know all too well about these kinds of veneers. I have lived in parts of the country where it was not safe to be “out.” Who knows, perhaps for some it still isn’t.

People ask me sometimes, since the Senior Minister should know after all, what is the mission of the church. It’s a very important question. I think the mission of the church is to create a place where we can all be who we are without pretention or subterfuge. Church should be a beloved community where you are not required to wear a mask of what sexual orientation you are or who you vote for or how much money you have in order to be accepted. It is a place where we can be who we are in the most authentic way possible. If you think about it, that is a very rare thing. I would even venture to go a step further and say that we need to be who we are first and foremost with ourselves. So often the masquerade only has one audience member and ironically it’s us. Church needs to be a place where we can explore what we believe and be challenged to go deeper with our spiritual life. It is place where we are asked to continually keep growing even if that makes us uncomfortable and hard truths need to be faced. If it is in service to

health, healing, and wholeness, then that process will also be in service to the Holy as well.

That is ultimately the work of the church, and it has been a good year for us. It has been a busy year, but a joyous one. I don't know if I have ever seen a church have as much fun as we have in the past seven months. There are more classes and small groups going on, including two before church on Sundays. Caring Friends have reinvented themselves and have increased their training, their visibility and their effectiveness.

Some of the best programs this year have been multigenerational. The fall retreat was a huge success. New people went who had never been to anything at church other than worship. People came back bonded and excited about their congregation. Pretty good for just two days.

Coming out of that retreat we noticed how we needed something for young people who may not have kids. So there is a new young adult group that started just a couple of months ago. This helps folks who might feel a little isolated and lonely to see that they are other people in the church like them. That can be hard to realization to come to on your own. However, by having a young adult group with a critical mass, then you can build on that program. This is near and dear to my heart because I joined a young adult group when I first went to a UU church in

Ann Arbor Michigan. I am sure if that church hadn't made an effort to reach out to me, I probably would not have become a Unitarian Universalist.

All of this has translated in to some modest net growth over the past year. While not by a lot, we are increasing. That is huge because this past February we reported an increase, rather than a decrease, in membership to the UUA for the first time in a decade. Looking at some of our new folks, they are diverse in all the ways that Unitarian Universalists are diverse. Some of them have jumped into programs like Open Circles and some of our committees. They tell us at new member lunches and on surveys that First Unitarian Church gave them one of the warmest welcomes they have ever received.

And these are just the tangible things I can point to. People have commented to me throughout the year about the energy, and the noise, at coffee hour. It just feels like people are enjoying being together. The intangible feelings of joy, and energy, and vitality, are actually very intentional and come to us through the hard work of both paid staff and volunteer alike. These experiences come because people come to our church for the first time or the five hundredth time and get the sense that "Yes, I can be myself here and I don't have to apologize for it. I can be wounded and vulnerable, and someone here is going to take care of me. I can be naïve and small minded, and someone here is going to challenge me in love and open my heart and mind to a new way of seeing the

world.” We have these feelings, this gnawing sense of joy, vitality, and energy, because our church is fulfilling that mission to help people feel safe in climbing out of their monkey suits that they have been hiding in, and out into the real world of real community.

The thing about doing the work of the church to accomplish this mission, is that it must always be externally focused. It so easy to think only of ourselves, because we can see and relate to the people who are already among us. It is a lot harder to see and experience, and therefore be concerned with, the people who have yet to join us, who are waiting out there to find out about Unitarian Universalism but are desperate as all get out to be here. That is why you hear so much talk about radical hospitality all of the time. Radical hospitality is simply thinking about and being sensitive to the needs of the stranger. It is an attitude and culture of receptivity, yet it is ironically very active. Unless you were there nearly 150 year ago when this church was founded, then all of us were strangers here at one point. On our first day here, a week ago or five decades ago, someone made room for us at First Unitarian Church both physically but more importantly socially and emotionally. They allowed us to be ourselves and find spiritual nourishment within these walls.

Another way of thinking about how we can be externally focused with our mission is creating a culture of abundance as opposed to scarcity. Lauren Wright illustrated this in this morning’s modern

reading. When she first got them, she became obsessed with having the perfect box of crayons. She had to have control over every one in order for it to remain just as perfect as she wanted. While I am sure she had a beautiful box of crayons, I am sure she had the worst pictures in the class. Crayons are meant to be used. They are supposed to become blunt and their paper pulled back out of frequent use. That means it is a good color—your favorite color. Wright brought a lens of scarcity to her crayons. She could only envision the crayons she had and how they had to be perfect now. For a while she could not see or understand or relate to the picture she could have produced; for that is the whole purpose of owning crayons. Eventually she abandoned the lens of scarcity and perfection for a lens that saw abundance and possibility. She felt freed when she gave up the goal of having the perfect box of crayons and saw instead how exciting it was to make her vision come to life using the crayons for their intended purpose.

The other day Thomas and I were watching cartoons when a similar story was told. One of the characters in the cartoon was really cheap; he loved money and hated to spend it. In fact he loved money so much that when he was granted a wish, he wished that his money could talk to him so that they could have a more meaningful relationship. At first this character loved talking to his money because he thought they would be best friends. But soon his money started to complain to him. “I have been locked in this safe for years. I want to be spent. I want to

go to the beach and have a little child spend me for an ice cream cone so that I could see how happy I make them.” It’s a silly concept, but it leads to a good question: what is the purpose of your money? Is there something it could bring about if unleashed in the proper time and place? What would it ask you to do with it, if it could magically speak to you?

Well if you can’t think of anything right now, let me make a suggestion. I am sure you can guess where I am going with this. Making your Unitarian Universalist values real in the world is a pretty good purpose. There are some amazing things coming up this year at First Unitarian Church.

We are going to be building on Ministry of Compassionate action by expanding the size and number of our social justice groups. I am hoping to form one on GLBT issues, and some of us, as soon as this Tuesday, will be heading down to Dover when the civil union bill is introduced in the legislature. There is also an event later this year in June in which Allies for Racial Justice will be working with our friends at Canaan Baptist Church.

Many of you have already heard about the boiler that has been approved and will be installed this summer. Next year we will be applying to be officially certified as a Green Sanctuary church. But there is more work to do in addition to the boiler.

Of course there was a lot of anxiety last year around staff compensation and how that will work. Obviously no one knows for sure until the pledge drive is over, but we do plan to be staffed in such a way that we continue our growth trend. I will convey to you though a message from your Stewardship Team that they wanted to make sure everyone understood very clearly: we will NOT do a supplemental pledge drive again this year. This is it. Whatever you pledge that is all. It is fine to do a supplemental once in a great while, but we will not be making a regular habit out of asking you for pledges more than once a year. I tell people who are concerned about this staff member or that one; if everyone took the amount they gave last year to both the regular and supplemental pledge drive, added five percent—just five percent. If we all do that, then there will be nothing to worry about. Check the giving guide you got in the mail for further instructions.

Perhaps the most exciting thing for me that will be happening next year is that the Board will be defining and clarifying our church's mission and vision. The Executive Team is right now working on ways in which we will be able to clearly, consistently, and effectively communicate that vision to those people who are not yet here, but are trying to get here as fast as they can. Some of these may be happening this year or early next: a Facebook page, podcasting services, and yes the long awaited overhaul of the church's website to accommodate these features. In fact one of our newest communication outlets should be

arriving to a coffee hour near you perhaps as soon as next week. Imagine what our church would look like, how we could be transformed, but such an infusion of growth and energy.

In the Bible God makes a deal with Noah and his sons. He tells them, “I will make a covenant with you and with all of creation. I will not destroy the world again, but I am leaving creation in your hands. It is up to you to make this work for the generations to come after you.” Now if Noah had a lens of scarcity, and he thought only about the people he saw standing next to him, his sons and their wives and his wife, then humanity would have died with them. But instead the Bible says that Noah and his sons saw the world as it could be. They understood the abundance of creation and as a result each one of Noah’s sons becomes the ancestor of entire nations.

That exhortation applies to us too. We need to think and dream big for ourselves, and for those folks that will be sitting next to us next year, but are strangers to us now. That is the next generation that we need to be thinking about today. We shape the next version of our congregation with the commitments we make this afternoon. May we continue to be successful in accomplishing our mission in the next year. Let us have the dreams of nations rather than of a single family. Please be as generous as your means allow, and I thank you in advance for that generosity. Amen Blessed Be.