

One Strong Body

Gathered here in the mystery of the hour,
Gathered here in one strong body,
Gathered here in the struggle and the power,
Spirit draw near. – Philip A. Porter

The big snowstorm on Friday—many things to many people: for some it was a day of peace, a day of solitary pleasures, a day of welcome relief from the usual round of errands and chores; for others, a day of worry and effort with many challenges, a day of being called outside to take care of whatever the storm required: shoveling, driving, extra duty at work, concern for loved ones traveling.

Stuck indoors with our nearest and dearest or all by our lonesome, those of us who were lucky enough to get a Snow Day hunkered down, and those who had to go out came home as soon as possible. Some of us went out to play in the snow. All of us felt the presence of the snow as it fell unrelenting out of the gray sky, hour after hour, covering trees and roads and houses, silent and beautiful, releasing us from our ordinary lives.

For everyone, a snow day is a time to regain perspective, a day reduced to whatever needs to be done, a chance to let the rest go. And snow days remind us that we are not, in the end, in control. The universe does not bend to our will. In February, here in

metropolitan New York, a snow storm will come without our permission and turn our days around.

Let us not wish away the winter. It is a season to itself, not simply the way to spring.

When trees rest, growing no leaves, gathering no light, they let in sky and trace themselves against dawns and sunsets.

The clarity and brilliance of the winter sky delights. The loom of fog softens edges, lulls the eyes and ears of the quiet, awakens by risk the unquiet. A low dark sky can snow, emblem of individuality, liberality and aggregate power. Snow invites to contemplation and to sport.

Winter is a table set with ice and starlight.

Winter dark tends to warm light: fire and candlelight; winter cold to hugs and huddles; winter want to gifts and sharing; winter danger to visions, plans, and common endeavoring—and the zest of narrow escapes; winter tedium to merry-making.

Let us therefore praise winter, rich in beauty, challenge, and pregnant negativities. – Greta Crosby (SLT # 543).

In a couple of weeks the Fellowship will gather for the sacred work of creating a new vision and mission. Late winter, very early spring, is a perfect time for “visions, plans, and common endeavoring.” The meeting is on Saturday, March 8, (not on March 9 as it says on the front page of the newsletter), and I know that many of you have already signed up. If you have not yet made your

commitment to this important congregational gathering, it's not too late, but we must hear from you soon.

During the weekend, we will come into the presence of three Big Questions and turn them like the facets of three precious jewels: Who are we? Why are we here? Where are we going? These are religious questions, by which I mean they are about ultimate things, and they will provide the structure for a holy conversation. We will listen deeply to each other.

One of our goals for the Mission/Vision process is to include everyone in the congregation: children, youth, and adults. I was talking with the Youth Group advisors last week, trying to work out the best way to involve our young people, and they told me the kids had asked about the context. Were we going to be talking about the Youth Group or about the whole Fellowship? Exactly the question you would expect from a wonderful and gifted group of adolescents: Is this about *me*? about *my* group?

Well, no. It's about all of us; the Mission/Vision weekend is a conversation about the entire the congregation, about the Fourth Unitarian Society of Westchester in Mohegan Lake.

And it's one of those conversations we can only have with everybody in the room. Just as you can't be a Unitarian Universalist

by yourself, so you can't articulate the identity, values, mission, and vision of a UU congregation unless you get everybody in the same room to talk about the three Big Questions.

Unitarian Universalists don't have bishops or a religious hierarchy or a single spiritual leader who will tell us who we are, why we exist, and where we are going. Our congregations govern themselves, and so each congregation must answer these questions for their own faith community. The answers are different for each UU congregation, and the answers for this congregation today are not the same as they would have been if you had asked the 4th UU congregation of five years ago, or ten years ago, or twenty years ago. Congregations change, and so we ask the questions again.

Perhaps the most important things I can tell you about the Mission/Vision process that will unfold on the weekend of March 7, 8, and 9 is that it's going to be a lot of fun. The work is serious, weighty, sacred business, and we're going to be doing the things we like best: talking and listening to each other. We will also be eating well, which is in the great tradition of good food practiced here at the Fourth Unitarian Society for many generations. Wear comfortable clothes. Bring your courage and your honesty, and

please don't forget your sense of humor. We are going to have a very good time.

So the First Big Question is about identity. Who are we? Unitarian Universalists are famous for marching to a different drummer, following the advice of our UU ancestor Henry David Thoreau. We celebrate diversity, encourage uniqueness, and privilege the individual. Our First Principle says we covenant to affirm and promote "the inherent worth and dignity of every person." Because we are a religion without a creed, we raise a big theological tent to shelter people who hold many different beliefs. It is said that trying to move UU's in the same direction is like herding cats. We are called to individual responsibility for our beliefs, our spiritual development, and our actions. And, at the same time, we recognize that we cannot develop in isolation, that we need others in order to become our best selves.

Unitarian Universalists come together in religious community because we are also called to be in relationship with one another and to be responsive to the injustice in the world. The Second, Third, Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh UU Principles are relational: "Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations; acceptance of one another...the use of the democratic process...the goal of world

community with peace, liberty, and justice for all; respect for the interdependent web of life of which we are a part.”

People out there in the world, civilians, non- UU’s, people of other religious persuasions, often misunderstand who we are. Somebody said to me last week at a party, “Oh, all UU’s do is demonstrate.” I was glad that my friend got the part about our social activism because that is an important part of who we UU’s are. But I was sorry she had us in such a narrow little box, and because I was a guest at her party, and I was full of good food, and it was late, I didn’t try to enlarge her vision.

If I had, if I had said one thing to add to her understanding of what Unitarian Universalism is, I would have said we believe that revelation is not sealed. As my colleague Daniel O’Connell puts it: “The UU faith *requires* conversion and transformation.” (“Unitarian Universalism: the Religion,”) We do not stand still. We continue to grow, to change, and we are open to new knowledge, to new experience, to new life as long as we are alive. Revelation is not sealed.

Another important aspect of this congregation’s identity is that it has always been a small congregation. This month we certified 70 members for the annual UUA census, a number that has

been fairly constant over the last few years. Five years ago, the congregation certified 58 members.

Writing about the special qualities of congregations like ours, David R. Ray holds up the value of smaller scale. “What does a smaller church offer the bigger, high- tech world? Smaller churches offer high touch. They offer a place of belonging to those who feel like refugees. They offer community to those who feel isolated or estranged. They offer opportunities to make a difference to those who feel superfluous. In a world full of sickness, they offer healing and wholeness. In a world imploding in its own complexity, they offer a simple place where people feel like they’ve arrived where they ought to be.” (*The Indispensable Guide for Smaller Churches* 61).

Fourth Unitarian Society’s identity as a small congregation helps answer the Second Big Question: Why are we here? Why do we exist as a congregation? Week after week, year after year, the congregation gathers for worship. We sing together, we talk and listen and listen and talk and talk to each other, we teach our children, we cook for each other and eat together, we build houses together, we put together an incredible tag sale, we raise money to

support the life of this congregation and for people who are suffering, we do an amazing number of things—but why?

What is the purpose of all this energetic activity? Why does the Fourth Unitarian Society of Westchester in Mohegan Lake exist?

Answering this question will give us our mission.

Mark Morrison- Reed wrote, “The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice...The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.” (*SLT* # 580).

These beautiful words speak to Rev. Morrison- Reed’s understanding about the reason for the existence of our congregations. I don’t know how long ago he wrote those words or which congregations he was thinking about. They seem good words to me—I love especially this idea that we are more together than we are alone.

Together on the weekend of March 7, 8, and 9, this congregation will put together their words that will say what you believe about why this congregation exists today.

Coming to agreement about these words will be a challenging part of the weekend. We will practice consensus building, and we will progress through many drafts to the final version of our mission statement. Each of you will have the opportunity to experience the maturing pleasures of reaching agreement through compromise. It is true, as Mary Grigolia says in her song, that we have come to our own conclusions, and it is also true that we can walk arm in arm, facing in the same direction, moving toward a common goal.

As the congregation's mission becomes more and more clear, then you will begin to answer the last Big Question: Where are we going? Once you know who you are and why you exist, the next steps will become more clear.

What will our shared ministry look like as the congregation moves forward? I was reading the real estate ads in the back of the Sunday *New York Times Magazine* a couple of weeks ago, and I found a perfect picture of what I hope the congregation will NOT become in the next few years. Perhaps you have seen these ads.

Huge fancy estates with stables and lots of acreage, impossibly expensive apartments on Fifth Avenue, exclusive beachfront properties. So this was an ad for a private island somewhere in the Caribbean, a place called the Abaco Club, and the ad copy said, “Nature’s perfect playground for the chosen few.” I took a pen and wrote No! right across the pretty picture of the thin blonde woman frolicking in the surf.

Because if we Unitarian Universalists believe anything—and we do—it’s that the good life belongs to everyone. We believe that all people deserve and are entitled to life, liberty, justice, peace, and love. We believe in trying to create heaven right here on earth, not just for the chosen few. For everyone.

The Abaco Club is the capitalist version of Calvinism: salvation, a wonderful life forever, for the chosen few. That’s another thing I could have told my host at that party: Unitarian Universalists believe that everyone is saved. I was in the hospital recently, wearing my clerical collar, and a patient in the room across the hall from where I was visiting growled at me as I walked past his door, “Saved any souls today?” No. I don’t save souls. Unitarian Universalists believe that all people can be saved. We believe that nature’s perfect playground belongs to all of us.

And so my question about the ministry we will share for the next few years is this: how can we open our doors and our hearts to embrace more people? We do not want to be the chosen few here on Strawberry Road. We have good news to share, a healing message for a wounded world, and we need to find more ways to get it out there.

I am confident that your Mission/Vision weekend will move this congregation to greater clarity and purpose. My wish for you, my prayer for you, is that you will carry the great legacy of the first fifty years into a new commitment to this community and to our Unitarian Universalism faith. It's not a faith for the chosen few. It's a faith for all those who hunger for a religious home where each person is dedicated to love, to peace, to the search for truth, to service and to justice.

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