

But Before I Go....

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As you probably know by now, this is the final sermon I shall preach before I leave for my sabbatical. My plans, as some of you know, involve moving to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, where Beverly is serving as interim minister. There I anticipate spending some time trying to put some things into shape for possible publication. In addition, I will be working on an outline for a course in Unitarian Universalist Polity, which I have been asked to teach for Unitarian Universalist students at Drew Theological School in the fall; I will be preparing a series of workshops on Universalist History for the Unitarian Universalist Mid Atlantic Community which meets this summer; we will be making a trip to England in March; and beyond that, I am trying to leave some time free for unguided reading and random reflection. My hope is to return to this pulpit in September not quite as tired as I am leaving it this January.

I must admit that I am eager to get myself packed up and started on this new adventure. I must also admit that I depart with a strong sense of incompleteness. This church is an exciting institution at this moment in its history. In many ways we seem poised on the brink of important new opportunities and possibilities, and I must confess that I am a little uneasy about not being here to participate in what I anticipate will be a critical period in the shaping and molding of the future of this institution. This winter and spring this church will be making decisions which will determine our future for some time to come. It is a little difficult to accept that the clock will not stand still, must not stand still, and while I will not be here to participate in the process, the decisions and the choices will be made, nonetheless.

One one level, that is as it should be. Unitarian Universalists take great pride in a rich heritage of congregational polity--that style of church governance which decrees that the final authority, the ultimate decision-making power rests not with bishops and an external hierarchy, not with clergy and religious professionals, but with the lay people--the men and women whose commitment and concern and financial support bring the church into being and sustain it over time. In many ways, a sabbatical is not only a time when a minister has an opportunity for renewal and rediscovery of the meaning of religious vocation, it is also a time when a congregation may experience a renewed sense of its own power and be reminded that the church does not belong to the minister but rather to the people. It is appropriate that important and necessary decisions be made in my absence; for, in truth, it is in your hands that the future of the Unitarian Church in Summit rests.

Having said that, however, I must add that I recognize that the role of a minister is not inconsequential in the life of a church. Just this week, I was meeting with one of our

young men who is working on a Religion in Life badge in scouting. As part of that program, he was required to interview the minister. After the mandatory questions about what a minister does, and what education the ministry requires, and what ministers are paid, he looked at me and asked, could I describe my function in two or three words. It was one of those simple questions that go to the heart of things. After a pause, I found myself saying that the minister is a catalyst. In chemistry, a catalyst is a agent which is necessary if a chemical reaction is to occur, but which does not enter into the reaction. A catalyst makes it possible for things to happen, but remains outside the happening. That is very much what ministry is about. By the nature of the profession, the minister enters into a community which already exists, and in time leaves that community. The minister's function is to provoke, to challenge, to suggest alternatives, to anticipate needs, to urge new approaches, to bring together people and circumstances and challenges and opportunities and allow the community to respond. The minister is important to the process by which the life of a congregation develops, in the same way a catalyst is to a chemical reaction. Consequently, being aware of my responsibility as minister to this congregation, there are a few things I want to say before I take my departure. And I say these things, not as instruction, but as the means by which I maintain my role in the interaction which defines this church at this moment in its history. You have the ultimate responsibility and authority. I have been charged by you to remind you, as you make your decisions and choose your future, of the tradition out of which this church has grown and the imperatives to which it is answerable and of the opportunities which lie before us.

The first thing I want to say is that this church stands at a moment of great opportunity. Over the course of this church year we have broken several significant barriers. I would remind you that our Sunday morning attendance is nearing two hundred people in the two services. Four years ago, our attendance was hovering around one hundred and thirty. Our church school attendance which was approximately thirty five or forty four years ago, is nearing one hundred on a Sunday. If you combine those figures, and add the twenty-five or so people who teach in the two sessions of church school each week, it is clear that we are involving approximately three hundred and twenty-five people in our program each Sunday morning. That, by the standards of Protestant churches in this country is a good-sized church, and by Unitarian Universalist standards, a large church. Indeed, 80% of the Protestant Congregations in country are smaller than we, when judged by average Sunday attendance. According to Lyle Schaler, leading authority on church life, we have crossed the barrier into the status of awkward-sized church--too large to function in the old ways but not yet convinced that we have the resources or the need to make fundamental changes.

Fortunately, there is no sign that we have come to some kind of limit on our ability to attract and serve new people. At this point one year ago, we had welcomed a total of twenty-five new members to the church. This year we have welcomed thirty-eight. Those new members come from all over north central New Jersey. We have broken through a geographical barrier which had limited us largely to this city and the immediately surrounding communities. We have become a truly regional church. By the same token, we have broken through an age barrier. Those of you who were here just four years ago can testify to the fact that the congregation has been attracting people from all over the

age spectrum. We are not a church of young people, or of older people. We have become a church in which all ages are finding a home. We have broken through a space barrier. By adding a second service and a second church school session, we have been able to serve a larger number of people, though, admittedly there are still constraints of space and parking. We have broken through a program barrier. Though Sunday morning is still the center of the life of the church, and probably always will be, we have become a full-service church, offering programs throughout the week responding to a variety of interests and needs and concerns. And we have broken through the social barrier which once defined Unitarian Universalists as "God's Frozen People." We have discovered that we can be open and warm and friendly toward new people, that new people do not threaten but offer the possibility of an enriched congregational life when we welcome them warmly among us.

Perhaps the major barrier we have broken through is the assumption that Unitarian Universalism is only for the hardy, self-reliant, clear-headed few. We have been discovering over the past few years that Unitarian Universalism has a message which speaks to increasing numbers of people in this generation--people who are seeking a spiritual dimension to their lives but who do not find the traditional religious alternatives meaningful, people who are seeking a religious community which will support them as they attempt to build a strong family life out of diverse religious backgrounds, people who need a religious community which will not condemn them because they are lesbian or gay, people who want a religious community which encourages respect for the earth and finds religious meaning in the natural world, people who seek a religious message which is not at war with reason and with the world in which we live our daily lives, people who seek a religion which respects our right and our responsibility to seek and serve truth as we are given to see the truth, while recognizing that no truth is so sacred it may not be questioned and challenged. And, for reasons of geography, of institutional history, and grace, the Unitarian Church in Summit has found itself uniquely positioned to present that message, to offer that religious alternative, and to welcome those who are seeking such a religious faith.

Sometimes we are so close to this process that we fail to understand how very important it is, and the enormous responsibility it places upon us. As this generation begins to understand that the emptiness at the center of life cannot be filled with things, that meaning does not grow out of increased consumption, that the purpose of life must be found in something more than perpetual achievement, Unitarian Universalism offers a unique and important religious alternative, a spiritual path which honors the quest and which affirms that the sacred is to be found in the acceptance of limits and in the midst of the ordinary. We have an obligation to present that alternative as clearly and as forcefully as we can, welcoming among us all those who find in our religious vision a spiritual path which speaks to the realities of our times and to their own inner-most need. The work of this Unitarian Universalist Church is not over; it is only just beginning. The challenge before us is to determine how we can most effectively meet our responsibilities to each other and to the larger world.

That brings me to the one barrier we have not surmounted. Despite our success in

attracting new people, from all over central New Jersey, and integrating them into our congregation, we still think of ourselves as a poor, little church when it comes to matters of money. We still budget and support this church and its operations as if we were a marginal institution. And the result is that we often find we are without the resources to do the job as we ought to be doing the job. For example, for a long as I have been here, we have been reluctant to tell people outright what it costs to sustain this institution and to meet the responsibilities which fall to this largest Unitarian Universalist Church in the state. A large portion of our budget every year is supported by garage sales, by service auctions, by dinners, by sales of entertainment books, and a host of similar undertakings. The reason that income must be generated in this way is because we are convinced that the people simply will not contribute enough money to allow us to function without infusions of cash from such sources. Indeed, in the current year's budget, the Fun and Funds Committee, as we call it, has been charged with raising the equivalent of half my salary! Now we justify that approach to financing by saying that in addition to raising money, these projects give us opportunities for fellowship and community building. And to some extent it is true. But it would be a lot more fun if the health of the church were not so completely dependent upon the financial success of such operations. Or we say that this gives the community outside the church the opportunity to help support us, though why we should expect the outside community to support us, I have not yet understood, and in truth, much of the money we raise still comes from our own people.

One consequence of this approach to budgeting and fund-raising is that we never feel secure in our ability to meet the needs of this growing and vital congregation. We expect, for example, our religious education program, three times larger than it was four years ago, to function with a half-time Director of Religious Education. The truth is, of course, the only thing half-time about that job is the salary. Carol Haag gives much more than half-time to the program. We expect our custodian to continue to meet the demands of an ever more active church without significant increase in his salary, a large part of which consists of graciously allowing him to live in the apartment in Unitarian House--an apartment few of us would want to consider as a home. We expect our Office Manager to juggle an increasingly complex operation and information flow without much increase in salary and no increase in hours. And so, the staff is often running flat out, responding to the urgent rather than the truly important, and missing opportunities.

By the same token, we are so busy keeping the institution afloat fiscally, that often we have little energy or time or resources for the world outside. Increasingly, new people have been asking me how come we are always raising money for ourselves, for the church and never for causes outside the church. In truth, of course, we do raise money for causes outside the church--much of it never appearing in our budget. And fifteen thousand dollars in this year's budget is allocated for the support of the Unitarian Universalist Association. But the truth remains, our attention is riveted on keeping the wolf away from our own door, and so our efforts to respond to the needs of others is often muted and inadequate. This, in turn, makes all our expressions of concern for the poor, the helpless seem academic and anemic at best, hypocritical at worst. This is a community which can afford to support its own church and reach out to those in need, and it is a scandal that we do not.

This brings me to the dream I want to share with you this morning. In a few weeks, we will begin our annual pledge drive. This is the time each year when members and friends of the congregation are asked to indicate what level of financial support we can expect for the fiscal year which begins on July 1. The Board of Trustees and the Pledge Drive Committee have taken a courageous step this year. They are proposing a budget which does not anticipate income from fund-raising events. They are proposing a budget which will derive almost all the money needed for the operations of the church from the pledges of members and friends. The dream is that we will undertake to support ourselves financially, and that this will leave us free to use the proceeds from things like the garage sale and the services auction and church dinners and the sale of entertainment books to create a fund which the congregation, at a duly called meeting, can then determine to use to respond to issues of social justice in the larger community. At the same time, the Board is proposing that we recognize the work that Carol Haag is doing, and pay her accordingly. In addition, we anticipate that we will continue to send our full fair-share to the Unitarian Universalist Association and budget moneys to meet the immediate and long-term needs for upkeep on this building. If this is to happen, if we are to be the church we can be, if we are going to continue to reach out and welcome new people who need what we have to offer, if we are to be fair to our staff, if we are to be responsive to the larger community, if we are to find the energy to reach out to others, all of us will have to consider a significantly higher level of commitment to the church. It is estimated that to do what we feel we must do, on the average, every adult member of this church--not household, but member--needs to pledge at least \$500 for next year. Of course, some of us already pledge more than this. Some of us cannot possibly afford that level of giving. But on the average, that is the kind of support this church needs if it is to meet the challenges, grasp the opportunities, acquit the responsibilities which lie before us.

In order to achieve this goal, we have chosen to do a face-to-face canvass this year. Members of the congregation will be asked to make their own pledges to the church, and then, over the course of a week, to contact two or three other members to solicit their pledges. In order for that to happen, a great many of you need to be prepared to say "yes" when you are asked to help with the pledge drive. This is your church; its future will be what you make it. And this winter and spring, your decisions will go far toward shaping the kind of church we shall be. I believe that we have the resources to do what needs to be done. I believe that we have the vision of what this church ought to be. I am convinced that this is the year we will break through that other barrier, stop thinking of ourselves as poor, and small, and living on the edge. This is the year we will decide to embrace what we have become, a large, thriving, healthy church with commensurate responsibilities to each other and to the world outside our walls.

This may seem to you a rather crass and inappropriate final sermon before the sabbatical begins. In our culture, money is one of those topics not discussed in polite company. But in truth, if you would understand the values of an institution, the place to look is at the budget. And if you would understand what really matters to people, check out how they spend their money. In our culture, budgets and matters of finance are essentially moral statements. How we spend our money and how we raise our money defines more fully

than we might like to admit, what we value and the real commitments which shape our lives. I will say again, it is a scandal that this community chooses to live hand-to-mouth and thus fails to achieve the greatness which beckons it and fails to respond to the needs which are presented to it. This is the year to change, to break through that barrier, and this is my last opportunity to challenge you to do what needs to be done.

There is one other thing I would say, before I take my leave. This sabbatical period is a time when you have an opportunity to discover the larger world of Unitarian Universalism and discover how we, as a church, fit into that larger picture. In some ways I envy the opportunity these months offer, and that is part of the reason I am moving to Bethlehem. Were I any closer, I doubt I could resist the temptation to drop in from time to time. Five of my colleagues from the New Jersey area will be preaching from this pulpit and will be on call to respond to your needs. In addition, several ministers who have served this church in one capacity or another in past years will return for a visit. Other exciting programs of speakers and music will enrich your Sundays together. The committees and the Board are determined to keep the life of the church functioning at the usual high level. The life-span religious education program will continue in full force. The music program of the church will provide the same rich experience. The months ahead are not to be seen as a hiatus but as an opportunity to experience the church in a new way and to reclaim it.

By the same token, the church will not be far from my mind during the sabbatical period. This is not a hiatus in my ministry, but a time for assessing who I am and who you are and who we are becoming together, for revisioning our ministry together in this place, in this time, for renewing our commitment to each other and to the larger movement we represent. When I return to this pulpit in September, we shall all have been enriched by this experience, and if we embrace what it has to offer, we shall be better equipped to solidify the achievements of the past few years and to reach out to the opportunities which lie before us.