

HOPES AND DREAMS FOR REVITALIZING OUR FELLOWSHIP

Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

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Let me begin with a story borrowed from my UU ministerial colleague Patrick O'Neil. "It's the story of the Church of Scotland minister, himself a teetotaler, who gave his small highland congregation a scathing, if ineffective, sermon about the evils of alcohol. The following week, he and all his neighbors were invited to a harvest feast at the manor of the area's richest farmer, Lord MacGregor.

"Now Lord MacGregor's farm was famed not only for the prized barley and oats which it produced but also for the fine cherry brandy that old MacGregor himself bottled every year. At the end of the magnificent feast, each guest was served a glass of the cherry brandy. Not wishing to offend his host, the parson did drink his serving and found it to be quite delicious. In fact, as he took his leave that evening, he discreetly asked Lord MacGregor if he might have a case of the brandy donated to the parsonage—strictly for medicinal purposes, of course.

"MacGregor was happy to do so, on one condition—that the minister himself write a public thank-you for the gift [on] the front page of the parish newsletter. The parson thought for a moment and then agreed to do so. The next morning not one but two cases of the cherry brandy were delivered as promised to the parsonage. And as promised, the minister wrote this public thank you in the next newsletter:

The minister wishes to thank Lord MacGregor for his most generous gift of fruit to the parsonage this week. But even more importantly, we thank the Lord for the fine spirit in which it was offered!

[Patrick O'Neil, "The Shoemaker's Window," in Terry Sweetser & Susan Milnor (eds.), *The Abundance of Our Faith*, p. 36]

Some of you may recall that in my sermon just prior to our annual meeting last June, I expressed my concern that our Fellowship needed to be **revitalized** if we were to fulfill our potential as a liberal faith community in the Shenandoah Valley. At that time, in the aftermath of our successful campaign to enlarge and improve our Fellowship Hall, there were signs that we might be losing some of our energy and commitment to the future of our congregation. Our pledge campaign had fallen well short of its goal, and we were struggling to recruit leaders for our committees. In short, our collective spirit seemed to be lagging.

I am delighted to report that our members' response to that challenge has been truly inspiring. Last summer I gave a copy of a book titled *Creating Congregations of Generous People* to Ann Thompson, the incoming chair of our Finance Committee. She read it and took its suggestions to heart. The resulting "hopes and dreams" conversations that were initiated by Sharon Van Name's talk on February 21st, along with Ann's coordination of our follow-up discussions, have generated several new possibilities that our members want to pursue. They include promoting musical variety in our Sunday morning services, increasing support for our burgeoning children's religious education program, actively engaging in local community

service projects, and offering tangible support for global programs that embody our UU principles.

What excites me most is that the hopes and dreams identified by Fellowship members include not only ideas for enhancing the experiences we have **within** our congregation on Sundays, but also suggestions for widening and deepening our connections with the local and global communities that we all belong to. Our Social Action Committee has engaged our members in the interfaith Disciples Kitchen program in Waynesboro and identified projects for involving our Fellowship in the local Rebuilding Together program for rehabilitating substandard housing in our local community.

Hopes and dreams of this sort are not self-fulfilling. They require commitments of time, energy, and money from all of us who cherish our values. April and May are the months when members of our Fellowship are directly challenged to match our ideals with our actions. One tangible expression of our commitment is the pledging of our financial resources for the coming fiscal year. The whole subject of money is touchy for many UUs. There is a paradox here. On average, Unitarian Universalists are among the highest in per capita income of any American denomination, and yet we are among the lowest in giving to our congregations. One of the reasons is that many of us also contribute to other worthy causes. As true as that may be, there may also be a deeper reason that reflects our ambivalence toward money and wealth. We associate wealth with greed and undeserved influence. The resulting unspoken code is that in many UU congregations, including this one, we avoid talking about money as much as possible. We assure our members that their pledges will be kept confidential from others, including the minister. Virginia Knowles suggests that one reason UUs have a low rate of giving is that “we find it so hard to talk about money and to celebrate it as a morally applaudable channel through which to live out our religious convictions. . . . Money is recognized as the ‘bottom line’ in our culture. Our alma maters, our symphonies—all our cultural and non-profit agencies—print lists that specify the giving range in which people have chosen to be. Yet the same people who urge us to give to [these charitable causes] until it hurts—or until it feels good—these same people usually freeze at the notion of personally and directly urging someone to give more to the church, particularly if it’s a Unitarian Universalist church.” [*The Abundance of Our Faith*, pp. 93-94]

At the same time, we need to acknowledge that there are many of our members whose financial circumstances limit how much they can donate in the form of money—particularly during these difficult economic times. Nevertheless, they can donate an even more significant gift: their **time and talent**, whether as a committee leader or RE teacher or as an active participant in one of our special projects. It has been deeply gratifying to see how many of our members, young and old, have given so generously of their time for our highway trash pick-up, for Disciples’ Kitchen, for our landscaping project, for our choir, for our social gatherings. In the immortal words of Yogi Berra, **“Youz guys is the greatest!”**

Mahatma Gandhi once said, “Happiness is when **what you think, what you say, and what you do are in harmony.**” None of us, including Gandhi, are able to achieve perfect harmony between our words and our deeds, but our Unitarian Universalist tradition challenges us to pursue this goal. We are a free-standing Fellowship in a free-standing denomination. There

are no bail-outs for congregations that fail to support themselves. This is the time of year when we have the opportunity to convert our hopes and dreams into **plans and schemes**. I am confident that our members will respond to the new challenges and opportunities that we have set for our Fellowship.

Why do I say all of this to you? John Wolf, the minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, once shared with his congregation some reasons for supporting their Unitarian Universalist congregation:

“You want to support it because it stands against superstition and fear. Because it points to what is noblest and best in human life. Because it is open to men and women of whatever race, creed, color, or place of origin. You want to support it because it has a free pulpit. Because you can hear ideas expressed [here] which could cost any other minister his or her job. You want to support it because it is a place where children can come without being saddled with guilt or terrified of some celestial Peeping Tom, where they can learn that religion is for joy, for comfort, for gratitude and love.

“You want to support it because it is a place where walls between people are torn down rather than built up. Because it is a place for religious, displaced persons of our time, the refugees from mixed marriages, [and I would add: same-sex partnerships], the unwanted free thinkers, and those who insist against orthodoxy that they must work out their own beliefs.

“You want to support a Unitarian Universalist [congregation] because it is more concerned with human beings than with dogmas. Because it searches for the holy, rather than dwelling upon the depraved. Because it calls no one a sinner, yet knows how deep is the struggle in each person’s breast and how great is the hunger for what is good.

“You want to support a Unitarian Universalist [congregation] because it can laugh. . . . You want to support it because it insults neither your intelligence nor your conscience, and because it calls you to worship what is truly worthy of your sacrifice.” [quoted by Gary E. Smith, in *The Abundance of Our Faith*, pp. 147-48] That sounds pretty good to me. How does it sound to you?