

Growing Our Future
Sermon for Appeal Sunday – Part II of our Capital Campaign
Kent Hemmen Saleska, Minister
UU Church of Minnetonka
December 2, 2007

OPENING READING:

The Faces of Children

By Elizabeth Spires

Meeting old friends after a long time, we see
with surprise how they have changed, and must imagine,
despite the mirror's lies, that change is upon us, too.

Once, in our twenties, we thought we would never die.
Now, as one thoughtlessly shuffles a deck of cards,
we have run through half our lives.

The afternoon has vanished, the evening changing
us into four shadows mildly talking on a porch.
And as we talk, we listen to the children play
the games that we played once. In joy and terror,
they cry out in surprise as the seeker finds the one in hiding,
or in fairytale tableau, each one is tapped and turned

to stone. The lawn is full of breathing statues who wait
to be changed back again, and we can do nothing but stand
to one side of our children's games, our children's lives.

We are the conjurors who take away all pain,
and we are the ones who cannot take away the pain at all.
They do not ask, as lately we have asked ourselves,

Who was I then? And what must I become?
Like newly minted coins, their faces catch
the evening's radiance. They are so sure of us,

more sure than we are of ourselves. Our children:
who gently push us toward the end of our own lives.
The future beckons brightly. They trust us to lead them there.

Growing Our Future
Sermon
Kent Hemmen Saleska, Minister

In my sermon on October 28 for the kickoff of our Capital Campaign I spoke about how this congregation – by deciding to move from this building, buy land, and construct a new building – is engaged in nothing less than reproduction. My text for saying this was a reading from Fritjof Capra, which ended with:

A machine will fail if its parts do not work in the rigorously predetermined manner, but an organism will maintain its functioning in a changing environment, keeping itself in running condition and repairing itself through healing and regeneration...Even though they are capable of maintaining and repairing themselves, no complex organisms can function indefinitely. They gradually deteriorate in the process of aging and, eventually, succumb to exhaustion even when relatively undamaged. To survive, these species have developed a form of "super-repair." Instead of replacing the damaged or worn-out parts they replace the whole organism. This, of course, is the phenomenon of reproduction, which is characteristic of all life.

It is important for us to remember, as we move through the creation of a new history, that reproduction is not a matter of creating something new in order to discard the old. Reproduction is a process of passing on life-giving genetic information, not just for survival, but also as a means to thrive in a world of changing conditions. Reproduction involves one generation nurturing the next generation into existence, and guiding new generations into autonomy.

When I think about “guiding new generations into autonomy,” the image that comes to my mind is the image of parenting. As a new parent myself, I learn more each day about what it means to guide a new soul into independence and autonomy – including both the anxiety and joy. I also think of the poem we heard earlier called “The Faces of Children,” and the truth of the line: “we can do nothing but stand/ to one side of our children’s games, our children’s lives.”

As parents, and as congregational parents birthing a new congregational entity, we can do a lot to help shape the new life, to help guide it to maturity. But there is also much we cannot do. If we truly want what is best for the new life, then we need to give it all the wisdom and love we have, but we also must let go, and let the new life grow into what it must become. In the closing lines, the poet writes, “They are so sure of us/ more sure than we are of ourselves. Our children:/ who gently push us to the end of our own lives./ The future beckons brightly. They trust us to lead them there.”

Today is the Appeal Sunday for our Capital Campaign. Today is the beginning of the future into which our spiritual and biological descendants trust us to lead them. Today is the day we ask ourselves to make a three-year commitment of money. Many people are energized by this direction; some are more hesitant. Yes, this is exciting and scary, both at the same time. And yet, 50 years from now when a new history is written, our descendants may attribute more certainty to us than we may even be sure of ourselves. This is why they call it “faith,” and this is why we call the first part of our Capital Campaign “Moving in Faith”: faith means not having any certainty, yet trusting in ourselves enough to take the best action we know how. As William Sloan Coffin once said, “I love the recklessness of faith. First you leap, and then you grow wings.”

And so, as I consider how we may move together in faith, I also imagine where this faith will lead and how we will “Grow our Future”...

...I imagine the year 2060 when a group of people – including women and men who are 65 and 70 years old – sit down together to plan the 100th Anniversary of the founding of the Unitarian Universalist congregation in the city of Wayzata, Minnesota. I imagine these congregational elders reminiscing about their youth, reminiscing back to when they were 12 and 15 years old, back in 2007 when the church began a capital campaign to construct a new church building, now 50 years old. For the 100th Anniversary Celebration of the congregation, these elders were asked to share some of their wisdom and experience growing up in the church and how it affected or changed their lives. They were also asked to talk about what had changed in the Twin Cities, and what had changed in the world during the second 50 years of the congregation’s existence.

Beyond some of the known changes, like a light-rail system throughout the Twin Cities and the prominence of hybrid and hydrogen-fuel cell cars, the elders also spoke about how these changes were necessary after the war in Iraq ended. Though the United States did finally get out of Iraq, and did narrowly avoid entering another war with Iran, it very quickly became apparent how dependency on oil needed to shift to alternative power sources. Despite the damage to its trust and reputation during the Iraq war, the United States slowly relearned how to engage in genuine international diplomacy. In the aftermath of the war with Iraq, the nation continued to attract millions of immigrants because of the history, vision, and renewed practice of democracy and religious pluralism.

The elders of the congregation understood something with hindsight that they had not realized earlier – that because of the religious pluralism within the Unitarian Universalist faith, the UU association became a prominent social leader that addressed issues of religious pluralism within the United States.

First of all, however, the congregational elders spoke of how, in the new church, they were excited to have a new youth room. It was a youth room that could be divided to house the junior high and senior high in two separate spaces, but then could be opened up to make space for the entire group of 100 teenagers or a district youth conference, if needed. And then, down the hall was a bathroom with a shower for when weekend conferences were held in the building.

The elders also recalled being so proud of their congregation for having one of the first entirely green buildings in the western suburbs – it had an array of solar panels on the roof that supplied the building with all its power, it had a parking lot with a permeable surface (similar to the one lot the White Bear UU church had created), much of the construction materials were either recycled or reclaimed wood from lot where the church was built, and the building itself was built into the hillside in order to take advantage of the dirt of the earth to help with heating and cooling. In addition, since the building was built into the hillside, it also made the multiple floors accessible at ground level from the outside. That wasn’t such an issue when they were teenagers, but as they moved into their 60s and 70s, that feature became more and more appreciated!

Many of the elders left the area when they went off to college, and for some it was many years before they returned with spouses and children. When they did return, they discovered many changes. For one thing, when the congregation moved to the new building, they also

decided to change their name. For another thing, the church was bigger. Within about five years after the new building was constructed, the congregation had nearly doubled in size to almost 500 people. That was a lot of growth in a short time, but fortunately, along with planning for a new building, the congregation had developed a long-range plan to welcome and involve visitors and new members. Part of the reason the church had grown so rapidly was because of its prominent location along Highway 12, just west of 494. The old church had even attracted new members while the new church was still being built. In the process of growth, the church called an Associate Minister, had hired a part-time social justice coordinator, and had been a teaching congregation for ministerial interns for at least 40 years. Another reason for growth was that the beautiful and spacious new sanctuary was also a welcoming and acoustically outstanding space that hosted a regionally renowned concert series including classical, jazz, folk, and various International performers.

But more than that, the congregation had diligently and intentionally created outstanding programming, knowing that growing an internal life of faith required a practice of engagement with the community beyond the church walls. During the week, the Religious Education wing housed a daycare for low income families; in the evenings, in addition to the church ministry meetings, many groups used the building: people recovering from addictions, people working on peace and environmental issues, people learning how to be better parents and better partners, people deepening their understanding of Unitarian Universalist history and their own faith, people meeting to engage a process of restorative justice in the neighborhood, people working together on interfaith programs and initiatives.

It was pluralism of interfaith work that seemed to generate a lot of energy and enthusiasm. Because Unitarian Universalists had lived for years with the pluralism of theists, atheists, humanists, pagans, scientists and mystics all under one roof, the members of the congregation learned more about the power of their plurality, and so were equipped to share with other faiths how they could remain in community while at the same time respecting the boundaries of differing beliefs.

Ten years after the new building was constructed, and because so many of their members came from the northwest suburbs, the congregation undertook the task to plant a new Unitarian Universalist congregation in Maple Grove. Twenty years after that, in collaboration with the Bloomington congregation, the two congregations planted another Unitarian Universalist congregation in Shakopee.

An added bonus for the elders, and especially for those church members back in 2007 who finally decided to move out of the old building, was that the old building on Walker and Rice Street was never torn down. Over the years it had housed a regional theater group, an interfaith chapel, and most recently had been bought by Interfaith Outreach and Community Partners as a second campus to provide space for the food shelf, soup kitchen and temporary housing for homeless families. As the elders reflected on the 50 years between 2010 and 2060, they were grateful for the vision and commitment of church members back in 2007, and were proud to be the living legacy that bridged the generations between people who originated the congregation in the first place, and the generations that would carry the community into the 22nd Century.

This could be the story our children and grandchildren tell about us 50 years from now. This is not the only story they could tell, but it is one of the many possible stories. I wonder what stories each of you hope for and dream about as you imagine the future of this congregation. I am reasonably certain that the real story will not be anything any one of us can imagine at this moment, but our imagination can help to open us to a wide range of possible futures.

As we've worked toward this Appeal Sunday, I have sensed an increase in anxiety in the congregation, but also an increase in anticipation and excitement. I recall the shift in the mood of the church Board between the meeting in September and their meeting in October. If we were going to do this Capital Campaign well, we needed at least \$400,000 to buy the proposed piece of land, and at least a million dollars, if not more, to finance the entire first phase. In September the Board's mood seemed to say that this congregation had stepped to the edge several times before, but each time it had stepped backwards again. What made this time any different?

Then for two nights in early November, our consultant, Larry Kassebaum, met with two small groups of congregants in openly advertised informational forums. On the first night, with only 17 people in attendance representing 12 pledging units, the amount of money those people said they would give over three years came to \$565,000! At the October meeting of the Board, the mood I saw was much lighter. I did not hear any discussion about *whether* we could reach the goal of one million dollars – the only questions I heard had to do with how *much* money the congregation could raise!

On a personal note, I recall telling you on October 28 that I would share with you today how much Heidi and I plan to give to the Capital Campaign. This has involved lengthy and detailed discussion, even through yesterday. One thing that made this discussion difficult is that Heidi and I are just at the beginning of our professional and family lives. Though I know we will be fine, much of our money situation is unknown. As a minister, the paycheck I get is my gross income, so I need to save about one-third of it each month in order to pay the government. We are saving enough, but we won't know the exact amount of our taxes until the end of December. In addition, Heidi and I plan to buy our first house next spring. At this point we have no idea how much our house payments, or other housing expenses, will be.

But just this past week we realized we do have one accessible asset. Over the past five years we have been saving like mad for a down payment on a house. It makes sense that fluid income should go towards the church operating budget, and that personal capital assets go to the church Capital Campaign. By next spring we hope to have \$40,000 saved for our down payment. So what Heidi and I finally decided to do was give 10% of our down payment to the Capital Campaign. So our pledge is \$4,000 – plus \$1,000 to make an even \$5,000 over three years. As time goes on and we become more familiar with our income and our expenses, we hope to increase this amount, but we are confident we can pledge this much now.

The pledges we receive today will give us definite hard numbers for the first time. But after all the small group meetings in the past five weeks, the amount of money in “soft” numbers has now reached \$1.2 million!

Of course, no number is definite until we collect the pledge cards at the end of this service and count the amount of the pledges. It may be that those of you who are wealthier have been reluctant to pledge as much as you are capable because you feared or resented the possibility that you would shoulder the majority of the needed pledges. And it may be that those of you who are not as wealthy feel scared about how much you are planning to give, or that you feel reluctant to pledge as much as you are capable of because you may feel your gift is not as

important as the money from more wealthy people. Well, today we ask that all fear be set aside. Today we ask for equal sacrifice even though it will be through unequal gifts. Today we ask that you give your best gift to the Capital Campaign, knowing full well that the “best” gift we can give means a different amount for each of us. The only potential failure I see is a failure to live up to our potential.

It is now clear that this congregation is capable of achieving the Capital Campaign goal of one million dollars. Since this is so clear, this morning we offer the challenge to reach our target goal of 1.5 million dollars. We are so very close. If it is possible, imagine stretching the gift you originally planned to give and consider adding \$1,000, \$5,000...or even doubling your pledge. We are so very close. Imagine the sense of accomplishment and energy in this congregation when we reach our target of 1.5 million dollars!

I do not know how much you can give. Only you know what you have and what is possible. I do know that one value liberal religion offers is a way we may align our actions with our beliefs. Liberal religion also offers a place where we can nurture our spirits as we work to heal our world. This Capital Campaign is about more than just money. It is about providing a home for our biological and spiritual descendants, for people who seek ways to widen the circles of love and inclusion, for people who want to be part of a beloved community that attempts to live in practice every profession of our good will. This Capital Campaign is about providing a home for a dream, a dream that will continue to evolve as new people join us in our vision.

As congregational parents birthing and guiding a new generation...

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