

*Moving in Faith*  
Part I of the “Moving In Faith, Growing Our Future” capital campaign  
Kent Hemmen Saleska, Minister  
UU Church of Minnetonka  
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**READINGS**

**First Reading – On Generosity**

From *Beyond the Collection Plate*, by Michael Durall

A culture of scarcity in...churches can be decades in the making. This culture may be particularly discouraging to the generous souls who contribute the most (usually one-third of congregants contribute about 75 percent of the church’s annual income, and about the same percentage of capital campaigns). These church pillars love the church and often labor mightily on its behalf...and usually do not raise issues at annual [budget] meetings. The least generous voices often go unchallenged and too frequently prevail. It is rare for someone to stand up and recommend the congregation pay more for something, even if this is the wisest course.

...I believe the key to reviving mainline congregations is for churchgoers to share the value of their religious lives with others. I urge readers to express their views more openly about what they find in church that cannot be found in secular life. We should all share more willingly the reasons we go to church, how our lives are enriched, why we work on its behalf, and why we support the church financially in ample measure.

I believe that discipleship and effective stewardship go hand in hand. We are called to create churches that reach out and serve. This is a far cry from asking people for money to pay the church’s bills.

...the operating budget is not an inspiration for giving. Charitable giving is an expression of faith and the religious life, not paying the church’s bills. The basis for true stewardship is the meaning and joy that people derive from sharing in adequate measure. Being a generous person or family is one of life’s great privileges – one of the hallmarks of a life well lived.

## **Second Reading – from *The Turning Point***

By Fritjof Capra

Self-renewal is an essential aspect of self-organizing systems. Whereas a machine is constructed to produce a specific product or to carry out a specific task intended by its designer, an organism is primarily engaged in renewing itself; cells are breaking down and building up structures, tissues and organs are replacing their cells in continual cycles. Thus the pancreas replaces most of its cells every twenty-four hours, the stomach lining every three days; our white blood cells are renewed in ten days and 98 percent of the protein in the brain is turned over in less than one month. All these processes are regulated in such a way that the overall pattern of the organism is preserved, and this remarkable ability of self-maintenance persists under a variety of circumstances, including changing environmental conditions.

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.

## **SERMON**

### ***Moving in Faith***

#### **Part I of the "Moving In Faith, Growing Our Future" capital campaign**

**Kent Hemmen Saleska, Minister**

I struggled a lot this past week about what to say for this Sunday service capital campaign kick-off. A few weeks ago I gave a sermon that was a bit of a "Capital Campaign preview," and in the past week I wrote a letter for the capital campaign flyer, I wrote my newsletter column about the capital campaign, and I wrote another letter included in today's packet of information we're handing out. I firmly support this campaign to Move In Faith and Grow Our Future. So my struggle this past week was not about whether I support this capital campaign; my struggle had to do with how I could communicate to you the depth of my gratitude and my commitment to my Unitarian Universalist faith.

I've attempted to convey my genuine enthusiasm – and yet it still feels to me like that enthusiasm only scratches the surface of what I feel, and only begins to describe the origins of my commitment to this liberal religious movement.

So – after writing about six or eight different opening paragraphs for this sermon – I finally sat down with my wife Heidi over dinner on Friday night to talk to her about my struggle. I told Heidi that I wanted to say something more moving and meaningful than just something

about money. I wanted a story, I said, something along the lines of a conversion or a transformation. I didn't want to talk just words or ideas; I wanted to bring a story to life. I wanted this sermon to be inspiring, not through guilt or shame, but by honest and positive energy; I also wanted to say something new, something I hadn't said in my previous writings.

As I talked with Heidi, I was reminded once again that I can only speak from what I know, and what I know best is my own life.

In his comments on generosity, Michael Durall shares his belief that "the key to reviving mainline congregations is for churchgoers to share the value of their religious lives with others." Durall urges us to express more openly what we find in church that cannot be found in secular life. He says, "We should all share more willingly the reasons we go to church, how our lives are enriched, why we work on its behalf, and why we support the church financially in ample measure."

Without any question, I know I am here today because of my involvement in the Unitarian Universalist youth movement when I was a teenager. When I was 14, my father was called to be the minister of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Gainesville, Florida. We moved from Wisconsin to Florida, and I have never had a more painful move in my life. I was a junior high kid entering high school, I was a northerner transplanted into the south, I was a new kid in the neighborhood. Everything was different, we had no extended family there, and I had no friends.

But as the minister's son, and as a teenager, I naturally began attending the church youth group. During the next few years I began attending Florida district youth conferences, and then continental youth conferences. I saw other kids share their lives with each other. I saw kids with pink hair, tattoos, and pierced body parts hanging out with kids in Izod shirts and penny loafers. I saw these kids work side-by-side in social justice projects and speak up as a united voice through the Youth Caucus at our annual Unitarian Universalist General Assemblies. I saw these kids wrestle with each other during games of "Wink," and cry together during the closing worship of our weekends together. I discovered that I was not only accepted into this group, but also welcomed and embraced. It was the first time I belonged to a community where I felt the emotional safety to share my whole self. It was the first time my dreams about being part of a loving community became a reality.

This is the heart of what drives my commitment to our Unitarian Universalist movement. I know from personal experience what it means to be saved by this faith community. Though we typically don't use this language, I can easily say I was born again, because I was brought into this UU community and became aware of a world where love was the way we lived our lives.

In all my work as an adult since that time, I have strived to create places and spaces where love does not just live, but can thrive.

I do not see our current Capital Campaign as an end in and of itself. This Capital Campaign is – or ought to be – a byproduct of who we are. Though we seek and need the most generous contribution you can provide over the span of three years, it is also important to remember that this Capital Campaign is merely a means to an end. With the money we raise we plan to buy land to build a new church. But it is important to remember that the land we buy is merely a means to an end. After we buy the land, the additional money we raise will allow us to construct a church building that will give us the space we say we need and allow us the room to do what we say we want to do. But it is important to remember that any new church we build is merely a means to an end. The money we raise is not for the purpose of competing with other suburban churches to show how great and stylish a building we can create. As we ask ourselves

to give money in this campaign to “Move In Faith,” my hope is that each one of us understands that this money can be used to create the same thing I discovered as a teenager – the radical presence of transforming love and compassion for each other and for our world.

As this campaign to “Move In Faith and Grow our Future” progresses, my wife Heidi and I are in the midst of ongoing conversation about how much we will give to this capital campaign. I can only imagine the conversations that must be going on in your homes because I know about the conversations going on in our home! Having worked in the field of youth programming for ten years before entering seminary, I never made much money. My average income was somewhere around \$24,000 per year. Now, as a settled minister, and with a wife who also has a job, we are bringing in more money than I have ever made in my life. But we are also faced with additional financial realities I never had to deal with as a single person.

We have a one-year-old child, and there are an amazing amount of costs that go along with that. We also plan to buy a house next spring, I have seminary loans to pay off, and after I began working full-time in August, Heidi reduced her workload by taking off Fridays. This way we each have a day to be home with Parker, but it also reduces our income.

Heidi and I recognize the need for a spirit of openness and generosity with each other and with this congregation. We also recognize the struggle between personal needs and communal commitment. Given the many unknowns of our current and future finances, Heidi and I are still in the midst of conversation about how much to give. This capital campaign is asking for a huge commitment from all of us, and it requires a great deal of thoughtful discussion. So, in the spirit of prime-time television that holds us in suspense until the next episode, Heidi and I promise to share with you on December 2, Appeal Sunday, the amount that we plan to pledge to this congregation!

Ultimately, the operating budget is not inspiration for giving generously. And though a capital campaign may provide more congregational vision, it is still not very good inspiration for giving. The first phrase of our campaign is “Moving In Faith.” A good place to begin our move, and a good place to begin our search for a source of inspiration, is our own liberal religious Unitarian Universalist faith.

The word “faith” is not a word we use very often in Unitarian Universalism. But I believe, whether we acknowledge it or not, that everything we do in every moment of our lives, is based on our faith. On a basic level, I use the word “faith” to mean believing in anything for which we have no proof – or for which we have limited proof. The belief in a God is a statement of faith. Similarly, the belief that no God exists is also a statement of faith. In the same vein, I have no proof that we will be able to attain our monetary goal for this Capital Campaign. But I do have the *faith* that we will reach our goal.

Our Unitarian Universalist religion has for a long time embodied a faith in the goodness of humanity. We do not believe in original sin. We do not believe that humans were born with a despised and depraved nature. Typically, our faith steers us toward seeing the goodness in each human, in each living being, and in all of nature. The Christian origins of our religion spoke of how we humans are created in the image of God, and how that image is a beautiful thing. We are, each one of us, artists, inventors, architects, authors, initiators, creators. As our earlier liberal Christian faith expanded to include Religious Humanism, part of our faith was expressed in the 1933 Humanist Manifesto which states in part: “We assert that humanism will: (a) affirm life rather than deny it; (b) seek to elicit the possibilities of life, not flee from them; and (c) endeavor to establish the conditions of a satisfactory life for all, not merely for the few.”

This is the passion I have that comes out of my faith: to see us all as artists and creators, and to establish the conditions of a satisfactory life for all, not merely for the few.” The “end” I see for our capital campaign is at heart not an “end” at all, but a process. The money helps us to build a church, but the church helps us to nurture spirits both inside and outside our church walls, and to be a prophetic voice of compassion in a consumer-driven and hate-filled world.

With this capital campaign, we are entering into something momentous, something larger and more powerful and more inspiring than any one of us could create or engage with alone. This is, and will be, our joint project, something we must do together. This is the faith I have, expressed in the song I sang earlier, that, “whatever your hands find to do, you must do it with all your heart/ In time, we will move mountains, and it will come through our hands.”

Working together, building a church, welcoming new people, transforming lives, our congregation is a complex organism. And a complex organism, in the words of Fritjof Capra, “will maintain its functioning in a changing environment, keeping itself in running condition and repairing itself through healing and regeneration.” Up until this point, with the remodeling of the church basement to create new religious education classes, and with the work to remodel the north room to install a new kitchen and offices, and with the work to create a back porch and handicap entrance, that is what this church has done – kept itself in running condition, repairing itself through healing and regeneration.

But it is also true that no complex organism can function indefinitely. Complex organisms “gradually deteriorate in the process of aging and, eventually, succumb to exhaustion even when relatively undamaged. To survive, these species 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.”

I see this congregation engaged in a common and amazing life cycle. This congregation is engaged in nothing less than reproduction. Reproduction is not simply a matter of creating something new and discarding 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 previous generations nurturing new generations into existence, and guiding new generations into autonomy. As we “Move In Faith” together, we have a beautiful opportunity to pass on the wisdom and love of our religious organism to future generations. May we be faithful stewards of our precious, radical, and loving liberal religion.