

Museums and Mud
Kent Hemmen Saleska
Candidating Week – Second Service
Unitarian Universalist Church of Minnetonka
May 6, 2007

First Reading

From *The Universe is a Green Dragon*, by Brian Swimme

The universe bestows on us fire from the beginning of time: it must not be wasted on trivialities or revenge, resentment or despair. We have the power to forge cosmic fire. What can compare with such a destiny?

The elements were bestowed on us by the stars, the complex compounds given to us by the young Earth, the informed sequences of the genes by the micro-organisms, our limbs and organs by advanced life forms, and the linguistic symbols carrying our thoughts and feelings by the human venture. We could not see without the work of those who shaped the eye; could not hear without the work of those who shaped the ear. The universe created these gifts, lavished them upon us; our first and deepest response is infinite gratitude.

[From another Swimme text:] Take supernovas as your models. When they filled themselves with riches, they exploded in a vast cosmic celebration of their work. What would you have done? Would you have had the courage to flood the universe with your riches? Or would you have talked yourself out of it by pleading you were too shy? Or hoarded your riches by insisting they were yours and that others did not deserve them because they did not work for them? Remember the supernova's extravagant generosity and celebration of being. **[End]**

That which created all of this now desires our creativity, commitment, and labor, our delight in entering with full awareness the cosmic story. The mountains and oceans, stars and life forms – all recipients of the same generosity, contributors to the unknown future culminations of our work – all tremble with the same power. Given a finite number of days in which to live, a particular store of primordial fire with which to work, who could deny that all that matters is contributing to the awesome work of fashioning the universe?

Second Reading

***Our Deepest Fear*, by Marianne Williamson**

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

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Sermon by Kent Hemmen Saleska
UU Church of Minnetonka in Wayzata
May 6, 2007

As a minister in search of a settled ministry this past year, I had the honor of reading the packets of many congregations across the country. After all the reading, phone interviews, pre-candidating – and one Candidating week! – I learned more about the composition of healthy and unhealthy congregations. In the process, I became more adept at “reading between the lines,” that is, hearing what a congregation says about itself, even if it isn’t spoken or written anywhere.

Of all the congregations I looked at, I’d like to share with you two stories I discovered in the process. Here are some quotes from the congregational record of one congregation that was having a particularly hard time:

- We lack a clear UU identity and common mission
- We do not have many young adults or singles
- We are challenged by burnout of lay leaders
- We have not been successful in stewardship drives for several years
- We have issues related to trust of lay leadership
- We may never have enough money to do what we dream could be done
- Religious Education and spiritual enrichment for adults is not meeting the needs of our congregation
- We are a congregation that has had a history of ramping up to move forward but then sliding back without realizing our goal. Naturally this has led to a degree of frustration and has tended to sap our self-confidence.

Now, here are some quotes from the congregational record of one church that had a more vibrant outlook and sense of identity:

- We are a congregation that cares deeply for each other and are happy to have found a welcoming church home that supports us in our spiritual journeys
- We have very capable and experienced paid staff
- We are a congregation with untapped financial resources – the average income of our members is considerably above that of many other churches
- We were described by a consultant as “a congregation with great resources, foremost among them is a wonderful collection of committed, talented, bright, and engaging members”
- Our RE program for children is superb and attracts many young families
- We are involved in leadership development training
- We value music as an integral part of our worship
- Our lay leadership is dedicated to working toward a bright future...Our church is located in the growing...suburbs [and] It is our sincere hope and intention to grow into a vibrant, active part of our community
- Several years ago we replaced a 32-plus committee structure with a seven Ministry structure that improved communication and the management of church functions. We moved deliberately in the direction of making the Board a policy making body while moving decision making on many day-to-day matters to the Ministry level.

Perhaps by now you've realized that these two stories are not from two separate congregations. These two sets of quotes are, in fact, taken from the same congregational record – yours: the Unitarian Universalist Church of Minnetonka in Wayzata. These are two very different ways of emphasizing the life and work of UUCM...and both are true! I hold up these two ways because I believe the ways we see and tell stories about ourselves are crucial to how we behave in the world.

This past week as we've assessed each other, I've been striving to pay attention not only to what you are saying with your words, but watching and listening to your actions and attempting to “read between the lines” of who you say you are, who you say you want to be, and where you want to go.

One thing I heard people talk about repeatedly is a desire to have a vision, a mission, a common sense of identity you feel you all can endorse. I agree that this is important. It is difficult to figure out what to do if you don't know who you are. As a living congregational organism, part of knowing who you are comes from a good concise mission statement.

In my understanding, good mission statements are short: one sentence with no semicolons! One of my favorite mission statements comes from the outdoor store REI. I love doing things outdoors, so I love not only what REI sells, but how they engage the world and give back to their communities. As a result, I've been an REI member for 20 years. REI's mission is not to make profits, sell a lot of stuff, or to have more business than their competitors. It is simply this: “To inspire, educate and outfit for a lifetime of adventure.”

As a minister, one of my dreams for the congregation I serve is that they have a strong sense of identity. A strong sense of identity is in evidence when a newcomer hears a similar answer from 20 different members about what we believe or what our purpose is. As a newcomer this past week, I listened intently for what might be a sense of cohesive purpose or mission. I am delighted to tell you, I did hear from your collective voices that you have one!

I know you just put a bunch of work into crafting a mission statement – but to be honest, I don't know what that mission statement says without looking it up. On the other hand, the statement I heard from you repeatedly this past week, from many people in many groups, sticks in my head, I like it, and I've already memorized it. I don't know where this statement came from or who started it, but it is widespread. People spout it off without having to think about it, and without having to refer to a piece of paper or a framed plaque on the wall in the entryway. As far as I'm concerned, this is the mission you say you are looking for, one you can rally around, stick behind, buy into, and support for many years to come. It is simply this: “to be THE voice of liberal religion in the western suburbs.”

That's it. Should you choose to accept it, and claim it, this is your mission. Everything else you do falls under that. For example, if you are THE voice of liberal religion in the western suburbs, then what will Sunday morning worship look like? If you are THE voice of liberal religion in the western suburbs, then in what ways will you engage social justice? If you are THE voice of liberal religion in the western suburbs, what will lifespan religious education look like? If you are THE voice of liberal religion in the western suburbs, how will you welcome newcomers, retain the members who've been here for years, reach out to former members who no longer attend, and evangelize the remaining suburbs?

How we behave in the world – as individual Unitarian Universalists and as a congregation – is the topic of this sermon. In our Call to Worship today, Marge Piercy presents us with two options. The first option is that of living in the past, in a museum, as a remnant of

historical glory that we must preserve with great effort and delicacy. “Greek amphoras for wine or oil, Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums but you know they were made to be used.” What Marge Piercy longs for, and what inspires me more, is the second option:

I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest...
who...move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.

The possibility of doing “work that is real” with you is what excites me about coming here, to get our hands dirty in the work that is “common as mud,” to hitch ourselves to a heavy cart and help pull it forward together, to engage – side by side – in the work that needs doing, over and over again.

I know this congregation has been through a lot of turmoil, especially in the past three or four years. I know your ending with the previous minister was painful, and I know wounds exist as a result of that pain. I know – as your congregational record states – that a lack of trust exists towards the lay leadership. I know you’re in an on-going search for a sense of identity.

I also know this congregation has taken great intentional strides recently. It is difficult to go through the pain you have without feeling a bit lost and confused. It is even more difficult to go through such pain and take ownership of your part. But that is what you did. Even more importantly, I heard what you learned from those missteps, and how, over the past several years, you are learning to do things differently and with a greater sense of organizational health. Out of your struggle is emerging a new self-awareness and direction.

One constant about my attraction to this congregation is your intentionality. I believe this intentionality is also part of your emerging identity. You reorganized your committee structure, you are reorganizing staff accountability structures, you are beginning to discuss creating a “covenant of right relations,” you are beginning year-round services, and returning to two services this fall. I’ve sensed a very positive feeling here all week. I’ve seen this congregation’s energy, it’s desire to engage the world, and a healthy sense of restlessness that is striving to make things better. I sense an emergence from chaos.

Recently I’ve been watching a series of DVDs by the cosmologist Brian Swimme. In this series he discusses primary qualities of the universe, one of them being this quality of restlessness, of creativity, of never be satisfied with the way things are, a quality that involves a process of self-transcendence. Brian Swimme names this quality of the Universe as “emergence.”

According to Brian Swimme, we are at a point in human history where we recognize that humans are a geological force on the planet, and that what we decide as a species will determine whether we fade away, or emerge into a more integrated and mutually beneficial relationship with the planet.

I see a parallel process occurring in this congregation. This congregation is at a point in its history where you recognize the power you have to determine whether you fade away, or emerge into a presence and a force that is more mutually beneficial and integrated with the wider community. As a minister, I would love to join you in this emergence, into the work that is “common as mud,” to become part of THE voice of liberal religion in the western suburbs!

From my perspective as a minister, the primary purpose of church – or any religion – is not to maintain itself as an institution, not to be a safe haven, not to engage in social justice, and not even to nourish the spiritual lives of its members. From my perspective, and as part of our delightfully muddy work of collaborative ministry, the primary purpose of the church is to engage in authentic and joyful reverence for that which is larger than ourselves – the encompassing existence of the universe some people call God. I see “church” as a community that gathers out of a sense of awe and wonder to honor that larger reality.

It is out of this sense of awe and wonder that then flows an understanding of worship. Out of this sense of awe and wonder then flows the creation of a safe haven, flows a sense of social justice, flows a sweet stream that nourishes the spiritual lives of its members. Out of this sense of awe and wonder also flows a sense of excitement about what we are doing here as THE voice of liberal religion in the western suburbs. Out of this sense of awe and wonder flows the inspiration to evangelize beyond these walls, to spread the gospel of the love and welcome and compassion of a liberal religion and free faith in an often painful and rigid world.

As a minister, my desire to encourage and manifest love and compassion in the world includes a broad vision. On this church’s website I would like to include a video welcome from the minister, if not other leadership, on the home page. I would also like to make services and sermons available in live-streaming audio format. I’d like to see this congregation grow – not for the sake of growth itself, but because you are so happy and excited about what we do that you freely share your joy with the world. Out of that growth I encourage your current direction and desire to acquire a new building so you have space to do the programming you need to do, and so you can be the people you say you want to be.

As part of ongoing engagement with our faith, I’d love to have a member give a two-minute statement of personal faith each Sunday, and how that faith engages the larger Unitarian Universalist faith. As part of a theology of abundance and an attitude of generosity, I’d love for this congregation – in a few years – to become a teaching congregation, a congregation that both teaches and learns from a seminary student intern each year. As part of that sense of abundance and generosity, I encourage tithing – that members give 10% of their income to the church, and in turn, for the church to give away 10% of its annual budget to the surrounding community.

In an effort to move away from a consumer mentality and to emphasize a sense of community within our voluntary association, I’d like to eliminate announcing upcoming services in the newsletter and online. If we have faith in this community and believe that “small miracles” happen here each Sunday, then we need not worry about who the speaker is or what the topic will be. As part of the growth and mission here, I can also easily see this congregation engaged in church planting. I envision this congregation, like a brilliant burning star, spinning off new congregations in the northwest and southwest suburbs of the Twin Cities.

I find it fascinating that Carbon, that essential building block for life, did not exist when the universe began. As the restless universe worked to transcend itself, Carbon was created through intense pressure from a dying star. When a star reaches the end of its time, the star implodes. That pressure causes temperatures inside to increase to 100 million degrees. In that crucible, the helium atoms fuse together creating, among other things, elements of both oxygen and carbon.

I see new life in this congregation emerging after a period of intense pressure as well. It may be that an old way of being is dying, but out of that old way is emerging new life. I believe, as I learn more about this congregation and more about how the universe works, that you are not a dysfunctional congregation...or at least no more dysfunctional than any other congregation in the midst of transition. In fact, your process has been, and is, the natural process of the universe from chaos through creativity and continual emergence.

“Your playing small does not serve the world...We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

We humans emerged from a creativity that exists in our very bones and blood cells, based on the element of carbon that itself emerged billions of years ago from the dust of dying stars. Our choice today then, is not whether to “become creative” or to “emerge,” but whether or not we consciously engage with the creativity that goes on all around and inside us. “The universe bestows on us fire from the beginning of time: it must not be wasted on trivialities or revenge, resentment or despair.” May we enter with full awareness into the cosmic story, and delight in contributing to the awesome work of fashioning our lives, our congregation, and our universe.