

*Sing Now Together*  
**Kent Hemmen Saleska, Minister**  
**Unitarian Universalist Church of Minnetonka**  
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**READINGS**

**Arizona - How Big is Big Enough?**

By Edward Abbey

Governor Bruce Babbitt tells us that by the year 2000, only sixteen years from now, Arizona will gain two million new residents, that Phoenix will become another Houston and Tucson another Phoenix, and that we will have an additional one million automobiles crowding our streets and highways. Tucson Mayor Lew Murphy – unable to conceal his smirking glee – predicts that Tucson will become, within twenty years, a 450-square-mile urbanized area. Most of our reigning bankers, economists, and developers keep shelling us with a similar barrage of thundering numbers. This, our leaders tell us, is good news. Growth is good, they say, reciting like an incantation the prime article of faith of the official American religion: Bigger is better and best is biggest. Growth, they tell us, means more jobs, more bank accounts, more cars, more people, leading in turn to the demand for more jobs, more economic expansion, more industrial development. Where, when, and how is this spiraling process supposed to reach a rational end – a state of stability, sanity, and equilibrium?

...we can see that the religion of endless growth – like any religion based on blind faith rather than reason – is a kind of mania, a form of lunacy, indeed a disease. And the one disease to which the growth mania bears an exact analogical resemblance is cancer. Growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell. Cancer has no purpose but growth; but it does have another result – the death of the host.

**Why Do You Come, John?**

By Rev. Victoria Safford

I knew a man once who came to church every Sunday. You may find nothing remarkable in this. But think of it – a man who came every single Sunday, and it was not that he lacked other things to do. I knew him only in the last years of his life – a birthright Unitarian, a retired geologist who, when he was not in church, was a volunteer for Amnesty International, for the local food bank, for the American Civil Liberties Union, for the family planning clinic, the AIDS project, for the Unitarian Universalist district we were a part of, for the Audubon Society, and for a splendid community chorus. Busier than any of us still holding full-time jobs, he was committed, effective, clear about what he could and would and, by his own standards, should

contribute to the causes that he cared for, and the world and people that he cared for. But what set him apart from all of us was that he came every single Sunday, and (because of hearing loss, I think, more than any sense of his own importance), he sat in the front row.

“Why do you come, John? In all kinds of weather, when you’re well and when you’re not, when you like the guest speaker and when you know you won’t, why do you come every Sunday?” I asked him not long before he died. His answer was straightforward, just like the man himself. “I come,” he said, “because somebody might miss me if I didn’t.”

He said it in a way not arrogant at all, but generously, and honestly. He was the kind of person who saw it as his duty and his privilege to welcome newcomers on Sunday morning – not because he needed more friends himself (the man was eighty years old, with a lifetime of friends and colleagues and acquaintances to spare; he had plenty of friends already, more than he could handle). He did it not because he wanted to evangelize the visitors or grow the church (on the contrary, he loved and missed the tiny congregation he’d joined in 1955. He felt a little lost with so many new faces, a little sad at all the changes). He greeted people as they came, and steered them toward the minister, the coffee pot, the Sunday school, the guest book, the pledge cards, the sign-up sheets, because he felt it was the right and only thing to do. When people come into your home, you welcome them as if nothing in that moment matters more. He worked hard on Sunday mornings, he got up on Sundays expecting to work hard to make others feel at home; he came with that in mind. And he was right – after he died, we missed him when he didn’t come.

And do you know what happened? The Sunday after his memorial, someone new (who’d never met John Eric and now would never had the chance) walked right in and sat down in his empty place in that front row. A whole family just sat right down as if they owned the place, as if they had every right to be there, as if we were glad to see them – two women new to town, and their toddler and their baby. They came hoping there was room, and John himself would have been delighted.

## **SERMON**

### ***Sing Now Together***

Kent Hemmen Saleska, Minister

Today is our new member Sunday, and Association Sunday, a day we celebrate our growth as a congregation and invite growth as a liberal religious movement. Association Sunday is a new Sunday created and organized by the folks at our Unitarian Universalist Association headquarters in Boston. According to the website, the UUA requests that, “all congregations recognize and support, both in spirit and financially, the national work of the Association. We envision a day – an ‘Association Sunday’ – during which thousands of UUs across the nation are simultaneously celebrating our shared commitment to Unitarian Universalism.”

The theme for this year’s Association Sunday is “Growing Our Faith Through Growing Our Numbers.” When I first heard this theme, I immediately thought of Edward Abbey’s words we heard earlier, words I read many years ago but were so powerful that they stayed with me for over two decades.

In 1985 I entered a small liberal arts school called the College of Idaho, in the southwestern Idaho cow town of Caldwell. At the time, the College of Idaho was a school of 485 students in a town of 17,000 people, in a state of one million people. In order to see a decent first-run movie or to go to an art gallery, it was a 30-mile drive through irrigated farmland on the interstate to get to Boise, the state capital. At the edge of a wide and shallow agricultural valley, Boise was a town nestled against barren brown foothills of an unimposing rocky mountain range. After college graduation I left the area for a while, but then returned every summer for three years to work as a trail leader on wilderness work programs with foster teenagers. I finally left Idaho in 1995 and did not return until 2006, when I went back to show Heidi where I had spent so much of my young adult life.

After 11 years away, I was stunned by the changes. The population of Idaho increased by 50% and Caldwell doubled in size. The once beautifully barren brown foothills above Boise are now spattered with what looks like jagged green cracks in a broken windshield as lines of trees, lawns, and irrigation follow new home construction up and over the landscape. Half of the 30-mile drive from Boise to Caldwell changed from a four-lane cruise through farmland into a six-lane commute through suburbia.

After spending so much time living in and traveling through the west, especially the wilderness areas, I came to love both the high, jagged mountains, as well as the barren, volcanic and dusty desert spaces. I also came to love the writings of Edward Abbey, including “Desert Solitaire” and “The Monkey Wrench Gang.” I’ve seen pristine mountain lakes become resorts, I’ve seen the mighty Colorado River – the river that carved the Grand Canyon – dammed up so much that it is only a seasonal trickle by the time it flows through Mexico, and I’ve seen suburban ghettos sprout in fields that once grew corn. All of this alteration and destruction occurs in the service of human needs and human growth. In his voice from the wilderness, Edward Abbey rails against our community leaders and politicians who say, “Growth is good...reciting like an incantation the prime article of faith of the official American religion: Bigger is better and best is biggest.” In response, I do indeed agree with Edward Abbey that, “growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell.”

So on this new member Sunday, and on this new Association Sunday, as we approach the question of growth in our congregations, I believe it is appropriate to ask, as Edward Abbey asks, “How big is big enough?”

More questions we may as well ask are: how many members can this congregation handle? Even if we move to a new location and construct a new building, how many members can we handle there? If we build a new sanctuary that can hold 300 people, what do we do when the 301<sup>st</sup> person walks through the door? What if we double our current size and grow to 400 people? What if, with a 300-seat sanctuary, we begin having two services?

These are great questions to ask ourselves, and personally, since we are currently the only Unitarian Universalist church in the entire western suburbs of the Twin Cities, I hope these are questions we will be forced to address. Yet, when faced with our Association Sunday theme for today, “Growing Our Faith Through Growing Our Numbers,” I cannot help but recoil in skepticism. I heartily endorse Edward Abbey’s articulation that growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell, with the ultimate consequence being the death of the host. This is why, when I speak of growth, of sustainable, systemically sound and spiritually grounded growth, I believe it must be done out of a confident and clear sense of communal mission and identity.

During my ministerial internship with the Reverend Mike Morran at the First Unitarian Society of Denver, I learned about four pillars of a flourishing church:

- Commitment to high-quality worship;
- Solid, easy to understand, effective governance and leadership;
- Many and varied opportunities for people to plug in; and
- A clear, coherent and compelling sense of identity

This final point is the one I want to emphasize this morning. Everything we do as a congregation is based on our sense of identity. Our sense of identity affects the way we worship, it influences the way we behave with one another, how – or whether – we engage in social justice outreach, how we educate our children and adults, how we govern ourselves, how we engage in stewardship, and how we welcome new people into our midst. In fact, I submit that the first three pillars of a flourishing church all flow out of the final pillar – that is, that high-quality worship, effective governance, and varied opportunities for people to plug in all flow out of a congregation’s clear, coherent and compelling sense of identity. From a clear sense of identity then, growth does not occur for the sake of growth, growth occurs as a byproduct of a clear and compelling sense of identity.

In the story about John told by Victoria Safford, John says he comes to church every Sunday – in all kinds of weather, when he is well and when he is not, when he likes the guest speaker and when he knows he won’t – because someone might miss him if he wasn’t there. John has a clear sense of purpose. And as I understand the story, John’s sense of purpose flows out of a clear sense of identity and commitment to serve the larger congregation – in all kinds of weather, when he is well and when he is not, when he likes the guest speaker and when he knows he won’t.

John made radical hospitality a lifelong spiritual practice. So often we get stuck in our ruts, our individual notions of what we think the church and the direction we think the congregation should take. As much as we hate to admit it, or at times even actively deny it, we Unitarian Universalists are an organized religion. As an organized religion we are subject to the structures and boundaries that come with any organized religion. I like to believe that our structures and boundaries are more forgiving and flexible than some other religions, but without structures and boundaries we would be in anarchy and would have no reason for gathering together as a group.

If we begin from the assumption that we are an organized and structured religion, rather than fight against it, then we begin to explore the purpose for our corporate – that is, communal - religious existence. As we explore the purpose of our existence, and especially when we agree with that purpose, then we may begin to explore our part and our willingness to commit to the larger identity. Though he may not have realized it, this is the process that John went through. He believed in the purpose of his church, and he believed in its mission, even when he did not agree with some of its particular movements.

And though it was not in the story, I suspect John was transformed, as people often are when they engage in a spiritual practice, through his weekly spiritual practice of radical hospitality. John could have been a bitter old man who removed himself from congregational life, resentful that new people were changing “his” church into a place that he no longer recognized. Instead, John leaned into and turned toward one of the things he resisted the most.

Welcoming new members can be a tricky process, if not downright scary, in many congregations, particularly if they are small. I can almost guarantee that if you ask anyone in any congregation whether or not they want their faith to grow, people will answer “yes.” But usually when people say they want to grow, what they are really saying is “we want to be just like we are now...but with more people.” If we are to be as truly welcoming as we say we are, then what is required of us is a weekly spiritual practice of radical hospitality, a practice that communicates through our words and our actions to everyone who enters that when they engage with us, “we are willing to be transformed.”

The simple fact is that when someone new joins our congregation, our dynamics and our sense of identity changes. This constant change is what is so often scary to the people who have found here a comfortable, or at least a familiar spiritual home. So we have at least two main choices in response to new people. We can say, in our words or in our actions, “You new people will fit in here as long as you continue to do things the way we’ve always done them.” Or we can recognize the life and vitality new people bring to our circle and we can say, as we did in our new member ceremony, “we promise to offer challenge, and to be open to challenge in return.”

Alice Blair Wesley is a Unitarian Universalist minister who regularly speaks up about the primacy of our free church tradition and the relationship our individual congregations have with the larger association. She writes:

The whole purpose of a rightly covenanted free church is to lift up worthy realities so that - hearing of them in story and song, “seeing” them, pondering them, reflecting on them together - we respond with the grace of love...any group of people who regularly lift up worthy realities...will thrive and draw new members into the covenant with them...Free church hope does not lie in “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” It lies in the ongoing dynamic of events in the life of any ongoing, faithfully covenanted group.

This is the growth I am talking about. Drawing new members into covenant with us because we “regularly lift up worthy realities” is the kind of growth I want to see happen in this, or any other Unitarian Universalist congregation.

If people come to this congregation and all they see is a group of people who want to maintain the status quo, or maintain a building, or maintain an equilibrium of relationship, or maintain a faith, then we have offered no vision, provided no cure, engaged in no transformation. Anyone can get any maintenance approach at any other church or business or social club in town.

But if people visit and see that our clear sense of identity compels us to consistently and continuously lift up worthy realities, then people will be attracted to us because our vision for engaging each other and the world, and for the work we do toward achieving that vision. In the words of our closing hymn, the words rephrased from the prophets of Hebrew Scriptures, “Come, build a land where the mantles of praises/ resound from spirits once faint and once weak;/ where like oaks of righteousness stand her people. / Oh, come build the land, my people we seek.”

The vision we have – any vision we have for our life together as religious people – is a vision we build together, each of you and you and I, together, here and now. We are a liberal religion that moves in awe and wonder through a faith in continuing revelation. We are a religion that makes room for both God and science to sit together in conversation. We are a faith with open minds and open hearts. We are people with many beliefs, but one faith. We are single

voices in a choir of thousands. We are tiles of color on a wall-sized mosaic. Our spiritual life and our congregational identity are not served if they are divided into separate kingdoms, ruled over by small powers. Rather, the land we seek to build, the vision we seek to create, is rooted in our understanding of and our service to the larger organic entity of our congregation.

As we welcome new members, as we move together in faith, I invite each one of us to speak our truths, but I also urge that we examine how we are part of the larger whole. Those who have been here a while have things to teach our new members. But these new members also have energy to share and insights to teach those who have been here a long time. No one person “owns” this church. We are all accountable together for what goes on here: new members and old; children and adults; leaders and followers; abled and disabled; theists and atheists; Humanists and Pagans.

We have good news to spread. We have life saving messages to share with a bruised and hurting world. Let us practice radical hospitality with one another and with the world outside. Let our communal identity emerge from our individual accountability to a common vision. Let us engage our vision as though our very life depended on it!