

*Ten Times Bolder*  
**Kent Hemmen Saleska, Minister**  
**UU Church of Minnetonka**  
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**Reading from *Belonging***

Unitarian Universalist Association Commission on Appraisal 2001 Report

Real community can only be built through hard and unglamorous work. Like any effective relationship, it requires commitment. Often these days we hear people say they are seeking a “spiritual community” but want nothing to do with “organized religion.” By the former they seem to mean a place that will meet their own religious needs; the latter they seem to associate with a place that will make demands upon them to support the institution’s needs. The reality is that you cannot have one without the other...

A commitment to building real religious community together is one of the significant meanings of church membership. How one reacts to one’s first disillusionment (and all the other disappointments that eventually follow) is an indicator and test of that commitment...One of the continuing challenges for liberalism is its inability to inspire and engender institutional commitments, transcendent of the concerns and interest of a given time or place...But you have to be trusting to be disillusioned, and surprising as it may seem, such disillusionment plays a crucial role in developing loyalties and commitments.

When...difficulties arise some walk away, others step back. But fortunately there are also those who remain steadfast through these times of disillusionment, whose loyalty grows beyond it...Out of their disillusionment grows a loyalty less to the institution and more to the values and ideals that the institution seeks to serve and embody. It recognizes that institutional as well as personal failure is virtually inevitable. This is loyalty of a high order. It requires extraordinary patience, tolerance, and the capacity to forgive. These are spiritual gifts, learned in real community.

[The second “Reading” was a video clip from the *Northern Exposure* TV series episode titled “Crime and Punishment”]

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Last spring in a sermon during my candidating week, I shared with you a vision and some programming I wanted to implement if you extended the honor of calling me as your next minister. One thing I said was, “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.” I shared this desire – among others – at that time because I wanted to be as open and as transparent with you before you called me so that, if you called me, you would not feel after I arrived as though you had been sold a false bill of goods!

Happily you did call me, and when I arrived here last August I implemented this process of not announcing upcoming services. The sign outside was changed to simply list the service times, and the titles of upcoming Sunday services are no longer announced in the Sunday Order of Service, the monthly newsletter or online.

Yes, I have encountered some resistance to this practice! This is new, it has not been done this way before, and we are people who want to know what we’re getting into. As you might expect, the range of responses I’ve gotten more or less follow a bell curve: a few people feel strongly opposed to this practice, a majority are surprised and range from feelings of annoyance to intrigue, and a few very much appreciate the practice. Some even reported to me they initially did not like not knowing what the service was going to be or who was speaking – but now they no longer question whether or not they will go to church, they just come.

My primary desire for not announcing Sunday services arises from a spiritual perspective on our community of voluntary association: that attending church and being part of a religious community is not a consumer habit, rather, it is embedded in and part of a spiritual practice. Just as we go to the mechanic to change the oil in our car, and as we go to the dentist to get our teeth cleaned, being an engaged member of a religious community and attending church is part of the ongoing spiritual maintenance we need to live our lives the remaining six days of the week.

I feel strongly about this practice of not announcing services for these and other reasons, but as I’ve told many people, I’m not willing to die on this hill! My hope and my expectation has always been that we would try it this way for six months or a year, to give people a chance to initially accept, then resist, then push through the resistance to something else. My curiosity is around what that “something else” might be.

My curiosity is around what lies beyond the resistance. My sense is that whatever resistance exists, it does not really revolve around whether or not five words of a sermon title are printed in an order of service or on the website. I do believe, however, that this practice points to larger and deeper questions about church life, like:

- What traditions are important to us and why?
- Who makes decisions in this congregation and why?
- Are there ways we promote consumerism in our congregation?
- If we do promote consumerism, is that a bad thing, a good thing, or a non-issue?
- How do we build trust and how do we sabotage trust?
- Why do we come to this church?
- What is the purpose of worship?
- What is the purpose of the church?

In my interactions with other ministers, one minister shared with me a question. It is a question their church consultant always asks when they met to talk about their vision and work as a congregation. The question is this: “What would your congregation be doing right now if you were ten times bolder?”

This question may make some of our fiscally conservative members a little nervous, but as we begin thinking about and discussing the purpose of worship and the purpose of the church, this strikes me as an incredibly relevant question.

Of course, I think it is also entirely appropriate to ask the next question: “*Why* would we want to be ten times bolder than we are right now, anyway?” My answer to that, as it is to many other things about church life, is wrapped up in our congregational understanding of our congregational sense of identity.

I believe that two primary functions of the church – this church in particular, but also the institution of the church in general – are to provide a sense of belonging, and to provide the continual opportunity for transformation. In other words, in a well-known phrase you may have heard before, the job of the church is comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

I do not believe a healthy church is a country club, where only people who are the right color with the right clothes and a pile of money are allowed to belong. I also do not believe the church is a buffet, where everyone is welcome and where you can believe whatever you want. In our liberal religious tradition, because we do not have a creed, it may be more difficult for us to define who we are as a church or as a faith. Nevertheless, we are called, as part of that liberal religious tradition, to constantly engage in the ongoing revelation of creation to both discover and continually articulate our identity.

One of my primary intentions as a minister is to invite us all into a deeper examination of our faith, and our faith practices. I see Sunday worship as the central hub of our faith around which everything else we do rotates. I do not want our faith to be a “pick and choose” faith. I want to raise the expectation of membership, including the expectation that we attend worship each week because that is part of what it means to be a member.

Having said that, I also believe that what holds a spiritual community together goes far beyond what happens here for one hour, one morning each week. It also needs to be said that any expectation around membership, even high and demanding expectations, does not need to be propelled or manipulated by a sense of shame. I am not your judge. You know your life better than anyone else. But if you do not come to church some Sunday, my hope is that the reason will be because you have personal reasons – illness, family, or simply because you need a break – but not because of who is speaking or what the topic will be.

I am inviting all of us to examine what it might mean, and what it might look like in our actions, if, as a religious community, we were to behave “ten times bolder.” I come from the perspective that conflict can be an opportunity. Out of this recent conflict has evolved a congregational workshop that will take place here at the church on Saturday, February 23<sup>rd</sup>. Two members of the Worship Arts Ministry – Pat Kreidler and Michael Holt – and two members of the Committee on Ministry – Mary Loberg and Mary Cotton Levin – are collaborating to facilitate a workshop around two of these basic questions: “What is the purpose of worship?” And “What is the purpose of the church?”

I hope you will be able to make it on February 23<sup>rd</sup>. It is a day we will begin, and continue, a crucial conversation about the existence and direction of this congregation. If we begin to think about being a congregation that is ten times bolder than we are now, I can imagine all sorts of things that could come out of the workshop. And I suspect that you can imagine all

sorts of ideas as well. It is my hope that a variety of voices will join in the conversation: voices of adventure and voices of caution; voices of anger and voices of forgiveness; voices of excitement and voices of fear; voices of certainty and voices of timid reluctance.

As part of being ten times bolder, we do not need to be afraid of conflict. A fear of conflict does not need to govern how we behave with each other. We are called upon as religious people to speak our truths. This does not mean being cruel, though. We can speak our truth in love. As I see it, speaking the truth in love is not so much a theological idea about the inherent worth of another person as it is about being aware of our own faults and frailties.

For example, recall the video clip we saw earlier from the television show, “Northern Exposure.” Normally, any conversation we might have about race and racism in our society, and in our church, would be engaged with feelings of anger, fear, and deep anxiety. Granted, I know that the idealism expressed in a television show may not be attainable in our real lives, but the clip we saw gives us an image of how things could be. Maurice, the white man, expresses his exasperation at one point with the discussion on race. He says, “Why is it that when I say something like that, I’m a racist, but when you say something like that, you’re just being thoughtful.” Bernard, the black man, responds with, “Oh no, Maurice, I’m a racist too! For a long time, I didn’t like being around white people. Once I realized that imperialism, slavery and genocide weren’t exclusively white institutions, it helped me loosen up a little bit!”

Now of course there are a lot of directions we could go with this little video clip, especially around issues of race. But the reason I chose it this week is because of the image we see of *how* this discussion is carried out. In this clip we see a beautiful image that is a mixture of compassion and blunt truth. Because he is aware of his own racism, that is, his own failings, Bernard is able to tell Maurice both that he is a bigot, but also that he genuinely likes Maurice!

If we were to engage in such a conversation here, I can imagine that it might easily slide into a heated debate full of anger, defensiveness, and many hurt feelings. We might even feel disillusioned about how this church is not as open and welcoming as we thought it was or should be. So as we engage each other and speak our truths with compassion for ourselves and for each other, I invite us to keep in mind the wisdom from the reading we heard earlier from the Unitarian Universalist Commission on Appraisal’s report on *Belonging*, when they said disillusionment plays a crucial role in developing loyalties and commitments. The Commission on Appraisal writes:

A commitment to building real religious community together is one of the significant meanings of church membership. How one reacts to one’s first disillusionment (and all the other disappointments that eventually follow) is an indicator and test of that commitment...When difficulties arise some walk away, others step back. But fortunately there are also those who remain steadfast through these times of disillusionment, whose loyalty grows beyond it...Out of their disillusionment grows a loyalty less to the institution and more to the values and ideals that the institution seeks to serve and embody.

It takes hard work and a lot of imagination to be ten times bolder than we are right now. And being bolder as an institution may not always mean being bolder as individuals. It may mean that we accept our own second choice so that the institution can move forward. It may mean becoming disillusioned, yet remaining loyal to the values and ideas that the institution of the church seeks to serve and embody. Sometimes the work to be ten times bolder as an

institution may just mean that as an individual we are wrong. I hate to think so, but I just could be wrong about my approach to not announcing Sunday services!

But if we engage the deep soul work to be aware of our faults even as we lift up our dreams and visions, we will be transformed. The process of excavating and honoring our faults and our dreams is a spiritual practice. The more deeply we engage in a spiritual practice, the more balanced and healthy we will become. When we are healthy, and do what we do well, the more we will be excited to share what we have and the more people will want to join us.

Rev. George K. Beach, in a 1999 Minns Lecture, uses a story from James Luther Adams that illustrates this understanding that the purpose of the church is transformation:

In the First Unitarian Church of Chicago we started a program some of us called “aggressive love” to try to desegregate that Gothic cathedral. We had two members of the Board objecting. Unitarianism has no creed, they said, and we were making desegregation a creed. It was a gentle but firm disagreement and a couple of us kept pressing. “Well, what do you say is the purpose of this church?” we asked, and we kept it up until about 1:30 in the morning. We were all worn out, when finally this man made one of the great statements, for my money, in the history of religion. “OK, Jim. The purpose of this church . . . well, the purpose of this church is to get hold of people like me and change them!”

Beach then goes on to say, “The purpose of the church is also to expose us to perspectives that fall outside our commonly circumscribed, self-protected existences, in order that we shall have the opportunity to read the signs of the times and to change.”

To be ten times bolder than we are right now requires of us lots of courage, awareness, compassion, humility, and imagination. I am confident that potential visitors will learn who we are when they read our website, learn about our activities, and read through past sermons. More importantly, they will also learn who we are when they visit. The real test for us, the test for how we retain visitors and invigorate our community, the test for how we measure ourselves as a healthy religious community, will be how much we allow ourselves to change when new people join us, and still remain committed to the new, constantly evolving and larger “us.” I invite you to join me in increasing our commitment to this community, risking disillusionment, engaging in transformation, and imagining what we could be and do if we were ten times bolder than we are right now.