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“So, you’re kind of non-denominational?” I’m asked sometimes, by those unfamiliar with Unitarian Universalist, trying to figure us out. “No,” I reply, “not non-denominational. We’re Unitarian Universalist. That’s our denomination.”

But it is hard for outsiders to grasp, for a couple of reasons. For one, we’re so small (just about 1000 congregations across the continent) and so good at hiding our light under a bushel that most folks have never heard of us. So, since we’re not the familiar Methodists, Catholics, or Lutherans, or even the less familiar Mennonites or Church of the Brethren, we must, in their eyes, be non-denominational. Secondly, we lack some of the characteristics common to other denominations. We have no creed, no official doctrine, no book of discipline, no ecclesiastical hierarchy. Rather, we’re an association of independent congregations with a shared history, a shared basic approach to matters of the spirit, and a rich, varied, and wide-ranging theology. And it is this Association that we celebrate here this morning, along with more than 500 of our sister congregations. In a few minutes we’ll take a special collection in support of the Unitarian Universalist Association Sunday fund. This year’s collected monies will be redistributed to groups and individuals to promote both lay and professional theological education. I have written my check for \$100.00. I hope you will be generous as well. (The goal for Association Sunday is \$50 per member.) First, however, I have a few words to say on the topic of being in association, of belonging, especially in consideration of this year’s Association Sunday theme, Growing Our Spirit.

I spent the beginning of this week at a retreat center near Windom, Minnesota, attending the annual fall gathering of the Prairie Star District Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association. Some forty UU ministers and ministerial students from Minnesota, Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas, North and South Dakota, and western Wisconsin come together on the prairie each October because we need to be with one another. Oh, we always have a program—an expert presenter on a topic relating to UU theology or the practice of our liberal ministry. But the real purpose of our meeting is found and fulfilled in late night conversations between roommates, over meals, during quick stretch breaks in the middle of the presentation, at worship, and throughout the social time following the last business each evening. At these times we reconnect with colleagues/friends we may see only once or twice a year—men and women with whom we share a calling, an education and vocational experiences. Then we are reminded that we are not alone in a sometimes lonely profession. Then we build relationships so that in times of need or trouble we have people to support us—people we know and trust, people who over time have come to care deeply about our lives and our ministries. Then we laugh and cry and exchange stories of ministry in the trenches. In other words, we hang with our own kind.

Last week Michele Wallace mentioned a South African worldview that can be summed up, roughly, “I belong therefore I am.” Aristotle wrote, “... it is evident, that the city belongs among the things that exist by nature, and that man is by nature a political

animal." Some translate that last phrase as "an associating being." Preeminent twentieth century Unitarian Universalist theologian James Luther Adams, from whom we heard in one of this morning's readings, wrote, "The quality of one's associations determines the character and the meaning of one's existence." And, as we heard in this morning's first reading, Unitarian minister A. Powell Davies preached that, "We grow by fellowship. The life of our minds and the joy of our hearts is very largely the gift of others."

But we don't need those thinkers to tell us these things. We live these things. Just think back a moment on all the "tribes" we named before I started preaching. I don't know about you, but I had trouble deciding just which of my t-shirt tribes to represent here this morning. I have a Red Sox t-shirt, a Columbia Heights High School sweat-shirt, t-shirts from the YWCA where I was on the board, Unity Church where I grew up, ARC retreat center, where I once spent part of my sabbatical, Harvard Divinity School and Yale University, where I received my theological education. And I have t-shirts representing loose tribes—movements more than actual organizations—a v-day t-shirt, signaling my place among those men and women desiring an end to violence against women, and a "gay? Fine by me" t-shirt, proclaiming my allegiance to that community embracing the range of human gender and affection expression.

Sometimes folks come to our churches and societies for years and years without ever signing the membership book. "I'm just not a joiner," they say. And that may be true, to a certain extent. Some people are loners. Some are wary of public affiliations. Some people are simply less likely to join groups than others. But most of us belong to one or more groups—neighborhood associations, the parent-teacher group, the alumni association, the Y, Scouts, Bluebirds, choir, band, women's groups, men's groups, book clubs, dog clubs, knitting circle, League of Women Voters, Lions...you get the picture. We belong because we are associating beings. Because belonging makes us feel like the dog in this morning's story. Most of you were too far away to see the pictures; the final one showed him on his back, on a pillow on the floor beside the Lucy and Fred's bed, feet in the air, look of contentment on his face, his paw in Fred's outstretched hand—and Fred and Lucy were holding hands in their sleep as well. We belong because "membership has its privileges"—that is to say, because membership in a group provides identity, support, standards, protection, boundaries, education, and friendship. We belong because we want to change the world, or some small part of it, and groups can accomplish more together than individuals can alone. We belong because it's fun to hang out with folks speak the same language, enjoy the same hobbies, are traveling the same life journey. Or, at other times, because it's fun to hang out with folks who speak other native languages, have different customs or ethnic backgrounds, are on different life paths.

We belong to many different kinds of groups. And most of us here this morning belong to Michael Servetus Unitarian Society—or are at least checking out the possibilities of membership in this congregation. We join churches, and this church in particular, for some or all the same reasons we join other groups. And we join to grow our spirits.

Now “spirit” can be a flashpoint word for many Unitarian Universalists. Many say it is for precisely non-spiritual reasons that they have cast our lot with the Unitarian Universalists. Some join congregations such as this one because they have no use anymore for the spirituality they experienced in other religious traditions. Some come looking for intellectual stimulation, engagement of their minds. Some come looking for a community, companionship, engagement of their hearts. Some come looking mostly for the opportunity to become involved in social justice work, engagement of their values and ethics. And some come looking for mix of the three—intellectual stimulation, community, and avenues of social justice. Growing their spirit is simply not on the wish-list for many Unitarian Universalists. No prayer, no meditation, no worship, no inspirational reading.

But I use “spirit” in the broadest possible sense. Spirit means breath, and breath is, well, the breath of life, the stuff of life itself. So, I would argue, when we engage our passions—intellectual, social, social justice, or even physical passions—we *are* growing our spirit. It is impossible, or at least unhelpful, to segment off parts of our selves. We are complicated beings, with minds, emotions, physicals needs and desires, consciousness and conscience. It’s possible to get out of balance, to over or under develop one aspect of our being, but in general, what’s good for one part of our selves is good for all the parts of ourselves. And church, in this case, a Unitarian Universalist church, is one place where attention is paid to almost all aspects of being—with the possible exception of the physical.

Church isn’t only about the superficially, stereotypically religious topics, endeavors and pursuits. This church strives to provide activities, experiences, opportunities to grow our spirits in all the ways the members of this congregation seek to do so. So it is the calendar bursts with Sunday services featuring a variety of speakers and topics, play practice, work-days, Osborne Road Clean-up, adult religious education classes, RE for children and youth, book clubs, social events and more. We come to church because, while we could find intellectual stimulation, community, social justice activities in a variety of place, here we can find some of them all. And while we could read and study on our own, become connected to our neighborhood community or our work-place community, and seek out social justice work in the wider metropolitan area as individual volunteers or activists, here we learn from and teach and work alongside and celebrate and mourn with a group of people dedicated to the same purpose.

We say, sometimes, that we come to the Unitarian Universalist church to be with like-minded people. But in reality, we’re of lots of different minds—liberal and conservative, scientific and poetic, activist and contemplative, athletic and scholarly, adventurous and tentative. What we do hold in common, as members of this tribe, with or without t-shirts, is a spirit. We share a spirit of exploration, inquiry, and curiosity. A spirit of independence. A spirit of service. A spirit of awe and wonder before the mysteries of the universe. And so we come together, drawn by that common spirit, in order to nurture and grow that common spirit.

Much the same is true of our congregations, within the Association. Some are primarily humanist in their theology. Some are primarily Christian. Some celebrate primarily earth-centered religions. Some offer excellent, top-notch preaching. Some specialize in life-span faith development. Some are known far and wide for their social justice work. And they all come together, as member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, for support, for networking, for standards, for solidarity, for resource pooling, and to grow our common spirit. The UUA sets standards for ministerial education and preparation, provides a process and resources for congregations seeking ministerial leadership, develops religious education materials, staffs an Advocacy and Witness Office to aid in social justice work, runs a publishing house, and, through the persons of the President and Moderator of the Association, presents the public face of Unitarian Universalism in America. Our fair share dues to the UUA (\$56/member for the 2008/2009 church year) support all these programs and more.

Last year, more than 600 congregations raised \$1.4 million on Association Sunday. Thus funds were allocated to the national awareness campaign in Time magazine, to support diversity in ministry, and to fund growth projects at the congregational level. The collection this morning, for Association Sunday, will, as I mentioned earlier, be devoted to lay and ministerial theological education. The funding priorities for this year's Association Sunday were determined according to the nearly 2000 individuals who completed an on-line survey.

I was asked once, by a prominent official of the Unitarian Universalist Association, why my home congregation was not a fair share dues paying congregation. It was a moment of public embarrassment for me as a lay-person about to enter the ranks of our professional, ordained ministry. In the many years since that question I've come to have a fuller understanding and appreciation of the challenge to balance a church budget, of the many needs in diverse directions, of the constraints put on members' personal abilities to contribute to the work of the church. I have sympathy for the leaders of that congregation who made the difficult decisions regarding fair share contributions. Yet I've also come to a fuller understanding and appreciation of the benefits to a congregation of being a dues paying member of the UUA. A strong Unitarian Universalist Association benefits all the member congregations, and all the individual members and friends of those congregations. I'm proud that Michael Servetus Unitarian Society is a fair share congregation. It means your delegates to the General Assembly get to wear a ribbon on their nametags. And it means you recognize there is strength in numbers, even among an independent, ornery, willful bunch, as UUs tend to be.

Today's collection is separate from and in addition to the dues this congregation already pays, because it is meant to fund those special projects I mentioned, above and beyond the operating budget of the Association. I feel called to be as generous as my means allow, because I believe in the power and spirit of Unitarian Universalism and I believe our tradition will be well served by this collection. Please contribute as your spirit moves you. Amen.