

Within the Circles of our Lives The Reverend Beth Graham

*Association Sunday Sermon
Oct 12, 2008
Arlington, VA*

Between last August when Michael and I ‘booked’ my visit here for Association Sunday – and today – much has happened in our country. My image of being here with you, to talk about the work of the Association of Congregations and the importance of our common cause with one another – and my intention to make an appeal to you for financial contributions to this year’s Association Sunday projects – well our ideas hadn’t factored in a Wall Street melt down the 2 weeks before, and an 18% plunge in the Dow this past week.

My fundraising hopes for today hadn’t imagined the ratcheted-up anxiety that every single American now feels when it comes to funding for the future.

So I begin by borrowing from the title of a new book, which is a compilation of brief, six word descriptions of the lives of 1000 people – a tome of “nano-memoirs” written by the famous and the obscure, the known and the unknown. The book title also has six words. It is called *Not Quite What I Was Planning*.¹

So though this week’s news is not quite what I was planning, maybe its timing is just right after all. For it seems more appropriate than ever to be talking about the importance of our UU faith communities and the spark of hope and commitment we reignite here each week.

I’m here with you, amidst the dance of “the circles of the years,” as Wendell Berry put it. And it is our spiritual lives which will be our focus today. Important stuff; especially in a week like this.

I was six years old when I first laid eyes on this stage; this pulpit; the hut-like structure along the front wall.

This room was so big back then. And the pulpit loomed large, like some sort of pedestal. Or rather, like some special box-upon-a stage.

Back then, it was like magic. A chunky block of wood for most hours of most days. But when the minister stood behind here, bracing his hands on the sides – and yes, it was always a ‘he’ – it became some sort of corral that he seemed to be pushing against. It became a place from which he spoke loud and big words and everybody listened.

That was 44 years ago; I was six. This congregation was 16. We were both just kids.

¹ Ed by Rachel Fershleiser and Larry Smith, HarperCollins Publisher, 2008.

Back then, Bob Clarke was the minister. Mrs. Worth was the DRE. Mrs. Fuerbach was my Sunday school teacher – or maybe that was later, in middle school.

But back then, I sat with my parents and 3 siblings – usually over on that side of the sanctuary. My sisters and I thought that that was the best viewing place for watching the antics of the squirrels in the top-most tree limbs. From there, we also watched the bony fingers of the winter trees etch a pattern against the cold sky. We watched the buds' bumps appear in spring, and crack open the lime-colored shoots of leaves, when they were ready. We watched the green screen of summer move in each year. It was there where we saw autumn sneak in each fall, turning the color of a leaf here and there at first. And then of course, came the stinging beauty of the season's crisp colors. As was said in Wendell Berry's words we heard at this opening of this service:

*Within the circles of our lives
We dance the circles of the years.
the circles of the seasons
Within the circles of the years..*

A collage of images fills my mind right now, as I stand in this box-upon-a-stage. And I realize that this room embodies all that today's Association Sunday service celebrates. Last year, at another Association Sunday service in another room in another town, a colleague said this to his congregants:

Religious life – spirituality itself – is really all about connections; our connection with other individuals, with a religious community, with the cosmos.²

For me, such connections were born and nourished, strengthened and tested right here in this room. And these bonds bring me back here today. Whether or not this is your permanent church home, may this room and this community be a special place along the way for you too, as we all “dance the circles of the years” in times of celebration as well as times of anxiety.

It's an honor to be here. And I thank Michael – and all of you – for your hospitality.

All of this remembering makes the first point of my sermon, which is this: **alone our vision is too narrow.**

This year's Association Sunday is focused on a core belief of our faith that our spiritual lives and religious understandings keep growing and changing – keep evolving and hopefully deepening – by the people and experiences that companion us along the way.

As Unitarian Universalists, we expect that we all have on-going homework to do when it comes to figuring out life's majesty and mystery; its blessings and its burdens.

² Rev. Mark Hayes

In this home, we teach our children to follow the challenges and contributions of a questioning mind. We hear our ministers preach about the lifelong journey we are on, as sentient, feeling beings. We respond to the pieces our musicians offer us that bespeak of the cyclical tension between the individual and the universal; between the finite and the infinite; between creation's grandeur and our own toehold in its plans.

But as great as all of our programming is – the religious education classes for our children; the sermons our best preachers preach; the music our talented artists compose, sing and play – as important as all of this is to our worship and our faith journey, it is not enough for us to stop there.

To practice our religion, we need to test the muscles of this faith out there in our lives. In our world. In times good and bad. And then come back here to let those ligaments cool down and replenish.

This year's Association Sunday is focused on providing relevant resources to help our clergy and our lay people in their theological deepening. Why? So that we, in turn, can better share with others the promise and abundance which is at the core of this open-hearted faith.

Last year's funds went for a national visibility and numerical growth campaign. Then, this church raised **\$6498** for Association Sunday. You were in the top 10 in overall giving for this District.

This year, we already have secured some lead gifts, which Michael will announce after the sermon. I hope that each of you will give generously to this project. You are one of **512** (and counting!) other UU congregations who are participating in Association Sunday this year. This represents 111,000 Unitarian Universalists who will be focused on ways we that together, we can grow our spirits.

After the sermon, Michael will explain **how** you can give to this project. (And yes, those envelopes in your pews have something to do with it.) But for now, I want to say that **why** it's important to give has everything to do with the message in our first hymn.

Where Do We Come From? What are we? Where are we going? These lines sing out the questions and work you do in here, in this room, each week. And they point to the ongoing efforts to solve this riddle, between your Sunday gatherings. The UUA is seeking funds to support the strongest programs possible that are already out there, and ones yet-to-be created, that help us as we wrestle with these questions – who are we? where are we going? – and to find the tools we need to better help our world.

A bare bones feature of our faith is that alone our vision is too narrow. We need the wisdom of one another. We need the insights of our elders. We need to teach and learn old and new ways to grow our spiritual muscles, so that we can bring deeper meaning to where we "live and struggle," as President Bill Sinkford says in our centering quote on the Order of Service.

A fable Elie Weisel loves to share is this³:

When the great Rabbi Israel Ball Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire; say a special prayer; and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted.

Years later, when one of his disciples had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest. But he would say aloud: "Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire. But I am still able to say the prayer." And again the miracle would be accomplished.

Another generation went by and another rabbi, in order to save his people once more, would go into the same forest. But he would say: "I do not know how to light the fire. I do not know the prayer. I only know the place in the forest and this must be sufficient." And it was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.

And then, in time, it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his own armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: "I am unable to light the fire. And I do not know the prayer. I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story. And this must be sufficient."

And it was.

Finding ways to better know – and share – our stories of hope and faith, redemption and forgiveness, strength and conviction – this is the goal of Association Sunday.

We know that growing our spirit doesn't just happen. We have to work at it and pass it on.

A second important aspect of our connections is this. Our religious mission of nurturing our spirit to help heal the world – of being open-handed with others – of "always making room" as your 60th anniversary slogan has it – these gestures are in and of themselves acts of faith – sprung from a belief in the future.

My second point: **being generous is always about tomorrow**

The second point I want to make, then, is this. The UU Congregation of Arlington is a remarkably visionary community. You often see things that aren't yet concrete. You build things you can't quite see. You even fund things you've not yet built. What do I mean?

I'm thinking, in part, about:

³ From *The Gates of the Forest* (Paraphrased)

- the justice programs that you have given birth to here in this place, so that you can go out there in other places, to help creation's arc 'bend toward justice' as Theodore Parker put it
- the current VOICE project comes to mind
- the supportive ministries you provide one another, in times when lives and relationships are most vulnerable
- the important conversations you are having with each other about the exciting and relevant vision of embracing multicultural and multiracial ministries here in this church and in our movement
- the commitment you have to life-long learning for all

I'm thinking, in part, about:

- the various collections of goods and money you've taken up for the New Orleans recovery project
- the roughly \$1.4 million budget you establish – and financially pledge to – each and every year for your mission and purpose
- the fact that last year you raised nearly \$6500 on Association Sunday
- **and** the fact that last year you re-established itself as a FAIR SHARE CONGREGATION, sending to UUA the suggested contribution level for a church your size and with your budget. You made a gift to us of over \$50,000! Its sole purpose, was so that the Association could provide resources back to our congregations.

I'm thinking, in part, about the fact that up the hill in the brick building known as Reeb Hall, this church spent its early days. But now, the year in which you celebrate your 60th anniversary, you sit in this remarkable building dreamt of and built by many of you. But this place is also the result of the hopeful and generous spirits of many who never saw this day, this year, this building, these times.

And of course you are already envisioning new dreams for your physical plant and, thus, your presence in the larger community.

You are a visionary congregation. None of this is lost on the UUA. You are a leadership congregation in every way. Not only do we thank you. We know that all of this is a manifestation of the belief in the yet-to-be. And that, my friends, is religion.

These times are tough, we all know. Some of us might not know how to light the fire; or say the prayer; or even find the place in the forest. But we do know our way here.

This month, regardless of our political party, we're anxious about a national election in which our next President will be chosen.

This month, regardless of how flush our own bank accounts are or aren't, we're aware that our nation's economy and way of life is due for a major-league reduction.

This month, as the autumn season blesses the Washington DC region with her colors and her candor, we're aware of the planet's health; the signs of aging it is showing. And we debate about the role we humans play in her destiny.

But in all this, we gather. We meet. And the boldest act we can make in the face of this, is to give. Give of ourselves and our resources. Give of our vision and our vocation. Give abundantly. For tomorrow.

Association Sunday is about something this simple: shoring up our resources so that we as ministers and laypeople can deepen our roots in this faith, in order to better live in and for this the world.

And so I've come full circle, back to where I began this sermon. Influenced by the 6-word book of memoirs, *Not Quite What I Had Planned*, I leave you with these phrases.

- Thanks be that we are here...
- Within the circles of our lives.
- Alone our vision is too narrow.
- Being generous is always about tomorrow.

One final fable:

In the Middle East, there was a little sparrow lying on its back in the middle of the road. A horseman came by, dismounted, and asked the sparrow why it was lying upside down like that.

"I hear the heavens are about to fall today," said the sparrow.

"Oh!" snorted the horseman. "And I suppose your puny legs can hold up the heavens?"

"One does what one can," said the sparrow. "One does what one can."⁴

May we each do what we can. For this Association Sunday for sure.

But also, on each and every week we gather in homes like this. And on all of the days in between.

⁴ *Friends Journal*, vol 29, no 16, Nov 1, 1983