

October 12, 2008 - Association Sunday: Growing Our Spirit, Deepening Our Shared Ministry

The Rev. Sally Hamlin speaking

When I was parenting teenagers a few years back, I recall more than one conversation that went something like this. I would say: "Well, I understand that *you* would not say/do/or participate in (fill in the blank with whatever topic), but from what I have seen and by your own admission, some of your friends do those things (or say those things, etc). So, you might want to consider who it is you choose to associate with. You do have a choice; I hope you will give this a little thought." And this is one way to frame our discussion about Association Sunday, which we celebrate today. It is all about choice. After all, we associate with one another, in this congregation, by actively choosing to do so. No one has legislated or demanded our participation. And we, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, who are in covenant with one another, need Association Sundays to strengthen the bonds of common purpose among us. We need to bring our congregations together to pursue our mission of affirming "the inherent worth and dignity of every person".

Association Sundays are a request by our UUA for all congregations to support, both spiritually and financially, the national work of the Association. It is a day during which thousands of UUs across the nation simultaneously celebrate our shared commitment to our faith.

Today is the second Association Sunday that our UUA has organized to help support its mission to *Growing Our Spirit*. This means 'our group spirit, the human spirit, the holy spirit, the spirit of life, the spirit of love'.¹ The monies collected today will not be used for the general operations of our association. Rather they will be directed towards projects focused on deepening our Shared Ministry as part of the *Now Is the Time!* Campaign.

Last year's Association Sunday funded, in part, the Time magazine ad series on Unitarian Universalism.

This is the first year that First Universalist is participating in Association Sunday. So congratulations are in order! Because once we decide to associate with one another through our covenant, we are creating the beloved community which we have visioned together, and in which all are worthy of participation.

We are living in extraordinary times, with headlines that seem as if they are coming from another planet, so bizarrely they barrage us, with warnings of more dire things yet to come. Our financial market is in complete upheaval. Our very foundations are cracked and weakening.

The frame we have used to determine what helps us feel safe has now been turned upside down. For generations we heard the mantra: live within your means, save for your future, invest wisely, take care of yourself now so you can have a healthy and long life.

It is time to think about doing the things we always do, the things we have always done, in a new way.

We need to ask ourselves what it is that will help us through these upheavals. What role does our congregation, our beloved community, play in our sense of security? How can I contribute to strengthening this relationship, when my own resources seem to be dwindling day by day? What can I possibly contribute to Association Sunday when I don't know if my cash is secure?

Well, first of all, you should know this: You are more important to this community than your money is. I will repeat that: You are more important to this community than your money is. This has always been and will always be, true.

At the same time, we know that money is needed to bring the community we vision into life. As Janus Mary pointed out last week in her offertory words, money, in and of itself, is neutral, it has no ethical denotation. The only meaning money has is the meaning that we give it.

Secondly, it is important to know what it is that will be funded by Association Sunday. Fifty percent will support Lay Theological Education programs. Congregations, districts, and seminaries can apply for grants to create programs which focus on spiritual and theological deepening.

The other half will be divided among three initiatives that support Excellence in Ministry programs, including scholarships for seminary students and support for our ministers of color.

Earlier we sang:

Blessed Spirit of my Life, give me strength through stress and strife.

Help me live with dignity; let me know serenity.

Fill me with a vision, clear my mind of fear and confusion.

When my thoughts flow restlessly, let peace find a home in me.

The words of our hymn today could not be more appropriate words for our current times, I think. We sing our prayer to find strength to deal with all that is before us, we pray for dignity, for serenity. We pray for clear vision, for freedom from fear.

And we recognize that when our monkey mind takes over and we spin instead of settle, we sing our prayer that peace finds its home within us.

And sometimes, especially right now when our financial institutions teeter dangerously over the brink of the abyss, threatening to disappear with our carefully saved assets- if we were among those fortunate enough to put anything aside- we find a new opportunity to make a difference.

But in times of stress and fear, we tend to forget the basics about what is important. I have had conversations with several of you who are very concerned about your financial future. Some of you retired with well-planned retirement funds in place, but are now considering returning to work, given your recent loss of capital. You wonder if your investments will have time to recover from these losses before you will need to draw on them.

Some of you were already living pretty close to the bone. You are now worried about what will be next. Will your health benefits be cut back? Will your premiums increase to the point of unaffordability? Will you need to find ways to help adult children raise their children, your grandchildren, as their jobs are lost and incomes halved?

In times such as these it is easy to slip into the mind set of 'Scare-city' as political comedian Swami Beyondananda names it. Swami B calls us to, instead, declare ABunDance for All. He says we need to turn to thinking of wealth for the whole, instead of wealth down the hole, we need to turn to concern for justice, and turn away from the concern for 'just-us'. We need to live by the Golden Rule, instead of the rule of gold. We need to live in a state of 'Emerge 'n See', instead of residing in a state of emergency.

This is the time when we begin to realize we need to weave a web of mass construction, as Swami says, and imagining a new world to replace our sick one, tell one another of our visions for the future, playing the game of Extreme Planetary Makeover. Speak of our fears, but work to change the way we see these times.² What can we do to change our perspective, to move from survival to 'thrival' (Swami B)? Well, Association Sunday gives an opportunity to do just that, with a gift of our financial support.

Let me explain why I will be donating \$100 to Association Sunday today, and why I have asked your board of trustees to consider making donations of \$50 or more. It has to do with stewardship, and putting my money where my mouth is, and

walking the path of faith instead of fear.

When I was in seminary, I took a class called Sociology of Religion. I was challenged by my professor's claim that while Unitarian Universalists were among the wealthiest of all denominations, our financial commitment to our denomination was among the lowest. I was shocked by this information. I didn't know who he was talking about, but it wasn't the UUs I knew! The UUs I knew were generous and committed. We were proud of Unitarian Universalism. We found ways to live out the principles of our faith in the world by working on and donating to many good causes- ACLU, Save the Whales, Doctors Without Borders, National Public Radio-what was he talking about?

Well, after doing my own research I came to the sad conclusion that Professor Baggett was correct. Proportionally speaking, UUs, in general, give a smaller percentage of their net worth to support their faith tradition than others do. In fact, we were second to the bottom on the list.

But, still, something did not sit right with me about this. I thought and thought about it until finally I came up with this theory. While others commit their resources to their faith communities with the desire and trust that their faith community will represent their values in the world, as UUs we often spread our resources out, over, and among, many worthy causes, and we make our congregation and our UUA only one of the many to which we pledge our funds.

This was a light bulb moment for me. It was, in the words used by those who give proportionally more of their net income to their faith community, a "Come to Jesus Moment!"

This got me thinking: if I truly believed in the saving message of my chosen faith community, then it was time to put my money where my beliefs are: in you, in one another, in Unitarian Universalism.

My new plan of giving, or stewardship focused on my faith, has completely reinvented the way I think about giving in my life. I now think about how I can be a steward of my faith and my religious community, and my beliefs at the same time. I think about how the money I have to give can be used within the Unitarian Universalist world, and I give until it feels good. My colleague, the Reverend Victoria Weinstein says this about stewardship: "Stewardship of the 21st century is not about providing services and a superior product to consumers, it is about fostering worshipful hearts and reverent souls who love what the church represents so much that they begin to live their lives in accordance with its ideals".³

I now tithe to support Unitarian Universalism. Some years this has been a full ten percent of my net income. Some years, it has been much less. I certainly did not start with anywhere near ten percent. I started small, and waited to see what difference my focused giving made in my life. I was concerned that I would feel a bit too stretched. And I *was* stretched. But not in the way I expected. By making my regular tithe to Unitarian Universalism, and by redirecting other monies I might ordinarily have focused other causes, I was finding that I was feeling spiritually stretched, as in expanded. As in, strengthening my belief in others, strengthening my belief in my belief. Tithing has helped me keep despondency, hopelessness and powerlessness at bay.

Tithing has also given me a new way to look at my faith. It has deepened my commitment to working with others to change the world by living the life I say I believe in. Tithing as a spiritual practice allows me to feel more deeply connected to all, more embedded within the interdependent web of all existence. It helps me see myself as only one part of all that exists. And it helps me feel that I have something to say in the face of all that seems outside my control, and that is this: I choose to associate with you. I choose to associate with others who can make a difference, and I choose to make my association count, with my time, with my life, with my

resources, with my heart and with my soul.

And this, for me, is enough. And this, for me, is just and good. And it gives me great comfort to know that my financial support of our faith is one way I can express spiritual congruency. Will you join me and your Trustees today in supporting Association Sunday, with your best offering?

If you did not get a chance to place your offering in the plate as it passed the first time, there is still time to do so now; you can give your envelope to an usher on your way out after our Postlude.

In closing, the words of the 19th century Unitarian theologian and minister, William Ellery Channing come to mind. Let me share them with you:

To live content with small means;

To seek elegance rather than luxury, and refinement rather than fashion;

To be worthy, not respectable, and wealthy, not rich;

To study hard, think quietly, talk gently, act frankly;

To listen to stars and birds, to babes and sages, with open heart;

To bear all cheerfully, do all bravely, await occasions, hurry never.

To let the spiritual, unbidden and unconscious, grow up through the common.

This will be my symphony.

May it be so. Amen.

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1. [UUA Association Sunday Resources](#), 2008 ↵
2. Used by permission; excerpted from *Do We Go for ABunDance or Stay Stuck in ScareCity?*, Steve Bhaerman, writing as 'Swami Beyondananda', 2005, www.wakeuplaughing.com ↵
3. Rev. Victoria Weinstein, excerpt from sermon on Worship Web, found at www.uua.org ↵