

Today is Stewardship Sunday, and the official kick-off of the annual Canvass for the Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Andover (lovingly known to us as the UUCiA). Traditionally, this would be the time that I might preach about the meaning of money, and how it's connected to values, and how you should give generously to this congregation because we align with your values. But I'm not going to talk about that right now. I'll let the words of Coyote (from our reading/skit by Webster Kitchell) speak for themselves.

So, what then will I talk about in this homily? I want to think about our future. I want to think about how the UUCiA can become the congregation it's meant to be.

I recently read a book that is gaining popularity in Unitarian Universalist circles. It's called *Kicking Habits: Welcome Relief for Addicted Churches*, written by Thomas G. Bandy. In this book, Bandy writes about *growth* as what "occurs when a living organism truly 'thrives'"<sup>1</sup>. Bandy explains that "Thriving congregations... do not have to be big. They may be petite or small..."<sup>2</sup> – they are sometimes "naturally petite" based on various factors. But that doesn't mean that they can't be thriving congregations. And I would say to you that the UUCiA *is* thriving. We are *internally thriving*, in my estimation. This is a congregation where people really like each other and enjoy each other's company, which is wonderful and truly should not be taken for granted. And this is a congregation that has an amazing number of things happening – wonderful programs and ways to participate. When I came here in July 2009 as your brand new minister, I was truly impressed by all the lay-led programming and fellowship opportunities that we have, and by our small-but-excellent religious education program. I still am impressed by it. I don't take this "internally thriving business" lightly... All congregations have times when they do *not* thrive internally, and I know that you have been through such times. You have worked hard to be the internally thriving place you are today, and I commend you for it.

But my question for the morning is, how can we now become *externally thriving*? How can we be a congregation that everyone in the Merrimack Valley knows about, whatever our size might be? How can we become a more powerful presence in the community?

In his book, Bandy explains that many congregations today are in the habit of believing that their main appeal is as an institution. In other words, historically, people in this country have wanted to belong to some sort of religious institution, to some congregation. And historically in this country, there was comfort and even self-esteem and sometimes prestige involved when one was the member of the right congregation. And so, proud church members or proud synagogue members, for instance, were basically content to belong to the congregation and to work to keep everything going. It was all about *belonging*. And it was also, in part, like the old sitcom, *Cheers*: "You wanna be where everybody knows your name." And there was – and *is* – real pleasure in this kind of belonging. It can be an incredible feeling to belong to an institution that you believe in, where you like the people and the style and the worldview.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas G. Bandy, *Kicking Habits: Welcome Relief for Addicted Churches* (Abingdon Press, 2001), p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

But this model is one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Bandy says, it is not the model of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He says that for today's younger adults, and for many unchurched adults in general, there is no inherent desire to belong to a congregation. And so we can present to people a wonderful, internally thriving congregation – which I wholeheartedly believe is what we have here... and yet people still might not come. Why? Because as Bandy tells us, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, people aren't looking to belong to an institution. They're not looking to *belong*; they're looking to *be changed*. They're looking to be transformed. How can the UUCiA do more of that? How can we be the congregation where people come not so much to *belong* as to *be changed*?

Some of you might know that last month, I was lucky enough to go to Monterey, CA, for a UU Ministers Association training. In addition to the training, we were treated to a pretty great worship service each morning. My very favorite sermon of the week was delivered by the Rev. Dr. Kay Lynn Northcutt. Rev. Dr. Northcutt is not a Unitarian Universalist. She is an ordained minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

It's amazing how an outsider can often help you see yourself and understand yourself more powerfully than an insider can. And so it was with Northcutt. She preached, in part, on the calling, or vocation of Unitarian Universalists. And indeed, this outsider to our tradition framed it more succinctly and perfectly than I've heard any insider frame it. What is the calling, what is the vocation, of Unitarian Universalists? Northcutt framed it very simply: saving lives. Our calling as Unitarian Universalists is *saving lives*.

No, we don't focus on saving people so that they will enjoy bliss in an afterlife. Our Universalist forebears preached that all souls were saved anyway, that no loving God would condemn anyone to eternal damnation. And our Unitarian forebears had something important in common with the Universalists – namely, a focus on *this* lifetime... a focus on living well in *this* lifetime, saving lives in the here and now. And this tradition continues even today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. So how do we save lives?

Like other congregations from many religious traditions, we help to save lives in the here and now through social action. In part, we save lives in the here and now by helping to provide for the basic needs of our fellow humans. To give just a few examples, through our work with Habitat for Humanity and the Andover Community Trust, we help to provide shelter – affordable housing and shelter for people in need. Through our work with Bread and Roses, we help to provide food and sometimes clothing for those who need it. Through our work with the Refugee Immigration Ministry, we help recent new refugees and immigrants to find housing and clothing and furniture and so on. Those are just a few ways that we, along with other congregations in other faith traditions, do our part to help save lives through social action. This is stewardship of the community, an important part of any thriving congregation's vocation. You can never do too much social action.

But there's a way that Unitarian Universalists can save lives even beyond this important social action. It's a different kind of community stewardship. In her sermon, Northcutt preached in part about the safe haven UUs give to those in the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community. Think of all those people, of all ages, really – teenagers and older adults – questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity... struggling with coming out. In many

traditions, this is simply forbidden. Not allowed. You might be shunned, or at best, not supported, if you are bisexual, gay, lesbian, transgender, or even questioning. Not so here at the UUCiA, in the proud tradition of UU congregations that have worked to become Welcoming Congregations. Through our acceptance and embrace of the GLBT community, and through our advocacy on behalf of GLBT causes, we save lives. I am often unspeakably grateful that I was raised in a religious tradition that held me when I came out as a lesbian in my 20s... a tradition that not only tolerated me the way I was, but embraced me – eventually ordaining me as a minister, even. But this isn't the only way that Unitarian Universalists can save lives.

There's a campaign in the Unitarian Universalist tradition that is focused on saving lives. I've told you about it before. It's the Standing on the Side of Love campaign. As the Standing on the Side of Love, or SSL (called "Sizzle" for short) website puts it, SSL allows UUs and others to "harness love's power to challeng[e] exclusion, oppression and violence based on sexual orientation, gender identity, [and also] immigration status, race, religion, or any other identity."<sup>3</sup> As former UUA President Bill Sinkford put it when the SSL campaign started, "Every day people are targeted because of identities which are somehow deemed 'okay to hate.'... "We are called to use our public presence to more actively stand up with and for those who are targets for violence, exclusion, or oppression because of who they are."<sup>4</sup>

And so I say to you that through SSL, Unitarian Universalists can save lives. We can be among the brave people of faith in the United States today who consistently stand up for those who are GLBT, for those who are harassed based on race and perceived immigration status, for those who are under siege for being Muslims. Unitarian Universalists, at our best, do just this: harness the power of love to stand in solidarity with those who are oppressed, for those who are the targets of hatred, discrimination, and even violence. And when we stand in solidarity, we save lives.

This is how the UUCiA can increasingly become not only a wonderful place to belong, but also a wonderful place to *be changed*. Because when we stand on the side of love, we save our own lives, too. To use traditional language, we save our own souls when we stand on the side of love. This is the way that we can, as Gandhi put it, "be the change we want to see in the world". When we work to transform the world, we will be transformed in the process. To paraphrase the words of the Rev. Dr. Kay Northcutt, "[We] have a life saving, inclusive religion. [We] have a religious greatness to live out.... [Let us] find [our] greatness!"<sup>5</sup>

And that brings me to my final point... passing the buck.

This morning, I ask you both to pass the buck, and *not* to pass the buck. First, please *do* pass the buck... or bucks. I know this is a difficult economic time. It's a challenging time, financially, for some of us. Today I ask that you make a pledge that is as generous as you are able at this time. Together, we will do our best to put it to good use – to make it money that is profoundly

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.standingonthesideoflove.org/about/#about>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.uuworld.org/news/articles/147261.shtml>

<sup>5</sup> Rev. Dr. Kay Northcutt's words: "You have a life saving, inclusive religion. You have a religious greatness to live out. I believe in you.... find your greatness!" I was helped to remember her wording by consulting <http://blog.timesunion.com/trumbore/the-heart-of-christianity/711/>

well spent. So yes, as you are willing and able, please pass the bucks. That's the first stewardship request.

The second stewardship request? Please do *not* pass the buck. Please don't pass along the responsibility of your sacred calling as a Unitarian Universalist. You have a vocation: saving lives, right here, right now... continuing to help those in need... increasingly standing on the side of love in solidarity with those facing oppression, right here, right now... doing the work of transformation, and being transformed. I hope that we will face the future fearlessly, with love and excitement, with the urge to thrive inside and out! May we dare to dream beautiful dreams of change and transformation together. Blessed be, and amen.