

“The Foundation of a Vision”  
March 21, 2010  
Unitarian Universalist Meeting of South Berkshire  
Rev. Carol Allman-Morton

Readings:

From the Commission on Appraisal report, *Belonging: the meaning of membership*, published in 2001 p. 13

“The congregation that understands its purpose in terms of offering people a place to grow and change and to make connections will also be a congregation that understands itself to be an organic entity that also grows and experiences transformation. George K. Beach asserts, “People do not ‘join’ a covenanted community; rather they constitute it; there is no ‘it’ without them and each time new folks join, the whole is literally reconstituted”...Every person brings a different set of experiences and expectations and ways of doing things into the mix. The result will always be different, surprising and vital. A vital, growing, changing congregation is bound to look outward as well as inward. In addition to supporting the spiritual growth and deepening faith of individual members, it will always be asking the question about how it fits into the larger community. By words and deeds that are visible and audible, a healthy congregation shows people what Unitarian Universalism is at its best. You might say that this is the most powerful form of evangelism: demonstrating the possibilities that liberal religion offers simply by being the way we are in the world.”

Ecclesiastes 4:7-12

<sup>7</sup>Again, I saw vanity under the sun: <sup>8</sup>the case of solitary individuals, without sons or brothers; yet there is no end to all their toil, and their eyes are never satisfied with riches. “For whom am I toiling,” they ask, “and depriving myself of pleasure?” This also is vanity and an unhappy business. <sup>9</sup>Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. <sup>10</sup>For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. <sup>11</sup>Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? <sup>12</sup>And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.

Sermon:

*The Straight Story* is a movie directed by David Lynch from 1999. It’s a road trip movie, but not your run of the mill road trip. In the story, a 73 year-old Alvin Straight sets off on a journey to see his brother who has had a stroke. Straight and his brother are estranged and have not seen each other in years. He realizes that if he wants to set things right, he needs to see his brother sooner rather than later. Straight can’t see well and does not have a car, so he builds a trailer that he attaches to his riding lawnmower. The trailer has a place for him to sleep when it is raining, and he fills it up with canned food and camping gear. Straight sets off to drive hundreds of miles to see his brother on his lawnmower. One night as he is camped by the side of the road, he meets a teenage girl who has run away from home. As Alvin puts wood on the fire he says to the young woman, “When my kids were young I played a game with them. I’d give each of them a stick. One for each of ‘em, and I’d tell them to break it. They’d do that easy. Then

I'd tell them to make one bundle of all the sticks and try to break that. And of course they couldn't. I used to say that was family, that bundle.”

This echoes our reading from Ecclesiastes. “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help... And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.”<sup>1</sup> It would be possible for us all as individuals to go out in to the world and do good works. We could cultivate individual spiritual practices and grow as people. But when we do this work in community we are stronger. As part of the Unitarian Universalist Meeting of South Berkshire community we provide worship services and support social justice projects locally and globally. We offer lifespan religious education and fellowship. As part of the national body of the Unitarian Universalist Association people are writing religious education curriculum, lobbying congress, and building homes and water projects in developing countries in our name. We have two independent book presses, resources and departments to go to for help with growth, anti-racism work, being welcoming to the LGBT community and more and more. Most importantly to this particular congregation is that together we are “not quickly broken”. We have one another for support and care. Through our community we develop spiritually and in our worship we lift of up things of worth.

The mission of the Unitarian Universalist Meeting of South Berkshire states: “We come together from diverse traditions as a welcoming, religious community with shared values, seeking spiritual growth, lifelong religious education, and fellowship. We strive to promote justice, acceptance, and compassion in the world.” This mission is what the ministries of this congregation support. In the last year we have continued the ministries of membership, worship, lifespan religious education, social justice, stewardship, and pastoral care. The congregation has been talking about and working toward growth all along, but in the last year, has established a core group of members who will develop this work into a growth ministry for the congregation. By this I mean they will explore how and what kind of growth will help the congregation to fulfill its mission.

The members of the congregation have covenanted to “commit ourselves to provide support for our individual members and families of every variety in their emotional, spiritual, and intellectual lives; to promote the healthy growth of our congregation through full participation and creation of a welcoming environment for all people; and to unite in upholding and sharing the Unitarian Universalist principles.” What does that really boil down to? We covenant to love one another in open community. In addition to our members, our congregation has a lot of friends who participate, come to worship or classes, and offer financial support. We are grateful for our friends, and my hope, is that more of our friends may become covenanted members over time. One doesn't need to be a member to contribute to most of what happens in this congregation. But there are some privileges like serving on the board and voting at annual meetings that are only open to members. Those are important things, but most important are the promises we make to one another as members. We covenant to provide support to one another and we promise to participate and create a welcoming environment.

It is through our covenanted participation that we accomplish our mission. We participate in worship, but also in our committees, classes, justice projects, and fellowship. Members are also asked to participate through worship responsibilities that we share together, like greeting people on Sunday evenings, lighting the chalice and so on. Our members have a

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<sup>1</sup> Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

general understanding of the history and traditions of Unitarian Universalism. Members are asked to support the financial needs of the congregation and are also asked to do something that many congregations are not so bold as to request. We are asked to “help us grow by telling others about our spiritual family and by encouraging them to join us.”

This congregation has a “saving message for the world”. We are a community seeking to make the world a better place. One way is by fostering a community that provides a home for a variety of seekers. As we heard in the Commission on Appraisal report earlier, “George K. Beach asserts, “People do not ‘join’ a covenanted community; rather they constitute it; there is no ‘it’ without them and each time new folks join, the whole is literally reconstituted”...Every person brings a different set of experiences and expectations and ways of doing things into the mix. The result will always be different, surprising and vital.”<sup>2</sup> We are a vital congregation because we have lived our covenant to be an open community.

The foundation of our vision, covenant and ministries is love. The foundation of the stewardship of the congregation is love. As a bundle together, we are strong. We support each other. One way we support each other is through pooling our resources – this is true for our time and talents, and also our financial means. The money that we share in this community is used to fulfill the mission of the congregation. To “come together from diverse traditions as a welcoming, religious community with shared values, seeking spiritual growth, lifelong religious education, and fellowship. We strive to promote justice, acceptance, and compassion in the world.” We use money to connect our congregation with the wider world through the donations we make as a community to those in need, such as our weekly collection for People’s Pantry, through social justice projects when we “share the plate” each month and work with organizations like Construct, and through the wider Unitarian Universalist community in both dues and donations such as we collected on Association Sunday in the Fall. We use our shared funds to pay for a professional minister and administrator. We pool our resources to offer worship services, spirituality groups, fellowship and religious education that help put us back together when we are broken, and inspire us to continued growth and transformation.

It is reported that Unitarian Universalists are notoriously poor givers as a percentage of their income to their congregations. This may be for a variety of reasons, including low expectations, other philanthropic pursuits, reliance on endowed funds and so many other reasons. I do not know what the giving rates are for this congregation. What I offer to you at this pledge time is this advice. Don’t think about the pledge amount you are going to give as a percent of the pie in the operating budget, but rather ask the question: how are *you able* to help fund the mission of this congregation? What means to you have at your disposal? I am grateful that I will be back with you next year, and I will be placing my pledge in the basket as well. I first thought about what I could afford to offer as a percentage of my income. I was trying to hit a percentage I would feel good about. I got to a ball park and then I thought, well, I really want there to be resources for some of the ministries that got cut last year, and I really want the congregation to have the opportunity to go back to sending money to the Unitarian Universalist Association, and then I wrote down a number. I based my pledge on my vision for the congregation, and on the mission of the church.

I encourage all of us to think about our pledge in these terms. What means do you have to financially support the ministries of this congregation? What an amazing situation we could put ourselves in if our pledge came in higher than we are hoping. What more might we be able to accomplish in the next few years?

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<sup>2</sup> *Belonging*, p. 13

In our grace note today, there were two sons given the task of filling a room with anything they chose, and they were given five pieces of silver to do so. One son used his coins to pay a man to bring in vegetable waste. The other son did not use any of his coins, but rather lit a candle and let its light fill the room. I like this story especially because it reminds me of the great Universalist, John Murray's message about letting our light shine. "You may possess only a small light but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women. Give them, not Hell, but hope and courage. Do not push them deeper into their theological despair, but preach the kindness and everlasting love of God." John Murray's Universalism is woven all through the covenant and ministries of this congregation and of Unitarian Universalism. It is in our inclusion and openness and our call to talk with others about our faith. It is in our foundations: in our love of one another and our belief that goodness is something we are called to as human beings...that there is reason and call to hope. Imagine how much of the world we can light when we all bring our candles and let them shine.

If you have been a friend of this congregation and are thinking about becoming a member, I encourage you to do so. I invite you to join the covenant, or in Beach's words, to constitute the covenant together, and to help shape the future of this great religious community.

So may it be.