

Spiritual Stewardship
Rev. Carol Allman-Morotn
UUMSB
March 22, 2020

Reading:

From Sufi poet Mahmud ash-Shabistari (1288–1340)

Know the world from end to end is a mirror;
In each atom a hundred stars are concealed,
If you pierce the heart of a single drop of water,
From it will flow a hundred dear oceans;
If you look intently at each speck of dust,
In it you will see a thousand beings;
A gnat in its lines is like an elephant;
In the heart of a barley-corn is stored a hundred harvests,
Within a millet-seed a world exists.
In an insects wing is an ocean of life,
A heaven is concealed in the pupil of an eye,
The core in the center of the heart is small,
Yet the lord of both worlds will enter there.

Sermon:

I went to our building yesterday to pick up some things for worship. I was surprised by my feelings walking through the space. I zoomed around to grab things that would be helpful: candles, our chalice, a table, and so on, and I reflected on our spiritual home as I prepared myself to maybe not see it again for a while. We are so lucky to have such a beautiful sanctuary. I remember when we were first in the building, before it was even ours, almost exactly six years ago, so many people remarked about the feeling in that room. It is big, and spacious, but not overwhelming. I love all the warm wood. Yesterday the pews were very shiny in the afternoon light. I am going to miss worshipping in our physical home while we are dealing with all that *is* right now, but I am so grateful for the technology that allows me to see and hear so many of you, and I am so grateful we are able to continue to worship, learn, and connect with one another.

We have had a home together for six years, but for the 19 years before that, we lived into the truth that a building does not make a congregation, but the people do. As I was preparing for today, I found the prayer that I wrote for our building dedication in 2014:

A building is not a home
Relatives do not make a family
A group of people is not a community
Love makes homes,
families,
communities.
We have always been a community.
We have built homes in every place we met.

Today we have a home that can help us connect with more people,
more of the community,
to share of ourselves and help others in new ways.
We could do good, and work for justice in the world without this home,
without this community.
People *can* grow, love, and change without a spiritual and religious home.
We freely choose to do that work, the work of being human, together.
We gather because we believe we are stronger in community,
to reflect on the whys and hows of the universe,
to hold and be held when we are broken.
We recognize that we are radically interdependent.
We are grateful for each other.
We are grateful to all those outside our community who have helped and shaped us on
this journey.
...Let's breathe together in this space, this home, made by love. Amen.

It's all still true. Recognizing that it is not a building, but the people and their intentions who make a community is in our congregational DNA. Before our space in Housatonic, we worshiped in five different locations, we changed meeting times, ministers, and lots more. Our ability to manage change, to adapt, and grow as a community in the midst of challenges, and to not make an idol of our building, is a testament to the commitment of our congregational leaders and our skills as a community. And now... now we are offered a new test. Not only are we not in our building home, we are not able to physically connect with one another. We are managing all sorts of emotions and challenges from personal health and financial worries, to practical concerns about being sure we have what we need, as we all prepare for what comes next. As a layer on that personal and societal challenge, in a few weeks we will be launching our annual stewardship pledge campaign, to fund the programming, worship, and infrastructure of our congregation.

A stewardship campaign is an opportunity for us to reflect on our mission and vision for our community, and on the meaning of stewardship. Stewardship is the work that we do to maintain the health and well-being of this spiritual community. That comes in a variety of ways. It is the service of so many people on committees and in volunteer roles that make this congregation run. We have many volunteers who are working in what is sometimes called a volunteer staff role, doing the kind of work that in a larger organization would be done by staff. Paying the bills, opening the building for renters and managing rentals, copying the order of service each week, managing our member database, running the nursery, leading the choir, playing music on Sundays, mowing the lawn, and I am sure a million things that I can't think of now. The work that you all do for our building, and for each of us, is what makes our budget sustainable, and keeps us moving forward. Thank you. And I expect that you, and the many folks on our "infrastructure-type" committees and our Board continue to do this work, because it is feeding your spirit, as the floor sweeper at Notre Dame said, to be part of building a cathedral. All that we do has the potential to be grounded in spiritual practice, and in a worshiping community, that is all the more important.

In its early years, this congregation set its mission:

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.

I sometimes offer this in the shorthand: Love, Justice, and Compassion in Spiritual Community. We do the work of supporting this congregation in our time, commitment, and dollars because we believe that Unitarian Universalism is important, meaningful, and that our community has something to offer to the world. In addition to worship, and the wonderful volunteers who make that happen from the committee to musicians our choir, to guest and lay preachers, for a congregation our size we have a very robust lifespan faith development program. It includes small group ministry, Living by Heart, and a spirituality group which are all lay-led, in addition to Second Sunday School, Deep Fried Faith, Coming of Age and more. We also have a very strong Social Justice Team who do important work in the community and work especially hard to help our congregation connect with justice leaders in our larger Berkshire community, and the world. We have a Caring Team who work very hard to offer support to those in the congregation who need assistance, and before everything went sideways this month, we had started thinking about ways to deepen this work for the folks on the team. These teams support, love, justice, and compassion in spiritual community. Our congregation stewards deepening spiritual development, and *all* the work that we do to support our congregation is spiritual work.

Our reading this morning reminds us that within each drop of water are oceans, and that everything from gnats to elephants to the universe is made out of the same stuff. “In the heart of a barley-corn is stored a hundred harvests, within a millet-seed a world exists.” It is not only the plant that will grow from that seed we can imagine harvesting, but we can also imagine the hundreds of harvests that will follow. Something as small as a seed not only promises fruit but the potential of sustaining fruit for a lifetime.

I invite us to think outside the box as we make our pledge this year. The dollars that we give make our community possible. They support getting our message into the world. They support exploration for all ages about theology, history, spirituality, and meaning-making. Our dollars fund our worship services, social justice projects, dish soap, Zoom accounts, our building, and staff, with a mission to grow love, justice and compassion in spiritual community. So when you consider what your pledge is going to be, and how big of a commitment you can make, I encourage you to think from a place of spiritual grounding. Through our spiritual stewardship of our congregation, we collect the seeds that will sustain it into the future. May we consider the fruit of this community today, how much we love and care for it and how much of a role it plays in our lives, and also the seeds of tomorrow, what future we want to plant for this congregation in the years to come. Acknowledging the challenging landscape in which we find ourselves, what resources can we make available *this* year, financial, and of our time and expertise, to help this community continue to as a home for seeking spiritual growth, lifelong religious education, and fellowship, striving to promote justice, acceptance, and compassion in the world that lasts long into the future?

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So may it be. Amen.