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UUFTC, Sonora

Sharing the Love, and Building on it too!

Last week, I was doing my usual volunteer shift at the Marine Mammal Center, near the Golden Gate Bridge. It turned out to be a hectic evening. There were only three of us, and several seriously wounded or ill animals were unexpectedly brought to the Center. It had gotten quite late as we scrambled to get everything done, and I was hoping to wrap things up so that we could go home. But I noticed that one of the new animals, a juvenile sea lion was drinking voraciously from her water dish, and I knew that meant – she was suffering severe dehydration from *Leptospirosis*, a disease that attacks the kidneys. Putting aside my desire to close up for the night, I decided that this animal needed to have some fluids that night, and I set up a drip set for her. Well, of course, seals and sea lions aren't always as compliant as human patients – they see us as predators, not as protectors, they don't understand that we're trying to help them, and they get angry when we keep sticking them with sharp needles. So not only would we have to start a drip, but I would have to stay with the animal until she had received a liter of fluids, making sure she didn't manage to pull the needle out. At first she was pretty agitated, but after a few minutes, both she and I settled down to wait together for the fluids to be absorbed.

Things got quiet and calm at the Center as the two of us waited. She would look up at me with her huge brown eyes, but she was no longer trying to get away from me. And I – as I looked down at her, I began to marvel at how beautiful she was. Here right in front of me was this wild creature, perfectly evolved for her role in the great web of life. In her tan coat, every hair was in its place, her mouth and teeth were perfectly designed for catching and eating fish. I could see the bottom of one of her flippers, and it was lined and calloused much like a human hand; a palm reader could have told her fortune. And it was one of those moments that we experience rarely, but that we treasure when they happen. I was just overwhelmed by feelings of love – love for this perfect creature, yes, but love for this great web of life, for the marvelous evolutionary system that caused this animal to be what she was. I experienced the sense of harmony that we can feel when we open our hearts to love.

And the love that I felt on that cold night was very much like the love that I feel for this congregation – a deep abiding love that comes with a sense of harmony, a sense of oneness, a sense of wholeness. What do I mean when I speak of love in this way? The ancient Greeks called this kind of love *agape*. *Agape* is a complicated word; it referred, variously, to divine love, to unconditional, self-sacrificing love, or to active, volitional, thoughtful love. The early Christians used the term to describe that they felt toward one another as members of a community of believers. And I speak of love here because this fellowship, for all that we have accomplished, and for all that we are today, is based on a foundation of love. Now two weeks, when we got snowed out except for a few hardy souls, I spoke of love in the context of Valentine's Day. For those of you weren't able to get here that Sunday, I want to repeat myself a little bit in order to focus on this notion of a community based on love.

M. Scott Peck, in his classic self-help book, *The Road Less Traveled*, defined love as “the will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth.” “The will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth.” Explaining his definition further, Peck wrote:

Love is as love does. Love is an act of will — namely, both an intention and an action. Will also implies choice. We do not have to love. We choose to love.

This is certainly true for the love we share as members of this community. We are here in community because we choose to be. And we act on our choice to love – we gather here on Sunday morning, we meet each other in classes, on committees, in our circle dinners, in all our interactions. And we extend ourselves to nurture one another. I particularly like Peck’s definition because it speaks to our spiritual side. Why do we choose to love? – to nurture spiritual growth, in ourselves and in others.

Feminist writer bell hooks, in her book *All About Love* points out that Peck’s definition means that love includes much more than merely giving and receiving affection. “To truly love,” hooks writes, “we must learn to mix various ingredients – care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication.” And these are the ingredients that we bring to this loving community – each one of them important – care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, trust, and open and honest communication.

So this is a community founded on love and sustained by love. Let us never forget that.. We choose to love, and having chosen love, we act on it. It is this choosing and acting that form the basis for this community of the spirit.

And I want that spirit of love to inform our conversation today as we begin our annual budget drive. After this service, we will have a short congregational meeting, and we request that members, and anyone else who is interested, stay -- as your stewardship committee initiates this year’s campaign.

We have so many accomplishments over the past several years. We want to take time to savor those accomplishments and to think about how we will build on those accomplishments in the years to come. This Fellowship had its beginning back in the early 1990s, when a few far-sighted individuals began meeting in each other’s homes. The group grew and flourished over the following years. It became an officially recognized Fellowship by the Unitarian Universalist Association, and it became a presence in the local communities where it met and continues to meet. Over the years, satellite meeting places were organized in Groveland, and in Douglas Flat, in Calaveras County. We retain that highly unusual format to this day – one congregation but meeting in different locations, depending on the Sunday.

By 2004, the congregation felt ready to take the next step in its development, and it began looking for a minister. The budget was quite small at that point – about \$17,000 a year, but the Fellowship had substantial cash reserves, and also a building fund to which members and friends had been contributing. At about that time, I had graduated from seminary and been ordained as a UU minister, and we managed to find each other and to begin talking about bringing me on board as a part-time “consulting” minister. I knew a few of you from district leadership school and from seminary, and the prospects of our working together seemed promising.

John and Renee Kramer generously offered to provide housing on their property in Vallecito, and I decided to take the plunge. I began commuting from Berkeley to spend two long weekends a month serving as your minister. So many of you took the time and the trouble to welcome me to the community. For a couple of years, we met at the County Board of Realtors office on Tuolumne Road, but we were really bursting at the seams there as attendance began to grow. In 2007, we began meeting here at Stage 3. This venue isn't perfect, but it has worked out pretty well for us, thanks to the dedicated volunteers who do the setup and takedown every Sunday. Over these past three years, our Sunday attendance has grown from around 35 to anywhere from 55 to 75 on a given Sunday, here in Sonora.

The congregation had a dream of acquiring property for a home of its own, but that dream seemed more and more remote as property values rose in this area. Then last year, our site committee, which had been searching diligently, located the property on Hess Ave. that we would eventually purchase. Suddenly things fell into place for us – here was a property of the right size – 2.2 acres – with a small house that we could begin to use immediately. Through hard work by many of our members, we turned our dream into a reality and we managed to acquire the property. Eventually, we intend to build a sanctuary there to serve as a permanent home. This is a huge accomplishment for us, and it has caused lots of excitement within our district and at our denomination headquarters in Boston. Recently, we were informed that we have been awarded a grant of up to \$17,000 by the district growth committee. The grant is earmarked for needed improvements to enhance the property to support our programs.

Meanwhile, we have been working at building a truly intergenerational community. The number of children and youth in our program has gone up and down, but we have maintained a solid core of dedicated families, thanks to the efforts of our teachers and a committee of volunteers. Our kids have undertaken projects to visit residents in the long-term care facility, and to help out local homeless people. With our new property, we are able to host gatherings where kids and parents can socialize and get to know one another.

Over the years, we have been a voice for liberal religion and progressive social policies here in the Mother Lode. We have sought to be a haven for people who want to be part of a spiritual community that is based on reason and open discussion rather than dogma. We seek to provide an environment in which we can grow and develop spiritually; each one of us following our own path, but supported by the community. We have spoken out for peace and nonviolence. We have hosted programs and discussions on global warming. We have spoken up for our gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender brothers and sisters, and we have supported the right of all to marry. We have held adult discussion groups on UU theology and history, environmental concerns, and now on ethical eating. We have organized programs to provide meals and other services to members who are home-bound. We have been, and we continue to be, a vibrant, welcoming, caring community.

This year, in support of our annual budget drive, your board has decided to do something a little different. We want to have one-on-one conversations with as many of you as possible. These conversations come under the broad label of “stewardship,” because they are intended to build relationships, to bring us closer together as a community, to elicit your feedback concerning what works well and what we could be

doing better. Someone will be contacting you within the next week or so to set up a meeting for conversation. We want to hear your stories. What brought you to this Fellowship? What were you looking for? How successful have you been in finding that something? Do you feel that you are able to grow spiritually within this community? What are some things that you would like to see us do; or that you like to see us do better? This is meant to be free-flowing conversation, and we encourage you to treat it that way. Tell us about your vision for the future of this congregation. How do you see your role in this Fellowship in the months and years ahead?

And of course, we want to give you the opportunity to think about and talk about the level of your financial contribution. This year, the conversation is more important than ever. First of all, it is important because of the concern we all feel about our economic future. Every day brings more news of jobs that have been lost, banks that have failed, and so on. We need to acknowledge the reality of this financial crisis, and we need to talk together about our fears. At the same time, we realize that we need the support and caring of this congregation more than ever. So we hope that these stewardship conversations can be an opportunity to talk about our fears as well as our hopes. At a recent workshop attended by some of your leaders, we were told that strong congregations will survive the financial meltdown just fine. This is a strong congregation! We have accomplished so much together over these past few years.

The person speaking with you will not have information about either your previous level of giving or your income. That's why we want those conversations to be about a level of financial commitment that reflects both how much you value this congregation and what percentage of your income you are willing to contribute to it. Your stewardship visitor will have a table of what we refer to as "fair-share" giving. This enables you to start with the level of your income and then to calculate your level of giving in terms of percentages. We invite each of you consider giving at a level that would make you a "fair-share" contributor. Remember, that anyone can be a fair-share contributor, regardless of income level. If you are already a fair-share contributor, we ask you to consider moving one step to the right on the table.

These conversations are also more important than ever this year because we have taken on our commitment to purchase the Hess Avenue property. And, as you will recall, we voted virtually unanimously at our annual meeting in May to make this commitment. In previous years, we had built up a substantial building fund, and that is what we used to make our down payment on the property. Now, we have mortgage payments to make, and your board decided – quite appropriately – to move this obligation over to our general budget, because of its ongoing nature. This has the effect of increasing our general fund budget by about \$20,000 to between 65 and 70 thousand dollars. But we already know that the property is a bargain for us way beyond its cost. We now have a home – with an office, a space for meetings, a kitchen, space for picnics and outdoor Sunday programs, and so on.

So, this is also an invitation from me – an invitation to consider our life together as a community, to consider how much we have grown and developed, and to consider how much this community means to you. And I invite us to do this with a sense of joy and enthusiasm. We are doing something good, something really worthwhile, right here in the Mother Lode. We are building a community based on the spirit of love.

Let us remember that we extend ourselves in love to embrace a spiritual growth that binds us together!

Let us remember that the love we share includes care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, trust, and open and honest communication!

Let us experience the joy that comes with being part of this loving community!