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**As tranquil streams that meet and merge and flow as one to meet the sea,
Our kindred hearts and minds unite to build a church that shall be free.**

And to build a church that will nurture us; that will satisfy our longing for community. The life of each Unitarian Universalist is like a flowing stream – sometimes tranquil, often not – and we merge into the rivers of our congregations and into the larger torrent of our UU movement. Those of us who attended General Assembly in Portland, in June, got a chance to experience this larger denominational flow. We could see that we are part of a movement that is bigger than our individual spiritual journeys and the journeys of each of our congregations. I am always inspired at having a chance to meet and to talk with so many insightful fellow Unitarian Universalists and to experience our gathering together.

Over these past two years, our congregation has been discussing just who we are as a movement. What do we stand for? Although we appreciate the feeling of merging our stream into a larger river, many of us wonder why that river isn't larger. Our association numbers around 160,000, and since the consolidation of Unitarians and Universalists in 1961, our growth has been negligible. Over the last 2 years, we have grown at the rate of about 1% per year, which is less than the rate at which the American population is growing. Only some 15 of our congregations account for about 25% of our growth. And yet – I believe (and I think you probably believe this too) – there are millions of Americans out there who are longing for a progressive religious voice, and for a liberal religious community to which they might belong.

In a troubled and suffering world, our religious movement has so much to offer – a commitment to reason in the exercise of our faith; acceptance of the idea that there are many valid spiritual and religious paths; respect for the rights of all people; an attitude of inclusiveness; respect for the interdependent web of all existence. And that's what I want to talk about with you this morning – how can we bring more tranquil streams into our watershed, uniting hearts and minds into a mighty, mighty river that can change the world?

[PAUSE]

Let me back up a bit and tell you about my particular journey. No doubt some of you will find similarities between my journey and yours. Karen and I first connected with Unitarian Universalism less than 10 years ago. It was Christmas of 1997 and the two of us were feeling a serious need for community in our lives, and for a spiritual connection. So we started searching. Our very first visit was to the UU Church of Berkeley – Kensington Church -- and we never got any further. Within just a year or so after we first visited the congregation, I decided to go to seminary. Going into the ministry represented both a radical change from -- and a logical extension of -- the twists and turns of my journey through life.

As I look back, I can see that my adult life has largely followed two parallel tracks. The first track has been the pursuit of various forms of justice – social,

economic, and environmental, and a commitment to peace and non-violence. It may seem curious from this vantage point, but when I served in the Navy after college, and volunteered for duty in Vietnam, it was out of a sense of idealism. At 22 years old – in the early days of the Vietnam War, I believed in “winning hearts and minds,” and “rolling back Communism.” By the end of my tour in Vietnam, I had become strongly opposed to the war, and I felt right at home in the anti-war turmoil of Berkeley in 1965. I went to law school in Berkeley, and my first job as a lawyer was representing farm workers in the Central Valley. I was based in Delano, between Fresno and Bakersfield, where Cesar Chavez and the United Farmworkers were carrying on their struggle. This experience helped me to see first-hand the economic inequality and the injustice that characterize this society – trends that have only gotten worse in the years since.

After almost 10 years of law practice representing people from various low-income communities, I returned to Berkeley to work for the University, doing research and writing on legal topics. I made this change because my daughter, Mallika, had been born, and I wanted a job with regular hours, so that I could spend time parenting her. Now, I'm a proud and doting grandfather. So my background includes a good deal of experience in the kinds of issues that we all confront in our lives – the joys and trials of parenting and intimate relationships, divorce and remarriage, military service during wartime, struggling to make ends meet on a middle class salary, dealing with the experience of feeling like a “wage slave” in a job that eventually becomes deadening, and so on.

The second, and parallel track of my journey has been my life-long spiritual seeking. I was raised in a Methodist congregation, where I enjoyed some things about church, especially the music. But I also had many questions that never seemed to get answered. As I recall, my biggest concern was about children born in Africa and Asia who had never even heard of Jesus – how could it be, I wondered, that they could never go to heaven because of that simple twist of fate? So when I went away to college, I got as far away as I could from organized Christianity. But I quickly found that I remained very much engaged with questions of spirituality and philosophy. One of my professors was Dr. Walter Kaufmann, a scholar of Nietzsche and the existentialists, who also taught a course on philosophy of religion. He introduced me to several of the world's religions as well as to theological exploration, which has been a major interest of mine ever since. After Law School, I was fortunate to obtain a fellowship from UC Berkeley that enabled me to live and work in India for two years. This gave me exposure to Hinduism and Buddhism, but mostly from the perspective of an observer. Back in the States, however, I connected with a Tibetan teacher, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, and I became a serious student and practitioner of Buddhism for 15 years or so. From that experience, I learned that I have a need for a regular spiritual practice. I continue to find a great deal of wisdom in the Buddhist tradition, but I sometimes found it too removed from the struggles taking place in the world. And I also began to feel that I wanted to know more about western religious tradition, including the Bible, biblical archeology, Jewish and Christian theology, and so forth.

When I decided to go to seminary, I saw the ministry as a way to merge the two parallel tracks of my life – as a way to advocate for social justice even as I continued to pursue my spiritual journey. Actually, I thought that my ministry would probably take the form of environmental advocacy. But by the time I became ordained, I realized that our

congregations are the heart of our movement, and that my ministry would feel incomplete unless I became a parish minister.

[PAUSE]

So that's a short version of the story of my stream. Karen and I encountered the larger river of Unitarian Universalism and we chose to merge our little streams into it. How can we, as a movement, bring an ever-growing number of individual streams into our denominational river? Over the past few years, our UU Assn. has put its resources into some strategies to promote growth. We have attempted to start mega-churches in a few large cities. For the most part, these efforts have not gone well. And we are conducting marketing campaigns in key areas – congregations in the Bay Area are about to embark on a regional marketing campaign there. These efforts share several key features -- they assume that growth can be achieved through a technological solution; that this will cost large amounts of money; and that someone other than those of us in individual congregations will make this happen. I really hope that these efforts succeed, but I don't believe that those kinds of solutions are the answer for us.

I want to suggest to you that the solution to our growth issues is religious, not financial, and that it begins at the grass roots – in our local congregations. Rather than spending large sums of money, we need to look to the roots of our faith. What would it mean to grow our movement by practicing our religion? For some of these ideas, I am indebted to the Rev. Peter Morales – pastor of the UU church in Golden, CO, and for the past two years a growth consultant to the UUA. Rev. Morales led a growth workshop at this past General Assembly. He was a sociologist before turning to the ministry, and he presented us with some surprising numbers. According to various social science studies, Americans are lonelier than they have ever been. For example, different studies have asked respondents how many people they feel close enough to to confide in. In 1985, the average response was three – that is, the average American felt some degree of intimacy with three other people. By 2004, the numbers had changed dramatically. 25% responded that there was no-one – not a single person -- they felt close enough to to confide in. And today, the percentage of American households that are shared by multiple generations is as low it has ever been. These numbers suggest what many of us experience -- that there are many, many Americans who are disconnected from other people; who are feeling alienated and lonely. And they suggest that when people come to visit us on Sunday morning they are looking for connection; they are looking for community; they are looking to belong!

Despite our separation and our alienation, human beings are relational! We need community! So when people visit us, I believe, they are looking for a connection; they are looking for ways to transcend their daily lives and for ways to transcend the selfish commercialism of the age we live in. When people visit us, for the most part, they are already in agreement with our principles. They're not looking for theology, and they're not looking for politics. Their quest is essentially emotional, not intellectual. How does it feel to be in this congregation? Are these my people? Could I belong here?

And responding to this widespread need for connection is where this becomes a religious and ethical issue. People come to us with an aching need that we have an obligation to address. Rev. Morales suggests that for us to fail to respond to this need for relationship, is the moral equivalent of failing to feed the hungry or to house the

homeless. We need to practice our religion by opening ourselves up, by being willing to be in relationship with those who visit us, by letting our compassion guide us.

Earlier I mentioned that when Karen and I started looking for a spiritual home, we did so because we were seeking community. That winter holiday season we had felt that sense of loneliness that Peter Morales talks about. We felt a longing to be part of a community, to have a sense of belonging. And when we visited the UU church in Kensington, our response wasn't intellectual, it was emotional. Both of us had tears running down our faces when the sermon was preached. – Pause -- And we were immediately invited to join a small group of congregants for a program called "Evensong" that was created by one of the ministers, Barbara Hamilton-Holway. That group started meeting in March of 1998. That same group still meets every month today, nine years later! We meet at each others' homes, and each month one member plans a program for discussion and spiritual sharing. We have gone on weekend retreats together. We have shared each others' sorrows and triumphs. Our lives have become interwoven. When Karen and I went looking, we found connection; we found the sort of community we were seeking.

We have discussed these issues a good deal in this congregation. Now that we have moved into this new space, we are more visible. And we get a fair number of visitors coming through our doors on Sunday mornings; people who are seeking to connect with a liberal religious community in this very conservative area. Leaders of this congregation have studied the issue of growth, and we have attended workshops together. And we have concluded that we need to focus not just on attracting visitors but also on nurturing them. This is the term we use for helping newcomers to find their place within this community; for getting our visitors and our new members "engaged" with what we are doing in the congregation. And I don't mean just signing people up for committees and then working them to death! We need to discover peoples' interests and skills and find them niches within the congregation -- where they can nourish those interests and skills.

For example, Janet Telford, a gifted professional musician, has volunteered to direct our music program and our choir. Our community has benefited tremendously since Janet became an active and engaged member. Our Membership Committee, led by Diane Doddridge has been organizing "circle dinners" at members homes. These dinners enable us to share a meal together and to get to know one another, and I encourage you to attend one, or maybe more than one! Over the past couple of years, we have organized classes for our adult members on subjects of interest, and these also help to form community when we meet together.

So we are just taking the first, teeny-tiny baby steps. But we believe that we have identified an important aspect of the process of growing our community, and we are working on it. We have come to the important realization that people are hungry for liberal religious community. And we are working towards an understanding that when we find places for people in our congregation, we are truly practicing our religion. Several years ago, I attended a workshop led by Mike Durall, who is a consultant to religious congregations and also a Unitarian Universalist, and one thing he told us really stuck with me. He said: "People don't leave because you ask them to do too much; they leave because you ask too little of them." I truly believe that. People are longing to put their time and their energy into a community where they feel they belong.

And as we welcome people into active participation in our congregations, we are practicing the essence of our religious heritage. In the Hebrew Bible, Jahweh tells the Hebrew people that they must love the stranger in their midst, for they were once strangers in Egypt. (Lev. 19:18). We have all been strangers somewhere, at some time in our lives. We have found a home -- a welcoming, nourishing community -- in Unitarian Universalism. Now it is our turn to welcome the stranger into our midst. So many people in this troubled world are starving for the kind of community that we can offer. So many streams – tranquil or troubled – are flowing through the world all by themselves. As we welcome those streams into a growing, thriving river; as we become a mighty torrent flowing towards the sea; we increasingly empower ourselves to do the holy work of transforming our troubled world!!!