

February 5, 2006
UUFTC, Sonora

“I Know this Rose will Open”

“I know this rose will open.” This Fellowship is a rosebud, bursting with vitality and life, ready to open into a beautiful blossom. The seed was planted some 15 years ago by a few pioneers who had a vision of a Unitarian Universalist presence here in Gold Rush country. Dan and Marguerite Johnson started things going by hosting a meeting at their home. A few intrepid souls showed up, and a Fellowship was formed.

Joe and Amy Haratani, Libby and Ted Hilbourn. Soon afterwards, Marilyn and Mack Waggoner, Lloyd and Martha Kramer. Are there any others here from that original group? Over the past 15 years, the rosebush has grown from that seed, and it has flourished. Now, we are bursting into bloom!

“I know my fears will burn away!” It is often scary when we step up to begin to fulfill our vision of what we want to become, of what we can be. We might fail! We might look foolish! We fear that we may be taking on commitments that will prove to be too much for us. We are forced to move out of our comfort zone. And yet, people do step up. We do things we didn’t think we were capable of doing. And as we do, our “fears burn away.”

“I know my soul will unfurl its wings.” As we step up to do what needs to be done, as our vision begins to take shape, we find ourselves growing, stretching ourselves, finding powers we didn’t know we had. We grow in spirit, and we grow in relationship, as our collective soul unfurls its wings.

Today we inducted 10 new members into our Fellowship! We are growing, we are unfurling our wings; we are burning away our fears! We have begun to formulate a vision of who and what we want to be, and we are beginning to act on our vision. And what is that vision? Last month, as I prepared to speak about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; as I read the words and stories of his life once again, I couldn’t help but be struck by his vision of “beloved community.” It seemed to me that this vision of Dr. King’s had a universality to it, and that it applied -- very aptly -- to what we are trying to build here in Tuolumne and Calaveras Counties.

Now I must tell you that someone has complained to me that I use the term “beloved community” way too much. Nine times in this month’s Catalyst!! Fair enough – I plead guilty to that charge! But why is it that I harp on this vision? Dr. King was speaking about so much more than a community of a few friends, even of a community that would end segregation and uplift African-American people. He was speaking of a community that would welcome all people in a true spirit of love; a community that could change the world because it would embody the transformative power of love. Remember that the slogan of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which Dr. King founded, was “to save the soul of America.” Not to empower any one group, but to empower us all.

To me, the term “beloved community,” is a way of recognizing our call to make America once again the image of true freedom and democracy. It is our call to see to that America lives up to its highest and best ideals. It’s a way of

saying that we must foster community everywhere we go in the world – in our local towns and counties, our country, our world. We must never let ourselves be overcome with fear, so that we see the world in terms of “us” and “them.” We must keep our eyes lifted upward toward the vision of a community based on hope, based on belief in the innate ability of human beings to become what is best in themselves, based on our belief in the power of love.

So, here we are in the Foothills – what is our vision of what we want this fellowship to be? Do we want to be a warm, loving, welcoming community, in which we care for each other, in which we treat each other with love, courtesy, and respect, and model that for the world? Do we want to provide a haven, a sanctuary, for people who are hungry for a worldview based on love, on generosity, on caring? Who are tired of being told that we must live in fear; that we must be “tough” and “get the other guy” before “he gets us?” Do we want to be a community that welcomes all -- people of all ethnicities; people who come from and honor all religious traditions, as well as atheists and agnostics; gay, lesbian, straight, bisexual, and transgender people together? Do we want to be a voice in the community for this spirit of inclusion? And if we want to be these things, what must we do to build this community?

Many in this Fellowship have been working hard to implement this vision of what we can be. The first step was to hire me, as consulting minister for this year, to work with you on implementing your vision. The longer term vision would include a permanent, called minister to serve this community. Another part of our vision is to obtain a facility that would serve as a center for us, a place to hold Sunday worship, yes, but also a place to hold meetings, a place with adequate space for our children so that we can be welcoming to young families, a place where local community groups might meet, a place for public forums. And our Building Committee has been working hard on that. For the moment, it might be a more settled place that we could rent; over the longer term, it probably needs to be either a building that we purchase or a facility that we build after acquiring the land. Another step, already under way is to upgrade our music program; I’m sure everyone has noticed how our music has improved by leaps and bounds in just a few months.

So far, for everyone – here, and in Groveland and Douglas Flat – we are a part-time congregation. We meet no more than twice a month in any one place. Doesn’t our long-term vision need to include a central meeting place where we meet as a Fellowship every week, even as we nourish our satellite congregations and encourage them to grow as well? Imagine someone who is new to the area, who is looking for a Unitarian Universalist congregation, and who has to try to figure out – well, let’s see, is this the second Sunday or the Third, and where are they meeting this Sunday? And wouldn’t we be better able to serve our families with children if there were at least one place they could know that we would meet every week?

Well, if these things are to happen, who is going to make them happen? As Annie Dillard asks, “who shall ascend the mountain?” And then she gives us the answer – “there is no one but us; there never has been.” If we are to implement our vision of who we want to be, it is up to each one of us to step up.

We need to think big; we need to match big thinking with big acting. We need to stretch ourselves. We need to put to use the many talents and skills that we bring to the Fellowship. We need to discover within ourselves the powers we need to build this community, and as we do that, we empower others to join us.

You will recall that I mentioned three key attributes of membership in UUFTC: spiritual growth and development; participation in our programs; and financial participation. Part of being a member here is to continue our individual spiritual seeking, supporting each other in our lifelong quests for meaning and purpose. Another part of being a member is to take part in our various activities. The more we engage ourselves in the Fellowship's activities, the more we get out being a member. As a well-known UU congregational consultant once said: "people don't leave because you ask too much of them; they leave because you ask too little." The more we serve on committees, work together on social justice issues, teach our children, find us a new building, build our music program, the more we become an integral part of this community.

And then there's the question of financial participation! You knew I'd get here eventually, didn't you? First, let's look at the numbers. We now have about 75 members at our three locations combined. That comes to somewhere between 40 and 50 "pledging units" – many of us pledge as a household, not as individuals. Our pledge income for this year – from July 1, 2005 to June 30, 2006 – is \$17,500. Now that's a reasonably generous pledging level for a part-time congregation that meets in rented space, that is essentially lay-led, and that has a small religious education program, if any. As I think you can readily see, if we are to begin to act on our vision – to take some of the steps we envision – we need to increase our income considerably.

To take just one example – ministers spend a minimum of four years in seminary, and they acquire a lot of debt while they do so, like all other students. They are professionals – no UU minister expects to make a lot of money, but ministers should be entitled to a professional standard of living equivalent to that of members of the community they serve. They serve because they want to serve; most could make far more doing something else; but they should not have to sacrifice their families' well-being nor their retirement in order to serve as ministers. Now, I think you can see that \$17,500 would be nowhere near adequate to call a minister, even if the congregation spent absolutely nothing on anything else. And there are other staff – people who run children's religious education should be paid. If we are to have the kind of music program we want to have, we will almost certainly need to pay people with the skills we need. Eventually, we probably will want some administrative help.

And then there's the question of adequate space. Right now, our rent obligations are minimal. But if we want to have adequate facilities, we will need to pay considerably more than what we are paying now - - whether for rent or for mortgage payments on a place of our own. And if we eventually meet every week in one place – and I'm assuming here that our satellites would also continue to meet on a part-time basis – that will cost more as well.

Well, your Board of Directors considered all of this at the retreat it held last fall, and it decided that we would set a goal for the 2006-2007 year of increasing

our pledge income by 40%. That sounds like a lot, but an increase of 40% would still leave our pledge income at just \$24,500! So, not only do we need to think about increasing our pledges for next year, we also need to develop a long-range strategy for raising our level of pledging each year. To implement our vision will require an increased level of pledging across the board.

Now I realize that saying we need to increase our overall level of pledging by 40% doesn't mean much to each of us as individuals. "I give plenty, let someone else give more." One of our obstacles is that for each person the congregation is a part-time endeavor – and that includes me, of course, since I was hired on just a part-time basis. What I want to suggest, though is that we need to begin to change our thinking on that – we need to start thinking of a level of pledging that envisions us functioning as a full-time congregation. Now, I know that scares people. It's pretty nice to have a fellowship where we attend only every other Sunday. That leaves a couple of Sundays free for other things. Well, I'm not suggesting that a change to a full-time Fellowship would mean that everyone would need to attend worship every Sunday. But we do need to become a congregation that has a presence in the community every Sunday, that can be found in one place every Sunday. People need to know where and when they can find us. And to do that, we need to pledge at a level that sees this as an every-week congregation.

Ok, so how do we approach the question of what an appropriate level of giving would be? First of all, of course, we have to recognize that we vary greatly in the level of financial resources we have available. What I want to suggest here is that each one of us look to the percentage of income that he or she will commit to the Fellowship. How much do I value this community? What part of my resources am I willing to commit to its growth on a regular basis?

Remember the story in Mark and Luke of "the Widow's Mites." (A mite was smallest coin of the realm during Jesus' time). Jesus was standing by the collection box at the temple in Jerusalem. He noticed rich congregants coming up and ostentatiously putting in large sums. And then he watched as a poor widow came up and put in her two mites. He turned to his disciples and commented that the widow had put in more than all the ostentatious givers – they contributed out of their abundance, but she gave freely of what she had to live on. Well, my point here is certainly not to discourage those who have abundance from giving generously, nor to suggest that we give all that we have to live on. The point is for each of us to give according to what we have.

And here, I want to suggest some standards to keep in mind. When you join some congregations (Jewish and Christian alike), they don't ask you what your contribution will be. They ask for a copy of your tax return and then they tell you what your contribution will be – and it's often going to be at least 10 percent, just for basic pledging. Well, that would never do for Unitarian Universalists – no one of us would put up with that for a second. However – each one of us can decide what proportion of our income should be devoted to giving. My suggestion for an overall goal to work toward is this – that we contribute ten percent to overall giving, with half of that, or 5 percent, dedicated to the Fellowship. Obviously, this is not something that any of us can do overnight. It is, I would

suggest, a worthwhile goal towards which we can work. If everyone here gave five percent, we could fulfill our wildest dreams!! If everyone here gave 2 percent, we could fund our mission easily and be well on our way to financial stability.

One way to look at percentages is to consider our contributions to both our general fund and our building fund. Many have already given generously to our building fund, which now stands at roughly \$60,000. That sounds pretty -- good until you start thinking about what an adequate facility for us is likely to cost! Contributing to the building fund is great and that should certainly count as part of one's overall contribution. Our first priority right now, however, must be to build our yearly level of pledging. So my suggestion would be that each of us try to reach a level of pledging that would reflect 2 to 3 percent of income, and that anything over that might go to the building fund if that is your preference.

Look, I know it's not fun to talk about money. I hate to do it -- most UUs hate to do it. But we don't serve ourselves well if we don't address our money situation frankly. Let's face it -- we all worry about our financial condition. Many of us are retirees with fixed incomes -- I realize that -- and none of us wants to be poor as we age. And why?

Because we know that in this culture no one else will take care of us. We want to be secure against potentially crippling medical bills, we want to be sure we have enough to take care of ourselves. The problem is that this acquisitiveness can easily become an end in itself -- and often does -- for people living in this culture. We can become so absorbed in holding on to what we have that we forget that we need to share what we have with those less fortunate, and with those who, like us, have a vision of a community of which we want to be a part. This is a culture that stresses individualism, especially economic individualism. By becoming truly generous with what we have, we focus on another aspect of being human -- our interdependence, our community.

I think it only fair that I share with you a bit about how Karen and I face this question of pledging. We are working our way, slowly but steadily, toward sharing 10 percent of our income with others. We are part of that famous "sandwich" generation right now -- the one that has responsibility for aging parents as well as for children who are still learning how to be adults. I know many of you have similar obligations. Karen and I have managed to bring our level of charitable giving up to about six percent -- of which well over half goes to our congregations. We belong to the UU Church of Berkeley and to the Jewish revival synagogue started by Rabbi Michael Lerner, and we make pretty substantial pledges to both. We also make monthly contributions to a number of organizations, including the our UU Legislative Ministry. We try to increase our giving a little more each year. The fact that these contributions are deductible certainly helps when tax time rolls around. We have a long way to go, but we find that making generosity an intentional part of our spiritual life is a powerful practice for us. It helps us to remember that we are interdependent -- that we depend on each other more than we know.

Well, all this probably comes as a pretty big shock. The Fellowship hasn't had a canvass before, but on our next Sunday here in Sonoma -- and in our satellite communities as well -- we will be asking you to make your pledge for

next year. As you think about the level of commitment that you want to make, I want to leave you with these words by the writer Marianne Williamson. They were spoken by Nelson Mandela at his inauguration as President of South Africa:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
It is our light, not our darkness,
 that most frightens us.
We ask ourselves, who am I (who am I?)
 To be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?

Actually, who are you not to be?
We are children of God.
Our playing small doesn't serve the world.
There's nothing enlightened about shrinking
 So that other people won't feel insecure around us.

We were born to make manifest
 The divine spirit that is within us.
It's not just in some of us.
It's in everyone.
And as we let our light shine,
 We unconsciously give other people
 Permission to do the same.
As we are liberated from our own fears,
 Our presence automatically liberates others.

I invite each and every one of us to try to think "big;" to consider what it is that we want to be in the world, and what you can contribute to getting us there. "I know our fears will burn away; I know our soul will unfurl its wings; I know this rose will open."
 Blessed be! And Amen!