

MISSION, MUSIC & MONEY
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You probably know the well-traveled story of the famous sea captain who was renowned for his skill in sailing even the most daunting of oceans, always bringing his ship and crew safely to port. But like most truly gifted people, that captain had a peculiar habit. Just before weighing anchor, he would scurry to his cabin for what his crew took to be a moment of prayer before beginning yet another unpredictable journey.

One day his second-in-command happened by the captain's porthole as the ship prepared to leave harbor. Glancing inside, the junior officer saw his captain take a small wooden box off a shelf, peer inside and quickly close it. Watching for just a moment more, the second-in-command could see the captain return the box to its shelf, smooth his coat and leave his cabin.

When the famous captain died some years later, many of those who had sailed with him over the years attended his funeral. Once the great masses had left the chapel, the captain's long-time second-in-command could not resist the urge to know what was in that little wooden box. Stealing aboard the ship late that night, the officer found his way into the captain's quarters. Lighting a small candle for light, he found the box still on the shelf. Opening it, he found a yellowed scrap of paper that read: Starboard is right. Port is left.

You and I stand on the verge of yet another church/fellowship year. Because we have been here before, we know something of what awaits us. We *know* that we will wrestle with the budget, argue over the mission and sing at least a half dozen previously untried hymns that will sound eerily similar to the courtship of semi-rabid skunks!

We *know* that we'll sit through an untold number of unnecessarily long meetings, until, come February or March, we'll seriously consider suspending our First Principle, just long enough to wring the neck of that person who just *has* to insert one more inane, offensive comment mere seconds after the committee has, finally, reached a fragile compromise about the place of applause during the service!

And we *know* that we'll be confronted by at least one person who registers his

or her weekly complaint that the church is too: a. cold and rational, b. warm and fuzzy, c. formal, d. informal, or e. all of the above, invoking the mortal threat that he/she will most certainly withhold the full amount of his/her \$50 pledge unless things get better.

Folks, we *know* – ahead of time – that not everything will be Oreos and whole milk this year, because...well, because that's how these churches and fellowships of ours function. And the best solace I can offer from this mid-August precipice is this: Starboard is right. Port is left. Stick to the basics. Keep it simple. Refuse to let the complexity of a world gone goofy poison the well of your little congregation. And, most importantly, don't forget that love is our calling. I say again, love is our calling.

I'd really like it – and you may, too – if I could end this sermon right here. Story, application and challenge. It would be swell if love could be made manifest in our congregations with sermons that make us laugh and feel better about ourselves. But such is not the case. For the rest of this sermon, I'd like to pose, and take a shot at answering, a tough question: How *does* a Unitarian Universalist congregation manifest love? For real?

My responses to such a tough question will be homely ones, lacking in all respects the erudition we've come to expect when we talk about the "beloved community". But erudition, by itself, does not get us through a budget quarrel. Fanciful words alone do not help us endure an overly long meeting. And memorizing the Seven Principles is no insulation against our baser nature when responding to that chronic complainer who is threatening to withhold, again, her or his pledge.

But neither is love manifested by a few minutes of ordained cheerleading on my part. Thus, as we gather on the eve of a new church/fellowship year, my responses to the question of how love is served in a liberal religious congregation are meant to be gritty. Practical. And I'll ask that we be focused and disciplined and willing to take some flack for not being all things to all people.

In the next few minutes, bear with me as I try to answer my question with three stories. One is about mission. One is about music. And one is about money.

MISSION

From Maya Angelou comes the story of Mrs. Scott, a woman with a mission:

Mrs. Scott, a woman well past middle age, who fancied young men. She was a great churchgoer and used each religious gathering to search for the objects of her choice. All the young men in her town were aware of her predilections, and she was unsuccessful in snaring them.

One day a new man appeared at the meeting house. He was handsome and although he was adult, he was still young enough to be gullible.

The woman caught him directly after service and invited him to her home for late Sunday afternoon dinner. He accepted gratefully.

She rushed home, killed a chicken and put it on to fry. While the chicken cooked, Mrs. Scott took a small needle from her sewing kit, and putting on her bifocals, picked her way down the lane from her front door. When she reached a tree a hundred yards away, she stuck the needle in the bark and returned to the kitchen to finish preparing the meal.

When the young man arrived, they sat down to a tasty dinner (for Mrs. Scott was an excellent cook) and after they finished, Mrs. Scott invited the young man to sit on the porch in the swing, to let his dinner digest. She brought out lemonade and sat with him. Dusk was falling and the shapes of things were blurred.

Mrs. Scott sat bolt upright and turned to the young man. "What on earth is that I see sticking in that tree?" She pointed down the lane to the oak, which was barely a shadow in the darkness. The young man, squinting, tried to pierce the gloom. "Mrs. Scott, I can't hardly see the tree. And you can see something sticking out of it?"

"Yes." Mrs. Scott had relaxed her scrutiny. "At first I thought it was a pin, but when I looked for the head it wasn't there – I saw instead a hole. So it's got to be a needle."

The young man turned and looked at Mrs. Scott with admiration. "You know, ma'm, when you left church this morning, some folks told me to be careful. That you were an old woman who loved young men. But I must say, if you can see the hole in a needle a hundred yards away after the sun has gone down, you're not nearly as old as they say you are."

Mrs. Scott, proud of her compliments and forgetful of her subterfuge, said, “Well, thank you for that. I’ll just go and get the needle and show it to you.” She flounced up out of the swing and stepped jauntily down the stairs. When she reached the bottom step she turned to smile at the appreciative young man, and then continuing, she walked two steps and tripped over a cow sitting in the lane.

In times like these, it’s hard to imagine a liberal religious congregation without a mission. We live in a nation that is increasingly basing many of its political and social values on a literal reading of two ancient collections of oral stories, one set of which was intended to justify its protagonists’ claim as a chosen people (the Hebrew scriptures), and the other, to justify the creation of a splinter sect and its liturgy (the Christian scriptures). Rather than tackle the emerging social and ethical questions raised by stem cell research, space travel, global warming, immigration, disparity of wealth, the inevitable depletion of fossil fuel, and universal health care, the radical religious right has managed to convince a critical mass of Americans that a Medieval world-view is worthy of serious consideration. How can any liberal religious society be without a clear mission in such an era?

But recall that my question is not phrased in the negative - How can a UU congregation negate biblical literalism? – but in the positive - How can a UU congregation *manifest love*?

Let’s consider what we say about ourselves as communities of love. When someone asks me what Unitarian Universalists believe, I politely tell them that it’s not our beliefs that hold us together, *it’s what we value*. And what we value is religious freedom, religious community and religious activism. We begin with the conviction that we are each capable of, and responsible for, developing our own beliefs. We value the support and accountability of being part of a local congregation as we develop and live out those beliefs. And we value the struggle for justice – the willingness to engage our resources on behalf of compassion and equality.

The patient folks at Nora Church know that freedom, community and justice serve as my shorthand for mission as applied to a Unitarian Universalist church or fellowship. Perhaps it’s my hillbilly inclination toward simplicity, but show me freedom, community and justice – *all the in service of love* – and I’ll show you a church/fellowship that is fit for the 21st century. We need not put forth a reactionary religious alternative, based on what’s wrong with the orthodox position. We can do better. We can manifest love.

I would that every congregation in our Association would stop wringing its corporate hands about models of governance, shrinking membership and internal theological squabbles. Speaking for myself, I want to be among those UUs who “get it” - those who know that the present and future portend challenges far more important than fussing with one another over governance or linguistics. And frankly, I look forward to the day when every one of our churches and fellowships - in its unique way and words - adopts a mission that sounds something like this: We exist to care of one another and our corner of this broken world.

MUSIC

In the 1980s, the nation discovered a relatively unheralded former UU minister named Bob Fulghum. His *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* propelled him into a minister-turned-author career the likes of which our movement hasn’t seen since Emerson.

Buried toward the end of that first book is Fulghum’s account of his visit to a fairly rowdy fiddling contest. I offer it here as anecdotal (but strangely resonant) evidence that music is indeed a universal language.

The big deal of my summer was a week in Weiser, Idaho.

Maybe that's hard to believe. Because if you've ever looked at an Idaho map, you know that Weiser is nowhere. But if you can play the fiddle, Weiser, Idaho is the center of the universe. The Grand National Old Time Fiddler's Contest is there the last week in June. And since I've fiddled around some in my time, I went.

Four thousand people live there in normal times. Five thousand more come out of the bushes and tress and hills for the contest. The town stays open around the clock, with fiddling in the streets, dancing at the VFW hall, fried chicken at the Elks Lodge and free camping at the rodeo grounds.

People from all over show up – fiddlers from Pottsboro, Texas; Sepulpa, Oklahoma; Thief River Falls, Minnesota; Caldwell Kansas; Three Forks, Montana, and just about every other little crossroads town you care to mention. And even Japan!

It used to be that the festival was populated by country folks – pretty straight types – short hair, church on Sunday, women in their place and all that.

Then the long-haired hippie freaks began to show up. The trouble was that the freaks could fiddle to beat hell. And that's all there was to it.

So, the town turned over the junior high and its grounds to the freaks. The contest judges were put in an isolated room where they could only hear the music. Couldn't see what people looked like or what their names were – just the fiddling. As one old gentleman put it, "Son, I don't care if you're stark nekkid and wear a bone in your nose. If you kin fiddle, you're all right with me. It's the music we make that counts."

So I was standing there in the middle of the night in the moonlight in Weiser, Idaho, with about a thousand other people who were picking and singing and fiddling together – some with bald heads, some with hair to their knees, some with a joint, some with a long-necked bottle of Budweiser, some with beads, some with Archie Bunker T-shirts, some eighteen and some eighty, some with corsets and some with no bras, and the music rising like incense into the night toward whatever gods of peace and goodwill there may be.

I was standing there, and this policeman – a real honest-to-god Weiser policeman who is standing next to me and picking a banjo (really, I swear it) says to me, "Sometimes the world seems like a fine place, don't it?"

Oh, yes, and yet again, yes. Yes, indeed...

UU friends, it's the music we make that counts. Our religious conservative counterparts have known about and tapped the power of music in ways that we've resisted, evidently refusing to taint ourselves with the bohemian grime of truly singable music! (Perhaps nothing betrays our economic and social prejudices more than our widespread preference for classical music to the exclusion of the vast variety of other genres.) But in my perfect little UU universe, Mozart and Jimi Hendrix and Patsy Cline and Alanis Morrisette all get the same billing. There are strains of reggae, metal, hip-hop, bluegrass, jazz, swing and zydeco. The lyrics are sung in a number of languages (including Minnesotan) and we rock to grunge on Saturday night and meditate to Taoist chants on Sunday morning. In short, my ideal Unitarian Universalist congregation puts its musical offerings where its mouth is.

I challenge every congregation represented here today – all of us – to be inclusive and universal in our use of music this church year. Instead of wondering why only upwardly-bound white folks seek us out, how about we start updating our music files to become more inviting to poor folk, people of color and the hordes of young people for whom something other than classical

music is their first language of expression and spirituality. We'll know we're getting serious about growth - in all its applications - when we take our music as seriously as our preaching and our teaching.

I say again, it's the music that counts.

MONEY

Mission requires money; freedom, community and justice do not fund themselves. Music requires money; retrofitting our music programming to take its rightful place beside our preaching and teaching requires a reallocation of resources. But here's the bad news: if the past record of Unitarian Universalist giving to the local congregation is any indication of future giving, we'll have to come to terms with the fact that money is going to be a barrier to realizing our mission and improving our music. Given that we are always among the top three religious traditions in terms of per capita income, the *possibility* for increased funding is always there. Yet we give between 2-5 per cent of our gross incomes to our local UU congregations. It's as though we think we're going to take it with us.

There is a tale about a somber old billionaire who became convinced that he had found a way to take his earthly treasures with him once he died. One day, when he was certain that his health and life were slipping away, he ordered his butler to withdraw all his money from the bank, cash all his bonds and sell all his stocks. When these things were done, the old man told his butler to put the money in a large suitcase and hang it from the chimney. That way, he said, he would just grab the suitcase as he rose to heaven.

While by no means the first time the eccentric old man had asked his staff to perform strange tasks, the butler considered all this to be pure poppycock. Still, his employer was dying. How could he refuse his dying wish?

Late that night the old man did indeed pass away. After calling the proper authorities, family and funeral home, the butler's mind turned to the suitcase suspended from the chimney. Taking a flashlight from the pantry, he walked outside to have a look. Sure enough, the suitcase was still tethered to the brick chimney.

The butler didn't know that the cook and maid were standing on a nearby porch when he muttered that perhaps the old man should have put the suitcase in the basement!

Folks, think about it. There may come a time when human beings no longer have to suffer and die; there are medical advances in the pipeline today that may eventually ensure eternal human life! But for now, we can't live forever. And we can't take our treasure with us when we die. Why in the world are we investing so little of our money in our congregations?

It's time to stop beating around the bush; money is absolutely essential to growing a congregation. The best mission is but a plan without the funds to implement it, and a vibrant, and an intergenerational music program will never come to fruition without money for materials and or staff.

Let me put it this way: if you think that the laws of money apply to everyone from IBM to your household – but not your church or fellowship – think again; if you conjure up visions of televangelists with pinky rings every time your congregation asks for money, get over it; and if you've the good fortune to be able to increase support your pledge, do it!

Back to my original question, How does a UU congregation manifest love? By getting *intentional* about mission, *open-minded* about music and *direct* about money. I say again, it requires focus, discipline and the willingness to take some flack for not being all things to all people.

As we prepare for the new church year, I challenge each of you to help shape and/or apply your congregation's mission, right down to the level of every committee or team, including and especially, religious education for children and youth. I challenge each of you to lobby for an intergenerational music program that will knock the socks off newcomers and get the attention of your community. And I challenge each of you to be absolutely shameless in keeping before your congregation a theology of money that says your church or fellowship will find a way to fund its ministry. Period.

And, when those inevitable times of chaos and confusion come, remember, starboard is right, port is left. And love is our calling.