

OUR WHOLE FELLOWSHIP: STEWARDSHIP SUNDAY

The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
November 20, 2016

OPENING WORDS *Responsive Reading* ~ Kathleen McTigue

Leader: You who are broken-hearted, who woke up today with the winds of despair whistling through your mind, come in.

Congregation: You who are brave but wounded, limping through life and hurting with every step, come in.

L: You who are fearful, who live with shadows hovering over your shoulders, come in.

All: This place is a sanctuary, and it is for you.

L: You who are filled with happiness, whose abundance overflows, come in.

C: You who walk through your world with lightness and grace, who awoke this morning with strength and hope, you who have everything to give, come in.

L: This place is your calling, a riverbank to channel the sweet waters of your life.

C: The place where you are called by the world's need. Here we offer in love.

L: Here we receive in gratitude. Here we make a circle from the great gifts of breath, attention, and purpose.

All: Come in.

Come, let us spend a while as a whole Fellowship, together.

STORY FOR ALL *Mama Panya's Pancakes* ~ Mary and Rich Chamberlin

(In this tale from Kenya, Akida, excited that his mother is making pancakes, invites all of their friends. The mother is very worried that there won't be enough, but everyone arrives bringing something.)

READING

One day, your church was born.

Maybe it was a gathering of saints, called together for the common worship of a wrathful god, ceaselessly praying, between bouts of decrying the evil of Christmas or dancing.

Or maybe a few brave souls answered a notice in the newspaper, curiosity piqued by the announcement of a religion where free-thinking and tolerance were bedrocks.

No matter how it happened, your church was born. A gathering of people – humble, caring, anxious and quirky all at the same time – who covenanted, to be with one another on the journey of life, death and everything in-between –

and so it began. A faithful few. Beautifully imperfect, called to that central task – that human task – of connecting, loving, and serving.

It was just a baby, and yet it was thrust deep into the human condition. Tasked to hold minds and souls, bodies and hearts along the roller derby of disease and birth, infighting and joy, and Christmas pageants. Sometimes all of those at the same time.

They gathered to hear the world broken open, for insightful sermons, rejuvenating music, and a community whose fierce devotion to each other's well-being rivaled a

mama bear's for her cubs.

But it wasn't always like that of course. There were the trying times – and I don't just mean Phyllis or Jack, those stubborn but loveably souls who inhabit the netherworld of committee meetings – no, I mean the trying times:

when the church almost split in half over the war or integration,
or when the mill left the town vacant,
or when the minister crossed that line, and the people couldn't speak about it for decades.

But somehow you were still here.
still on the town common,
still the church that everyone recognizes,
still the one that shows up every time you were called on,
still using the communion silver (until you voted to sell it).

New people came, and they changed things. Small things, big things. Things that nobody noticed as it happened, until suddenly it was hard to even recognize anything anymore. That was a hard moment, a tearful moment.

And other things changed too.

The proclamations about God, once heard loud from the pulpit softened:

Wrathful became loving.

Distant became intimate.

Mandatory became optional.

After the war, the nursery and RE classrooms were overflowing. Each baby dedicated reminded the church of the incredible beauty of life and the gift this community, all huddled around baby, would bestow upon this child.

The history of your church is more a story of the determination of love to break forth than it is about tie-dye, or chalices, sermon discussions or social justice committee meetings.

The history of the church is the history of human enterprise, evolving in its sights and sounds, yet revolving always around its core.

The history of your church is the gift of potential and momentum, of baggage and personality. The history of your church is the launch pad from which you spring – into action or disarray.

Each day your church is born.

MESSAGE

Our Whole Fellowship

~ Rev. Stoneberg

I had this fantasy yesterday, that I would get up here and confess... "I got nothin' today.

Truly. Nothing. So, I'm going to turn this time over to you. What have you got?" It's true. I sometimes feel that I have nothing to give.

What DO you have to say about how to create and sustain a whole, interconnected, interdependent, lively and relevant Fellowship community? What do you know about what it takes, what it gives back, why it matters? I know for a fact it takes more than my talking head

up here on Sundays. I know it gives back in countless big and small ways that are felt by you but often invisible to others. I believe, I so believe, that this community and others like it matter greatly to the health and well-being of our world, most especially in times like this. And, I really really believe that we could be more intentional about how the magic of an abundant community happens.

Abundance. It feels almost dangerous to talk about abundance on this Sunday, which baldly focuses on an appeal to give of your financial resources. Yes, I know this year's Stewardship Team has rightfully broadened the definition of stewardship to include the myriad non-financial contributions you all make....contributions that are just as critical as any monetary gifts. But let's take each of these separately. I want to address the financial appeal directly. Make no bones about it, financial contributions matter a great deal to the ongoing sustainability of this spiritual community.

Our relationship with money...with possessions, and what is ours...is complicated. It can bring out grasping, and greed, and lust...bumping us up against our values of sharing and cooperation. It can evoke fear of scarcity, and even survival...stockpiling or hoarding, "just in case." Money easily brings out feelings of shame. And, one only need cast a glance Trumpward to see all that we hate about money, qualities which we regretfully recognize in ourselves sometimes.

Our money-relationship has been recognized as a place of human frailty for thousands of years. At least two of the ten commandments relate to possessions...Thou shalt not steal; thou shalt not covet anything that belongs to your neighbour. According to one source,¹ one out of every eight verses in both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Testament talks about the relationship between faith and wealth. And sixteen, nearly half, of the thirty-eight parables of Jesus deal with what you say you believe and how you use your money.

Okay, I know. The Bible may not be your chosen source of authority. But it's a great historical reference. People have struggled with money and its value for ages. And this morning, I want to call us, myself included, into a more intentional relationship with, and practice of, money.

I walk into this realm with caution. I know well our resistance to anything that 'shoulds' on us. We don't like being told what to do...being directed to act or behave in expected ways. But sometimes, don't you think, we react that way because we know we are hearing good but difficult advice...something that demands something of us? Rev. Stefan Jonasson of Manitoba, who worked for years as a congregational consultant for the UUA, has said that 'sophistry is first among the deadly sins of religious liberals.'²

I had to look up 'sophistry'. It means making excuses or using deceptive arguments. Good word, eh? Sophistry. I don't much like the notion of deadly sins, but I do like this word. If we are to lead well-examined lives, then we definitely need to look at the excuses we make for not doing the things that our better natures call us to do.

¹ Rev. Stephen C. Gray, as quoted in "Money, Anxiety and Abundance." <http://www.questformeaning.org/spiritual-themes/money-anxiety-and-abundance/>

² <http://members.shaw.ca/smjonasson/files/Download/Towards%20a%20Culture%20of%20Abundance.pdf>

Still difficult language? Really, all I want to acknowledge here is that making decisions about how to use our money, whether we have too little or too much, is difficult. I respect whatever decisions you make, and respect them even more if you make those decisions with thoughtfulness.

I don't think I've ever openly shared what my pledge is, but since we're talking frankly, I thought I'd tell you. I admit to having a personal struggle with it this year. My values resonate with voices that suggest that I should give until it hurts, at least a little...voices that confirm the benefits of giving away at least a tithe (10%) of what I have...voices that encourage me to keep increasing what I am giving. Those are values that I want to listen to. But, this year I realized that I'm at about my limit; my charitable giving last year came to 13.5% of my gross income, with almost 9% going to UFP. It's starting to hurt, and I decided I could increase my UFP pledge by only a few dollars each month. It was a hard-made decision.

Now, I recognize that I have great privilege in being able to make these financial gifts. I am not taking care of children, or tending to ailing parents. I don't have any expensive habits or needs. I have enough, and it matters to me to be able to share what I have. During this pledge season and beyond, all I ask is that you examine what matters to you, and do what you can to align your financial resources with those values. That is all that is asked of you... to make a well-examined personal decision of consequence. One of the great benefits of being part of a spiritual community is the call to examine one's values and to live accordingly.

Let's shift gears now, and return to the theme of abundance, acknowledging that while money is important, it is by no means that only thing that matters. It is simply one of the resources, a kind of energy that you may possess, that can be used to support UFP.

The word 'abundance' has its roots in the Latin, abundare, which literally means 'from a wave' or 'like a wave.' Imagine standing on a seashore, experiencing the relentless rolling waves, coming one after another to the shore. Standing there, we don't question if the waves will run out, or if we are using them up too fast and should somehow keep them for a rainy day. This is abundance...waves that just keep rolling in, without end.

But, in reality, all kinds of things contribute to making waves happen. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration tells me that waves are actually energy passing through water, causing it to move up and down in a circular motion.³ That up and down motion bumps into the ocean floor, slowing the motion down, and causing the tops to crest. And, the reason water moves up and down is because of wind, because of extreme weather, because of earthquakes and landslides at the bottom of the ocean, and the gravitational pull of the moon. The constant abundance of waves doesn't just happen.

The same is true for this Fellowship. Stuff doesn't just happen. You contribute money which makes it possible for us to rent this space, for you to pay a minister and a Director of Religious Exploration, among other things. Sunday services happen because you have prioritized having full-time ministry, and because as many as 30 people actively contribute on that day...by spending time guiding our children, and singing, and service leading, and greeting,

³ <http://oceanexplorer.noaa.gov/facts/waves.html>

and making coffee, and counting the collection, and running the sound system, and, and...you show up. All of these contributions are the energy that cycles back around, sometimes beneath the surface, and while it might look like Sundays just happen, they actually happen because of the energy you contribute.

And we can look at any program or quality of this community in that way. Covenant groups happen because people volunteer to facilitate, because the facilitators show up for regular training and support, because someone creates a session plan, because others open their homes and bring snacks. And because you want the experience of covenant groups.

Our social justice initiatives... take for example, our refugee sponsorship, is happening because some of you had great vision for what we could do together, because you worked tirelessly at understanding how to best engage in this action, because many contributed funds, because others volunteer to find things like furniture and an acceptable housing situation, and to offer rides and tutoring, and...

A successful OWL weekend for seventeen 7th-9th graders this weekend happened because of the incredible dedication and vision of Kate Huband, who is paid with your financial gifts, and the volunteer efforts of a crackerjack OWL team, and the cooperation of our neighbouring UU congregations, and the food that you brought to feed them all, and those who gave up sleeping in order to keep them safe all night. This doesn't just happen, folks. It takes all of us, all of our hands, all of what we can offer.

People find community here not by magic, but because smiles and hugs are offered warmly...and because our tradition has promoted acceptance of others from its deepest roots...and because we are all engaging in ongoing learning about how to be allies and friends...and because newcomers are invited into participation and given opportunities to learn and grow as well. This stuff doesn't just happen.

Marion shared a reading about the history of church, and those of you who have been long-time UFPers perhaps saw some of the history of this congregation in that reading. It has changed over its 55-year history. It is not the same as when it began, and it will not be the same next year, or in ten years, as it is today. It evolves because of the abundance of contributions that you make. Each of you brings who you are and what matters to you into this community, and that changes it. We learn from one another. We are inspired by one another. We are together the pull and the tug that creates waves of change.

There is a Sufi teaching story that explores the nature of abundance. It tells of a seeker who was meditating in the forest and observed a bear with a mangled foreleg. Unable to run or to hunt, the bear seemed destined to die of starvation, yet as the seeker watched, a fox came with its prey of that day, and after eating its fill, it left the remainder of the meal for the bear. Several days later, the seeker observed this same pattern, and said to himself, "Behold, how good and generous is God, who feeds the bear by means of the fox, how He provides for all His creatures! I, too, will put my trust in Him utterly." And the seeker retired to a cave, to await the arrival of his provision, but days passed and nothing came. Finally, on the fifth day, as he was fainting from hunger, a voice said to him, "O thou who art in the path of error,

repent! Stop imitating the injured bear, and go out and follow the example of the fox!"⁴

We give, trusting that we are contributing to the abundance that exists in community, and trusting that such abundance will come back to us. You see, we can understand abundance in two ways: as a given that we can accept with complacency, or as an invitation to become a part of the energy of largess...that beautiful cycle of giving and receiving without end.

SO...Your mission, should you choose to accept it...and your decision about whether or not to accept it is a sacred one, as it involves you carefully setting priorities that align with your values...your mission, is to decide what you can contribute to this congregation, its health, and its future. And further, your mission is to have a vision for what we can do together.

In a recent article, Parker Palmer tells of predicting that the Chicago Cubs would win the World Series, a win that many people credited to Theo Epstein, the president of the Cubs baseball operations. But in a locker room interview right after Game 7, Epstein said:⁵

"It's not about me... A great organization is a thousand little sacrifices when no one's looking — a scout traveling 100 miles out of his way to see a prospect, the stat people up all night — it takes everyone... All that business school leadership stuff is [BS]... [If there's a secret, it's to] keep deflecting credit, keep from blaming. Live your ... life and be nice to people."

It takes everyone, folks. Every one of us making the little sacrifices we're able. Every one of us contributing what we can...expressing kindness to one another...saying yes when we're able...saying no when we must...showing up with our whole selves...to make this beautiful thing we call our whole Fellowship.

And a beautiful thing it is indeed.

Blessed be Our Whole Fellowship.

READING *Nurture This Precious Light (adapted)* ~ Naomi King

How shall we begin to live out our free faith?

Nurture this precious light.

When we do, we are beacons of freedom creating a safe place to rest, explore, and innovate.

Nurture this precious light!

How we keep this lamp of truth and justice affects how and whether we are transforming inequity through witness and action.

Nurture this precious light.

As we nurture this precious light together, we become a light of hope turning isolation into community, anguish into peace, sorrow into joy.

Nurture this precious light.

As we do, our faith burns a steady flame of innovation banishing illusion, creating a new and renewing way together.

Nurture this precious light!

⁴ <http://www.questformeaning.org/spiritual-themes/abundant-life/>

⁵ <http://www.onbeing.org/blog/parker-palmer-our-november-surprise-i-predicted-the-winner/9033>

With our living connections, with our glowing stories, with our flame of freedom moving hand to hand, we...

Nurture this precious light.

Together, we turn this world from bleak to bright one flame, one fire, one light at a time.

***CLOSING WORDS** *Blessed By Our Connections* ~Susan Karlson

We leave blessed by our connections to one another, to the spirit of life.

Walk lightly so that you see the life that is below your feet.

Spread your arms as if you had wings and could dance through the air.

Feel the joy of the breath in your lungs and the fire in your heart.

Live to love and be a blessing on this earth.

Each of you is indeed a blessing...to one another, to this Fellowship, and to the earth.

I am so very grateful for you. Go in peace.

Amen.

EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME