

Sermon for March 7, 2004.

*How do we make a Difference? What Gifts do we  
bring to the Table?*

By Lone Jensen

The question is both personal and universal. As in: what do you, each of you, sitting here this morning bring to the table? And as in: what do we, this congregation and our larger Unitarian Universalist uncommon denomination, what do we bring to the larger table?

When I first decided to become a minister I wrote with all the optimistic idealism of a novice, that we Unitarian Universalists embodied hope for our torn and divided world. For if we can get along, with all our theological differences and diversity then it is also possible for the world one day to do so. Where else can we find Atheists and Theists, God lover and Goddess worshippers, Humanists, Buddhists, Earth centered folks, Liberal Jews, Liberal Jesus followers and a whole host of other various and sundry beliefs sitting together peacefully on any given Sunday morning and upon occasion breaking bread together happily? That is, in and of itself, quite an accomplishment. But after many years in the ministry I now realize that what we fight about is not always theology, as in God or no God. More often we get into heated

arguments over other seemingly far less important things. In another congregation I once watched in amazement as ten adults, whom I knew to be, in fact, mature, understanding and caring people, yet here they were red faced, yelling loudly and nearly coming to blows with each other over the exact color of kitchen tiles. There are advantages, my friends, to buying something already built and painted!

But such arguments, like many family arguments, are often not really about things like tiles. They were really fighting about their collective identity. To whom does this place belong and who are we becoming, and who decides around here?

Just like we are doing now as we grow into this bigger space. They argued because they cared so much. This congregation was, as ours is for many of us, the beloved community, an extended family, a safe space and a sanctuary in an otherwise divided and uncaring world.

I understand the need. My house is in a middle class, Arizona retirement community neighborhood and it is well kept, in near perfect beauty. But I do not really know my neighbors. I have so little time it seems and so I travel in my little separate car back and forth to work, to shops, on errands and back home again without ever needing to make real human contact with anyone. Except for here, except for the blessing of this congregation and my work, I

could be a near hermit. It takes tremendous intentional effort to reach out to others. And it is a powerful temptation to think we are utterly alone, that we only have to look out for ourselves and that we do not matter greatly to anyone else. But that would be wrong, not only religiously but also scientifically. We are in fact all connected.

That is both a scientific and theological statement. We are all of us according to science made from ancient stardust, elemental strands finely interwoven in the larger web of life. In our seventh principle we speak about *the interdependent web of all existence of which we humans are only a part*. But we forget. It can feel heartbreakingly lonely out there. Now I do know that many of you are very involved in the world, but in general, one of the biggest challenges in this age of communication and information is, ironically, how to connect with others in a meaningful way. This congregation can be such a safe place, to explore in freedom, to connect in love, to find friends perhaps, to stir the mind or find some comfort.

There are many people who have no affirming place like that in their lives. And when we feel powerless humans can do incredibly harmful things. Computer viruses, which I think are despicable, are for its creators, interviewed at length in a recent NY Times, a loud message to the world: I am here and I have

power! Even if what I have is only the power to destroy.

Why do you come here today? What is it you are looking for? And what do you bring to the table? For those are intimately connected. Take potlucks. Everyone is invited to the table. But sometimes all you get is chocolate cake. Or bread. If everyone expects someone else to bring the food we will all go hungry. Or maybe you find twenty turkeys and no cranberry sauce. It is always an act of faith trusting that somehow even when we do not plan we will all be welcome and fed. Which is what we are about spiritually too. The more involved you are when you come here, allowing the music to move you, letting the words evoke questions in your mind or drawing comfort from the assembled company, the more satisfied you will be. Religion around here is not a spectator sport.

We ourselves weave the future of this congregation. We can choose to create a tapestry of beauty, color, diversity and caring, a well crafted work of art of which we can be proud. Or we can leave the loom empty, the warp lacking the binding threads that will hold it all together. It really is up to us. The loom is this community and our individual hopes and dreams binds it together, that and our commitment to make those visions come true. We have indeed made a UU miracle over this past year just by getting into this new space. A miracle takes courage, ingenuity, faith and

creativity. Now we must look to the long haul. We need to nurture this miracle, protect it and secure our future. We have some wonderful hopes for this congregation. But these remain dreams until we act so today I ask for your commitment and your generous giving. When the canvasser calls you, do answer that call. We have a rare opportunity to leave a living legacy here. This is an invitation. Join us in this great venture, be part of our quest and our future generations of Unitarian Universalists will call us blessed. I ask nothing of you that you do not already possess: a spirit of generosity, open hands and hearts! Without your vision we surely would not have gotten this far.

We have the freedom here to search for truth and meaning. Sometimes we shrug our shoulders and say: so what? We take our freedom for granted. I am guilty of that too and then something happens like a conversation I had with another minister. He was complaining to me. *Oh, he said, I am sick and tired of all those couples that come into my church wanting to do their own ceremonies. It was he said, not their wedding, but the church's and as far as he was concerned they could just go elsewhere.* Oh, I thought, really? In my mind I saw the faces of all the different couples I have married and how we had carefully crafted a wedding that expressed their feelings and beliefs. Well, to him that was a travesty, even an affront. It was as if we lived in two

different universes. We certainly had very different ideas about whose service it was and who owned the church. Yes, this is also my congregation since I am a member, but this church belongs to *you, its members* and a wedding belongs to the couple. To him that was secular, to me that was what made it sacred. I shudder to think of what he would have said to a service of union or same sex marriage. We parted before that came up. The conversation reminded me of why I cannot be anything other than a Unitarian Universalist. This is where I find the sacred here among us, in nature, in good deeds, in caring people, in our long tradition, in all that, as our theologian Henry Nielson Wieman said, *work toward the creative good*. Which was his definition of God, the creative force that moves us toward the good. God is part of our tradition too but what is not our tradition is to insist that everyone else has to believe in your idea of what constitutes the Ultimate Reality, or for that matter in the absence thereof. That is what makes us unique. This hurting wounded world could use some good, life affirming, joyful and liberating theology for a change. We strive to be a safe place, a faith shaping, meaning making, soul-enriching workshop. We want to give our children a sound religious and inquiring foundation upon which to build their faith. When someone ask me if we UU's are a religion my answer is yes. We are a religion in the best sense of binding and linking together,

making sense of and finding meaning in our lives. We are a far more radical faith than many realize. We believe that human goodness is possible. We believe each of us embody such possibilities. Here we can test our beliefs in the company of others to see if it is good, for ourselves and for the world.

We have a metaphor for this: Potluck theology! I bring mine and you bring yours and we will find new tastes and spicy new flavors along with our old favorites. Vegetarians and omnivores unite! This is what we do bring to the larger table: our radical acceptance and celebration of differences. Not that it is always easy. My colleague Ned Wright wrote: *Diversity is one of the "in" words in our UU movement. But our attitudes are often ambiguous. On the one hand we know it is inescapable. It comes with living in a community. On the other hand it can be a pain in the neck. We cannot escape the sad truth that there is a conflict raging in our country about cultural diversity, multiculturalism, ethnic diversity, ethnocentrism, political correctness, family values, homophobia, racism, classism, sexism, ableism, and on and on. We live in a world where exclusion rather than inclusion seem to be the norm. Diversity is bound to make us feel uncomfortable.* Parker Palmer writes in *The Company of Strangers: Community is that place where the person you least want to live with always lives! And when that person moves away someone else arises to*

*take his or her place.* That is true. Diversity means bumping up against our differences. It is always hard to tear down walls especially those we have built in our minds. Walls that we were told were there for our own protection. After all those people, and here you may substitute any class or kinds of people, those are not like us. They are to be avoided, feared, put in their place, so they don't hurt us, take away our rightful power, etc. etc. etc. Yes, Robert Frost said fences made good neighbors but he was talking about a physical separation, and one could, I like to imagine, talk to each other over those fences. The fear of the stranger that so many ministers and politicians fan so well and raise so much money on is in essence the same fear that brought us civil wars in Bosnia and hate crimes in this nation. When we are afraid and feel threatened we revert to the reptilian part of our brain. I have seen it at tense meetings, yes even at church meetings when suddenly the room is full of alligators. I lived in Louisiana and one can't reason with alligators, trust me on that. Humor however, when we laugh at ourselves that lift us immediately up into the higher parts of the human brain. Knee jerk fear of others, leaves us in the end, isolated and lonely in our illusion of security. . Think of Howard Hughes in his last years living in a huge mansion, terrified of human contacts and germs. I'd rather mix it up with someone I am not comfortable with any day! This is a great congregation. We

live our faith and welcome everyone here. Friday evening at the canvass dinner Debbie Dinyes fearlessly put on antennas and entered the room saying in a B- movie Sci Fi monotone: take me to your leader. It did take a minute for the room to answer: You are welcome here!

Would we welcome a Martian? I hope so. But let us not underestimate the challenges we face. Especially right now. This is a tender and transforming moment in our congregation's history. We are fitting into a new skin, trying to figure out who we are now in this new place. Because we used to have two services it is hard for some of us to even know who is really a visitor here. When we feel secure in knowing who we are it is much easier to be both welcoming and hospitable. Right now we are still settling in. So let us covenant to be gentle with one another and greet everyone, familiar faces and not so familiar faces with a smile. It is essential we assume the best intentions of one another and not the worst. Thus do we grow our beloved community.

The moral is that what we *think* is going on shapes our behavior. If we think small, we will act small. If we are in fact, as in the fairy tale *The Ugly Duckling*, a swan growing up among ducks we will unsuccessfully try to be a good duck until we discover who we really are. Think back on why you came here the first time. What were you looking for? Did you find it? As a

visitor, what would you like to find here? And then answer this question: *what are you willing to give ?*

Let me close this sermon by another quote from Ned Wright. He wrote: *For all of us, our churches and fellowships are places where we reach out to one another in all our diversity, to form a circle of inclusion, to affirm our faith in the ties that bind us together, different as we are from one another...ties of commitment to our missions, to our principles and to our experience of unity wrought by a powerful spirit of love and respect. This spirit unites us. May we always be open to its power, as we keep this movement open to diversity in its myriad miraculous forms. And may this spirit of love and mutual respect grow in our won UU congregation and others like that affirm the blessings of diversity so that these blessings may be felt throughout the world. So may it always be,. Shalom. Blessed be, Insha'allah, Aho, Namaste, Amen.*