

**Roots and Wings: Why we need Both.**

Sermon for Stewardship Campaign Sunday March 12, 2006.

by the Reverend Lone Jensen

Before I begin this sermon let me issue a fair warning. Sort of like the yellow or red lettered ones you find on almost any packaging, not just on medicine, nowadays. Probably has something to do with insurance but these warnings are everywhere. Some are more useful than others, as I do not need to be told that the cardboard box is not meant for human consumption. So here it is in big bold letters: If you think you are allergic to the mere mention of money or suggestion of generosity brace yourselves. This is our annual Stewardship Campaign and I will mention money. Yes, this is my annual sermon on the amount. No not “sermon on the mount” but on the amount. Should you experience a sudden attack of generosity and act on it, be assured that such an attack is actually good for you. We would welcome that kind of an epidemic and react promptly with an appropriate expression of heartfelt gratitude. If you are very generous the entire Stewardship committee will even throw their hats in the air. If you are a newcomer or a visitor relax. We do not talk about money every Sunday. In fact we often preach about other really surprising and interesting topics. I must issue another warning

though. Attendance at this congregation's Sunday services can be habit forming.

Why you may ask is this so? Yes we offer spirit filled music and we laugh easily here, we do have a theology of joy and our only doctrine is love. That sounds pretty good. But there is something else here. This congregation has a secret we would love to share. Unitarian Universalism has good news that you can actually use, here and now in your life. Let us begin with the basics. *“Who am I? I am a person of dignity and worth. I share this world with other human beings of dignity and worth. Therefore I try to live with respect for my neighbor and for myself. I am a flawed person. I am not perfect. But I can change. I can become better able to witness the worth of human beings. I can become more compassionate, more involved in life. I can learn to recognize when people are demeaned and I can gain courage to speak out in protest. Through my decisions and actions I can make a difference in this world.”* (The Reverend Charles Howe)

Seems so obvious doesn't it. You have intrinsic value. But how obvious is this message really in a world that tells us otherwise? Think about it. Daily we are told in thousands of words and images how many ways we can buy our way to happiness. Our worth in the marketplace is measured by what we can produce. Actions that deny our common humanity are

commonplace. Watch the news late at night and you will likely get nightmares. And here we come with our good news. It can seem very unreal and as fragile as a candle in a windstorm. As Bruce Marshall recalls: *A new member of the congregation said to me: "You know, this is not the real world!" Oh?" I said without understanding. This person went on to explain: "It is not the real world because in a real world Christians and Jews and Atheists and Theists and Humanists don't try to live together. And in the real world you don't seek to understand another person's ideas- you attack or ridicule or ignore them. In the real world gays and lesbians and straight people don't share in the same life together. And in the real world people are kicked around a lot and no body cares very much and you can pray to your God to hurt someone else and that is acceptable. And so you shouldn't think that this congregation is the real world because it isn't."* With all due respect to Marshall and that new member of his congregation I beg to differ. What I put my faith in is that our congregations at their best model the real world as it could be. Imagine Valley UU Church as a bright guiding light in the desert. Envision us as a beacon of hope in this war torn and divided world, a tantalizing glimpse of the possibility that somehow we will all be able to get along. The world is crying, thirsty as our desert was just one day ago, for the life giving rain of such hope.

Yesterday I heard on the news about two very different men. One died in his cell on trial for horrific war crimes. Another was found murdered in Iraq. Milosevic is remembered for fanning the flames of ethnic and religious hatred. His memorial will forever be the mass graves of Bosnian Muslims. Tom Fox, held hostage in Iraq worked for peace. He was helping Iraqis find out what had happened to their missing loved ones. His former student said: *So many people are willing to die for war. Very few are willing to die for peace.* His memorial will be in the hearts of those he helped.

We also have a choice, not so immediately of the same magnitude, but still a fateful choice. The stakes are very high. It is by many smaller decisions that we determine what direction our lives will go. Will we be counted as being on the side of good? How will we be remembered?

This congregation's mission as I see it is to stand on the side of love. Not narrowly defined love but the kind we find in our Universalist tradition where God is love in action. You can call it agape or all embracing love but what it really means is that we act lovingly toward each other even when that is really hard to do. Even with those we really can't stand at all. You may not feel loving but you can choose to act kindly and respect the other even when you disagree. We choose to be one beloved community. "The basic sin" Gandhi observed, "the only sin in the ultimate

analysis is the sin of separateness." I agree. If I was to identify one particular sin among UU's that keeps us so small and saps our powers it would be the way we sometimes make our individualism into idolatry. To answer our call to transform the world takes the kind of unity where we put the best interest of all before our own narrow self interest. A city official once said, as he learned more about our tradition in the course of planning our General Assembly in Salt Lake City: *It sure is a good thing you are so few in numbers. Otherwise you could be a real dangerous religion!* Dangerous for whom I wonder? For those who fear change? Our congregations can be a real puzzle to my colleagues from other denominations. *How do you do it?* They ask. *How in the world do you manage to keep them all together? How come you do not fight each other all the time?* And I say: *well that is what makes us Unitarian Universalists. We will find a way!*

Our congregation needs both roots and wings to grow and flourish. We roots to remind us of where we came from and how we came to be who we are today. They hold us firmly in the soil, give us assurance and keep us from toppling over with the winds of change. We have our deep roots in the Jewish and Christian tradition but we draw from many wells and find truth in many religious scriptures and in the reasoned compassion of humanism. Sheltered by the shade of this tree with its many branches we

explore our individual faiths as we weave the beautiful varied tapestry that is our congregation. We have a vision for our future here. Our children grow up well and loved in this embracing UU village as they learn how to care for our world and for each other. We plan to expand what we do in education and music ministry to include the greater community as we have done this year on a small scale with unlimited potential and our vacation art school. We are working on creating more covenant groups, on more lifespan adult and senior offerings in religious education. We have cafes, and concerts and our own traditions like cabaret that bring us together. Our sheltering sanctuary is beautiful and yes, we have improved it painted it, made it our own. We have a true shared ministry in our worship associates program and pastoral associates program and a caring committee that makes sure our members in need are helped. We have a great board, a strong lay leadership, a committed and talented staff and we guard and administer our resources well.

And we have choices to make. We are a congregation with courage and we chose to buy this building two years ago. How could we not? So now we are looking at refinancing and the end of our capital campaign. Surely we did not choose to do all this to sit under our tree all by ourselves? How many times have you heard from a visitor words similar to these: *“I never knew such a*

*place as this Unitarian Universalist congregation existed! Where have you been all of my life?"*

When this happens I see such eagerness in their faces and hear such amazement in their voice: *You mean I am welcome here? As I am and with what I believe? I don't have to deny any part of myself?* But those are the ones who find us. There are many more souls out there who are longing for a church like ours, who post questions on the internet and ask friends in vain. What about them? Shall we leave such UU's in spirit wandering in a spiritual wasteland or make a real effort to go out and find them and bring them home? Surely the world can use as many UU's as it can get! To do this we need, you guessed it, more generous giving, money, staff and resources to bring them all in. And to let the world know we are here! So do invite a friend to church! Share our good news!

The reason I feel strongly about this issue is that I have seen too many people who came to us late in their lives and regretted the time lost. I remember one man in particular. He found the UU congregation I served with difficulty and only came because he had been diagnosed with terminal liver cancer. Let us call him Tom. Tom wanted to make one last attempt to find a religious home that would honor both his beliefs and his doubts. He had almost given up on ever finding such a church. But he was

driven by his need to make some sense of his life. In Unitarian Universalism he found at last his spiritual home. But his joy at belonging was mixed with regrets. Tom joined our UU congregation a few months before he died. He died as a UU but he could have lived most his life that way. How I wished we had been in his life sooner and offered him so much more than a UU memorial service.

How many Toms do you imagine are out there? How long shall we remain one of the best kept secrets in town?

Think about how it was to grow up in a UU congregation. Or remember when you joined. Or think about people you know who have joined UU congregations in the hope of finding support for themselves. Each sought dignity, a sense of having worth, affirmation for who they were. Each sought an atmosphere of acceptance.

This is where the metaphor of wings comes in. We need to nurture our tree that it may give us shelter but we must also send out messenger like birds out into the world around us. We have a proud history of social justice. It is my hope that we will strengthen this tradition in our congregation. Many of you do much already, but rest assured there will always be more to do. As in the Hebrew word *Tikkun*: to heal and repair the shattered world. This task requires that we recognize each other as filled with the

goodness and grace that also suffuses the Universe and treat each other accordingly. That is with love, caring, respect, compassion and gentleness.

And one more message here. There is enough to go around. The power of money, that some of our puritan foremothers called "the filthy lucre ", is after all just a tool that can be used for either good and for evil. The possession of it makes us neither good or bad it is to what use we put this power that makes the difference.

Imagine a world filled with joy. Imagine a peaceful, just world. Imagine a place where people do get along with each other even when they disagree, where love is the only doctrine and where radical hospitality and acceptance are living realities. Imagine such a world or maybe just a city like Chandler filled to overflowing with committed, passionate Unitarian Universalists! Our congregation could be like the ancient sacred tree of life with deep roots and a sheltering canopy, nurturing our congregation and its children, and at the same time send out messages like doves of peace, spreading our good news far and wide.

If you care deeply about our values, if it matters to you that we have this oasis of hope and joy, acceptance and freedom that we call Valley Unitarian Universalist Church, then join us! We need constant and generous gardeners who know that though we are far from perfect, we still embody a very real hope for this wounded

world we live in. And that together we help each other become better people as we care for one another in this, our beloved community. We need passionate messengers who know how important this battle really is and how high the stakes are. What kind of world are we creating? What kind of world do you want it to become? What messages do you want our children to hear?

You are giving to what you believe in. Be counted, stand for what you believe. Be generous! You are giving to our tree of life.

Jon Carrol article Unitarian Jihad:

*Greetings to the Imprisoned Citizens of the United States!  
We are Unitarian Jihad. There is only God, unless there is more than one God. The vote of our God subcommittee is 10-8 in favor of one God, with two abstentions. Brother Flaming Sword of Moderation noted the possibility of there being no God at all, and his objection was noted with love by the secretary.*

*Greetings to the Imprisoned Citizens of the United States!  
Too long has your attention been waylaid by the bright baubles of extremist thought. Too long have fundamentalist yahoos of all religions made your head hurt. Too long have you been buffeted by angry people who think that God talks to them. You have a right to your moderation! You have the power to be calm!*

*We are Unitarian Universalist Jihad. We are everywhere. We have not been born again, nor have we sworn a blood oath. We do not think that God cares what we read, what we eat or whom we sleep with. We will take over television studios and broadcast calm, well-reasoned discussions of the issues of the day.*

*We are Unitarian Universalist Jihad. We will appear in*

*public places and require people to shake hands with each other. (Sister Hand Grenade of Love suggested that we institute a terror regime of mandatory hugging, but her motion was not formally introduced because of lack of a quorum.) We are Unitarian Universalists Jihad, and our motto is: "Sincerity is not enough." We have heard from enough sincere people to last a lifetime already. Just because you believe its true doesn't make it true. Just because your motives are pure doesn't mean you are not doing harm. Get a dog, or comfort someone in a nursing home, or just feed the birds in the park. Play basketball. Lighten up. The world is not out to get you, except in the sense that the world is out to get everyone.*

*People of the United States! We are Unitarian Universalist Jihad! We can strike without warning. Pockets of reasonableness and harmony will appear as if from nowhere! Nice people will run the government again! There will be coffee and cookies in the Gandhi Room after the revolution.*