

*VUU – for Our Lives, for Our World, for Our Future.*

*Sermon for our Stewardship Campaign Sunday March 18, 2007*

*by the Reverend Lone Jensen*

When you are about to break one of our society's last taboo and give the annual "sermon on the amount", though I am not going to give you the amount, that is up to you, it is good to begin with a bit of humor. Thank you for that great rendition of "Night and Day we need your Pledge!" To our guests here today, you have by now guessed it, you have stumbled in upon our Stewardship Campaign Kick Off Sunday. I personally invite you to come again some other Sunday if you want to figure out what we are really like around here. We very seldom sound like our Public Radio or Public Television Station during pledge week. But I can easily imagine a phone bank over there where the choir is seated with eager volunteers: Call if you love VUU! They are waiting for you! We have special mugs for you. Imagine how this Valley Unitarian Universalist Congregation has enriched your lives and the lives of your families. What is that worth to you? But we are not Public Radio and we are asking for and seeking more than a dollar a day in return for a T-shirt with a quote by Ralph Emerson or emblazoned with a big question mark and the words: To question is the answer. No we are asking you for your commitment and that is far more than money alone. We are asking for your generosity toward this congregation but you are this congregation. Your presence here on Sunday is also your gift to us. Come

and celebrate our liberating vision and our beloved community. We explore deep questions of meaning and purpose here as we worship, celebrate, affirm life and offer transforming hope. And in the process we become better people. We are here to become better people and make a difference in this world. I shared this story with some of our leaders but it bears repeating: Some weeks ago I spent part of the service with our youths. We were to have a conversation, but as it so often is with teenagers, I had to work hard to find a rickety bridge across the cultural divide. Here was this aging baby boomer with a cell phone that keeps setting off strange noises and alarms because I can't quite figure out how to stop it. Surrounding me were a room full of instant text messaging, technologically advanced teens. We groped about a bit and I kept looking for something that would spark their interest. Finally their faces became lively when we began talking about their planned service called: What if UU's ruled the world?

What if we did? How would it be different? I invite you to think about it for a moment. What if we ruled the world? Go down the list of our purposes and principles and imagine them as public policy. What if respecting the inherent worth and dignity of every human being was a goal, or if we saw the interdependent web of all creation as a sacred trust, well you get the idea. Religious strife would become the archaic relic it ought to be and though anyone would be free to harbor such ideologies of exclusion and hatred they would not be allowed to impose them on others.

OK, it will be a long time before we are the majority. We may never rule the world. But we do keep hope alive in our small corner of it. That a place like Valley UU Church exists at all is both a great accomplishment and our precious gift to the future. On Sunday mornings we gather in gratitude to those who made this possible. And those of you who have been here a while, our long time members are the generous gardeners and builders of this dream and we thank you.

How has this congregation changed your life? I remember when we asked this question and had you write down the answers and they were amazing. *This congregation taught me to believe in myself. It gave me a caring community when my husband died. They were there for me when I was in the hospital. My children have found a religious home that they love to come to. I have deepened my faith here. On Sunday I leave with renewed hope and a message to think about for the rest of the week. I love the people here they really care about what happens in the world. The music sustains me. We are not afraid to laugh at ourselves. We are not expected to be perfect here and I love that....*I could go on and on with these comments from a few years ago. But instead I encourage you to think of your own. How has, or if you are new here, how might this congregation change your life? How might you contribute to it and make it better?

It is sometimes the little things that define us. I found this story in the Arizona Republic. (Arizona Republic 3 16 2007) *A church in Michigan was planning a moment of silence for what the pastor called a model member of*

*his congregation: a wild turkey. The turkey was sadly run over by a car but used to attend services regularly and greeted people as they arrived. “He used to wait for me to come in and knew when services began,” said the Reverend James Huff. “He would greet us as we left.”* Let me quickly say that I do not think any of you here today are turkeys. I would really not know how to preach to one either actually I do not speak turkey. It would be very boring also to preach to congregants who could not answer or refute what I say. There is however no danger at all of that happening around here. Reticence is not a common UU characteristic. But the story struck me as so very human. I do not know why the turkey adopted this congregation. Was it a reincarnated preacher? Did the Reverend Huff slip him some Turkey chow? But in their response to the bird and their grief at its passing, the congregation, perhaps without knowing it, honored that interdependent web of life that we as UU’s so often speak of. The story for me is a reminder to not take everything we do so very seriously. Enjoy the unexpected gifts of God and the Universe, such as a church attending turkey. Especially in difficult times, that tries our souls, we need such small gifts for the spirit even more. I call them “nuggets of joy”. Unlike chocolate they have no calories.

In my research on generosity on the internet I discovered another such nugget. I found something called *Generosity Virus Cards*. I did not have time to do a great deal of research on this but I like the idea. No, it is not a new computer virus, as far as I know. It looks like a credit card. According to the instructions these cards are very open-ended: they don’t say “give

something to someone else.” They don’t even say “make someone happy.” They say “Go do something good for someone else.” Here is a quote: *We want giving to be fun and maybe even a little devious, a little subversive.* Well subversive goodness and a secret conspiracy of generosity sounds very good to me and I am one who otherwise detest conspiracy theories in general.

The site continues: *At some point soon, we would love to see millions (dare we say billions?) of these cards in circulation. We’re very interested to see what broad cultural effects might result. While we consider this to be a spiritual mission, we do not attach it to any particular denomination or faith.* Well doesn’t that sound a lot like us?

The Generosity Game they say is an example of *applied memetics*. Memes are ideas or thoughts that spread among people, like infectious diseases. They can be said to spread “with a mind of their own,” *or an intention of their own, as though they were using our minds to propagate themselves. This effect is most noticeable on the Internet.* The originator of the idea is Richard Dawkins, in the book *The Selfish Gene*.

That did give me pause, this idea. I have found that ideas do spread in strange ways but it does make me think very seriously about our role as the Unitarian Universalist outpost around here. Imagine our purposes and principles infiltrating city government? I would hope that ugly brown cloud of pollution over our beautiful Valley would soon be gone. Imagine reasonableness breaking out all over. As I wrote in our canvas brochure:

What would happen if Unitarian Universalists ruled the world? And did a good job of it! Our “blue boat home” would be transformed by our doctrine of love. We would work to create a peaceful, gentle and much greener planet where every person would be treated with the inherent dignity and respect they deserve. Justice would be a clarion call to make sure that all are treated equally and fairly. Our children would grow up in a city free from fear, prejudice and poverty. All religions would live side by side, sharing their ancient wisdom and learning from one another. We would rejoice and celebrate the sacredness of human love, and marriage equality would be law. In such a world we would love to discuss our different views but we would actually listen to one another.

Whose values are going to prevail? A narrow intolerance that see people as sinners in the hands of an angry God, born sinful, depraved and in need of salvation. Or the saving grace of Universalism that saw God as goodness, compassion and love. What is at stake is also the image, the mirror, that we as a society holds up for our children and youth to see themselves in. If we are born depraved why should we not try to get all we can in this world? Why would anything but the material matter?

Imagine for a moment that there was no such place as VUU. How would your life be different? No Religious Education for our children and youth to go to? How would their growing up be different? Imagine no choir, no minister, no evenings of music and fun. And who would be our voices in the East Valley. These are times of great tension and turmoil in our culture.

Whose values do you want to dominate? Mohandas Gandhi said: *Gentleness, self-sacrifice and generosity are the exclusive possession of no one race or religion.* Keith Ellerson, a newly elected House representative from Minnesota made history by taking his oath on a Qur'an once owned by Thomas Jefferson, who was a Unitarian. Ellerson writes:

*Somewhere in Minneapolis or Jackson or Baltimore, (And I would add somewhere in Chandler, Tempe, Mesa or Gilbert), somewhere in America today, there is a young couple that is feeling vulnerable. Maybe one has been laid off due to outsourcing, and maybe the other is working for something close to a minimum wage. They may have no medical benefits. Today real income is lower for the typical family than it was in 2000. Things are tough for working people and the middle class, but in America, we often turn to our faith in tough times.*

*When our couple shows up for worship service, there is no doubt that the preacher will tell them of God's unyielding love. "God loves you." But the next thing the preacher tells them is crucial - not only to the young couple, but to us all. The next message from the preacher may help to shape our nation.*

*Will the preacher tell our young couple, "God loves you – but only you and people like you?" Or will the preacher say "God loves you and you must love your neighbors of all colors, cultures, or faiths as yourselves"? One message will lead to be a stinginess of spirit, an exclusion of the*

*“undeserving”, and the other will lead to a generosity of spirit and inclusion of all.*

If we here at VUU are about anything at all, it is surely about a generosity of Spirit. If we have something to give to the world and the future it is this unwavering faith. But if we are to develop this spirit of generosity takes intention and practice. We live in a consumer society where everyone wants a bargain. There is however no such thing as bargain basement spirituality or dime store theologies. Rochelle Melander writes:

*As humans, we like parity in our relationships; a tit for a tat and an eye for an eye. You pay for lunch today and next time it is my turn. At its best, our desire for parity keeps relationships healthy. Both will give and take love, time, gifts, and kindnesses.. At its worst, parity leads to keeping accounts. We notice that at lunch, we asked all the questions while our colleague did all the talking. We pay attention to who does more of the calling, e-mailing, and inviting. We judge the people we connect with—and our relationships—against these accounts. We wonder, “What have you done for me lately?”*

*My daughter has become my role model in generosity. Each fall the local schools have a food drive. When my daughter and I went through our cupboards to find food to donate, I grabbed the food that seemed the easiest to give away (the stuff I don't like): canned asparagus, peas, and lima beans. My daughter chose the food she loved the best—the alphabet-shaped spaghetti with meatballs and her favorite boxes of macaroni and cheese. My*

*generosity was a cheap sort—giving away what I perceived I would never need. My daughter was generous—she gave from her treasures.*

Our Stewardship Campaign motto this year is. VUU – for Our Lives, for Our World, for Our Future. It says it all. We need this congregation in our lives, our beloved community where we keep our hopes alive. We do hold the world in our hands, or at least our small part of it. But Valley Unitarian Universalist Church needs your help, your hands and your hearts and your generosity. We depend entirely upon the financial support of every member and every friend! Our electric company won't take spiritual vouchers!

The stakes are high. What kind of world are we creating? You hold the answer in your hands. What kind of world do you want? What messages do you want our children to hear? How has, or if you are new here, how might this congregation change your life? How might you contribute to it and make it better? Give to what you believe in.