

A Vision of Community

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One auspicious day not too many years ago---I imagine it was on just another Sunday in a list of Sundays, unremarkable in other ways---a small group of people met for the first time on Saint Simon's Island. These people, no doubt, looked pretty much like their neighbors, but they were different in one important way—they had a vision. They wanted to create a space where they could be together with others who, like themselves, wished to explore and develop their theology and beliefs in social justice. They wanted to be with others who did not rely on creed or doctrine, but who instead believed that revelation is *not* sealed. They believed that everyone had inherent worth and dignity, and also that everyone had the right to be a seeker, rather than to be told what to believe. These risk-takers wanted to share their journey with other open-minded individuals.

On that first meeting, and at many to follow, they gathered at each other's homes. Yet as the group grew, this became more difficult, and they started meeting in restaurants and other businesses—anywhere they could find that would allow them to meet and share their vision. In 1996, they took another big step and joined the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, the UUA. This meant that they were now a part of a much larger community of people. They could attend district meetings and the annual General Assembly, and share ideas for spiritual and numerical growth. Back home in Saint Simon's, they continued to grow and change meeting places, much like early *Christian* congregations almost two thousand years ago, and the wandering Hebrews of a much earlier time.

Unlike those much earlier peoples, this group did not have a cross or an Ark of the Covenant. They may have had their coffee pot, which to UUs is often like a sacred object. What these people definitely had was a desire to share their lives with others in close and meaningful ways. As they grew, they began to wish for someone to help lead them in Sunday services and in social justice endeavors. This led them in 2003 to take the next bold step and invite a minister to come in among them to share and grow their community and vision.

Now there are some Unitarian Universalists, I'm afraid to say, that don't like to change paths. Fortunately for this group, their many paths to different meeting places had not worn any *one* path down so hard that they couldn't change course. They wanted to grow their community, and they thought that the best way to do that was to leave the beautiful island and come to the mainland, where more people might hear of them and be able to join them. This to me is remarkable. There are UU churches that were founded in the 1600s that have not budged. Some literally wait until the church burns down to do so.

And this is not the end of the story. This group of people was not done dreaming. They all began to realize that they could do much more if they had their own building, instead of moving around like a wagon train with a social justice banner. They bought a lot and hired an architect. I imagine that they couldn't wait to break ground. Yet even at this stage, these people were flexible. When the plans got too expensive and the building started to take over the vision, they sold the lot and got rid of the architect. They found a place on a busy street where everyone could see, where everyone would be welcome. They put their hearts into the building, transforming it from a law office into a place of gathering and worship.

I'm talking, of course, about all of you. It doesn't matter whether you have only been here a year, or if you have just walked in the door for the first time. Your being here makes you a

part of this community, of the Unitarian Universalists of Coastal Georgia, and of the vision. You may choose to leave, but we hope you won't. Either way, you are always welcome.

Let me tell you another story. Once upon a time, many, many years before those people first met on Saint Simon's, a little girl was born in Syracuse, New York. This girl grew up in the suburbs, loving cats, reading, and playing the piano. She lived in a happy home near many relatives that she saw frequently, and she had a best friend that she played with a lot. One thing she didn't like, though, was the many boys on the block who went to St. Margaret's Catholic Church who told her and the Protestant kids that they were going to hell because they weren't Catholic. She wasn't too worried about hell, since she didn't believe in it, but she didn't like being told what she had to believe, or else. While she liked the music at *her* church, she also didn't like being told what to believe *there*, especially since, to be honest about it, she really didn't believe what she was being told in Sunday school.

When the girl started fourth grade, her parents took her and her brother to the Unitarian church downtown, and immediately she felt as though she belonged. Admittedly, the hymns weren't as good, but no one told her what to believe, and even better, this curious girl learned about all kinds of different beliefs in her religious education class. When she was in junior high school, she became a part of Liberal Religious Youth, or LRY, the predecessor to YRUU, or the Young Religious Unitarian Universalists, of today. She got to go on outings and talk with young people like herself who had different beliefs from many of their neighbors.

This girl would sometimes walk home from school with her friend Sylvia, who had read the entire encyclopedia one summer, and debate the nature and existence of God, and our place in the universe. Yes, the girl was frankly what would be called a geek today.

Another thing about the girl that you should know is that her parents did not go along with many of the prevailing prejudices of the day. When the girl came home in second grade making fun of Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, using disparaging words, my mother said, “We don’t talk that way.” It was a subtle reminder that even though my parents might not have liked communists any more than the neighbors did, they still considered them human beings, and that treating them any other way was not productive.

Fast-forward many years. The girl has grown up and gone to college, following in the footsteps of her parents and many of her aunts and uncles, and has become a teacher. She acquired the love of learning from her mother, who learned it from *her* father who, in the midst of the Great Depression, always had books in the house. The girl, now a young woman, has learned that it wasn’t enough just to learn something and keep it all for yourself, but that you had to pass it on.

Moving forward again in time now, the girl has undergone two career changes and moved around. Eventually, she found a UU church on the West Side of Chicago and became involved in the Sunday service committee. This girl—let’s call her Lynne---became more and more involved with lay-led services, and people started telling her she should go to seminary. She put it off for years, fearing the loss of her paycheck and the risk of starting yet another career in middle age. But the inner voice she heard grew louder, so loud that she finally could not ignore it, and quit her job to attend seminary. After many years of study, meeting with the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, kind of our accreditation board, she was welcomed into fellowship and then ordained last year.

After ordination, Lynne wanted to be a parish minister, and she filled out her ministerial record on the UUA website and started reading about congregations who were looking for a

minister. This is a time-consuming process, involving reading numerous descriptions of buildings, budgets, hopes, and dreams. It requires reading between the lines to determine whether a congregation will be a good match, or whether they have issues that they haven't faced up to and haven't even admitted to themselves.

In the final analysis, Lynne had a choice to make—a fairly large church, almost 200 years old, or a small congregation with only a few years under its belt. The bigger church had several choirs, more staff, and a larger religious education program. It was closer to Lynne's old home and to her family. What do you suppose she did?

OK, you've figured this out a while back, no doubt. *I* am the Lynne and *you* are the congregation I chose. But why?

First of all, you can pat your search committee on the back. I met with several committees, and they are the most welcoming, best eating, best listening, kindest people I have met in a long time. When Sarah took me to the airport to go back to Chicago in mid-April, I didn't want to leave, and it wasn't just that I had seen on the Weather Channel that there were snow showers in Chicago. They are also flexible, and not above being deviant when it's for a good cause. If some of you who are not on the search committee think that you've seen me before, it probably is because you have. I was here during the play production, and I commented that it would be nice to see, but that I would be found out. (In case you are new here, when ministerial applicants first visit a church only the search committee knows their identity.) No problem! Meg sneaked me in, introducing me as her friend. And as far as I know, nobody that night guessed. So, you see, my friends, the first function I attended with the UUs of Coastal Georgia was not this service as a minister, but rather as an undercover agent at the play, which, by the way, I thoroughly enjoyed.

Beyond hospitality, though, I felt a firm foundation with this congregation. It was apparent when I read your history, and it is apparent in the enthusiasm of your members when they talk about their dreams for this place. This is a place where people come to be themselves *with* other people. There are no harmful “ghosts” here, or if they are here, they are well-hidden. People are respected, and that respect includes being allowed to make mistakes and change course, if necessary, in order to build and strengthen this community. People come to learn more about the world, and to work together to make it better. When I was making my decision last week about what church to choose, I made a list of pros and cons for each one. One of the deciding items was the following: I either had the chance to go and write a history of an old church or come here and make history with you. I love history, and if you call me to join with you, I will no doubt spend some Sundays talking about history. But history is useless unless we study it to help us move forward into the future.

So, I have reminded you this morning of your vision, as I have observed and read about it. It is one that I can't wait to share with you. It's not enough for you to remain a small, enthusiastic group. You want to share the excitement of Unitarian Universalism up and down this beautiful coast. I have no doubt that we can do that, and more. I want to work not just with the adults, but with the youth and the children, so if you have some fifteen-year olds lurking around your house on Sunday mornings, not wanting to come here because they don't think that there is a place for them here, please tell them for me that I want to meet with them. I want them back (and you parents will have them back when they're 21, if you're lucky—I know-- I taught high school). If the pattern is the norm, I'm sure that they will bring an even greater burst of enthusiasm to this place—they are your offspring, after all, and I know the adults here have energy.

There is a lot of room outside these doors that we can put to use. Why not have coffee hour outside sometimes on nice days? It will not only give us fresh air, it will get people who are driving by curious about just what it is we are up to. And since the Standing on the Side of Love Banner has disappeared, how about asking the children to make us a new one? We don't have to get it from headquarters in Boston. And we can have a picnic right here on the church property, and perhaps invite members of neighboring congregations to visit with us. Being neighborly is part of building respect in the community and letting people know that most UUs don't have horns. Eventually, as the congregation numbers grow, my vision is to have a worship service every Sunday, because people in distress don't take Sundays off, and we don't take time off from needing one another.

How can we go wrong? The Universalist message of acceptance of all people, that all are born holy, is more powerful than the theology of exclusion. The Unitarian message of one power embracing all, however our individual theologies choose to interpret that, is a message that includes the whole world. The whole world and all its creatures are united in one glorious, holy adventure.

Our Unitarian Universalist faith gives us a simple mandate: that we be true to ourselves and our journeys, respect the positive journeys of others as just as valid and meaningful, and that we do what we can to leave the world better than we found it. The mandate may be simple, but living with it intentionally is a life's work. There are plenty of obstacles in the road, and it is often difficult to decide whether to stop and remove each one or to go around them. I have found that not infrequently, you have to leave some things uncorrected in order to simply get down the road. We can't do it all, but in community we can do a lot. Together, we can see more of the big picture.

I hope to be a part of a congregation that has defined its vision and mission so well. You don't just want more people to show up on Sundays—you want to join with them to make Brunswick and the Georgia coast a more equitable and comfortable place for *all* the people who live here. You know that the vision of Unitarian Universalism is a positive one that can lift people up in all kinds of ways. I have heard that many in the congregation are passionate about justice. Next week, I will devote the sermon entirely to that mission.

So, pat yourselves on the back. You are off to an auspicious start and can look forward to good things ahead. The future is yours to claim, and I think there is no stopping you. But don't forget, sometimes it's worth sneaking into the play, just to see what's really going on.