

For the Love of fuUS

February 7, 2010

In 2006 The congregation of First Unitarian Universalist Church of Saugus, Massachusetts closed their doors for the last time and sold their building to a Brazilian Congregation.

I went by the following weekend just to look at the church I had once served, remembering the extraordinary efforts of those last few members and their minister to keep their beloved church open. I expected to see an empty building, drab with its fading, peeling paint and rickety steps, curtains closed and doors locked. Instead I was amazed to see men women and children, scurrying like ants inside and out, each with a job to do, regardless of age; clipping hedges, mowing the lawn and raking up the debris, cutting new stair treads, scrapping the exterior and even polishing up the bell and reattaching the ringer that had hung dormant in its deteriorating tower for far to many years. I stopped and spoke to the Pastor, the sweat of that warm spring day beading around his worn white collar as he worked. I told him how pleased I was to see so much energy from his congregation and how good the church was looking. He replied in broken English "... We love our faith and having this beautiful building gives us a home where we can gather to do our work in gladness."

That wonderful image of such passion, devotion and unrelenting commitment to labor for ones faith, has been with me ever since. I have rarely seen this happen in UU churches when the entire membership is so fully involved in the sweat producing mechanics of bringing a church fully alive and carrying it to its full potential. There is nothing more rewarding for anyone, than to look back and see what has been accomplished because of our efforts " for the love of our faith, and for a home where we can gather do our work in gladness.."

I thought about this a lot, and I realized that it does not have to be that way for us, at all, as we gear up to tackle our vision for the future and strive to create a true sense of ownership for the work we must all do to preserve our faith.

The image of those remaining 12 in the Saugus congregation as they walked away from the church they no longer owned or called their home, is not one I anticipate for the future of this society at all, as I believe we can create a vibrant sense of who we are, why we are here, and exactly where we want to go, as an alternative spiritual community.

This morning I would like to share with you my dreams and hopes for this congregation for our church and for our faith.

To do this, I would like to begin with the big picture, our 7 UU Principles. Which are printed on the cover of the order of service. Some point to them claiming they are far too general or they don't really say anything. As UU's we like to argue about their meaning, nit picking the verbiage and come to no unified conclusions, or most likely, we ignore them or pass them off as unimportant. I disagree. They contain 7 of the most critical components of our faith and they do invite us to address each one very specifically. That is how we are able to maintain our autonomy and our uniqueness as a congregation. We can own them if we choose to do so by how we define each one within the framework of expressing our religious freedoms as they apply to ourselves and the community at large. It is a task I see us seriously addressing, as a way to characterize who we are as a religious community in the here and now. I look forward to the day when we can and do identify ourselves through active participation in defining our principles. Secondly I wish for us a true acceptance of one another's opinions. To move forward, to give our faith substance, we do need to take personal and congregational stands on issues that affect the welfare and just treatment of our community and our nation.

That is exactly how The Unitarians and the Universalists came to be visible and viable in the first place, by actually living the principles they adopted as did we in 1984. To stop doing this for fear of disagreement or rejection is how we become ineffective and socially inert.

Instead we can open dialogues, welcome opposing points of view and move forward positively, with proper respect for both the opinions of the minority and the majority.

Third, as we delve into the future and effectiveness of our liberal faith I am deeply grateful for your enormous vote of confidence last year, however I would truly like to believe that your vote was directed toward the potential we have to discover and to voice our purpose as a congregation, with a true commitment, that will involve the labors of each and every one of us participating in the life and welfare of this church.

I did not stay only because of the fact that none of the potential candidates would accept the low salary package offered. I stayed because I saw something in you that was yearning to find ways of expressing this simple yet complex faith we hold so dear and I hope to remain here to help you do this for at least 4 more years or until I retire, should you have me.

Fourth. We are the caretakers of this society, and it is the responsibility of this congregation to support it in anyway you can; on committees, as chairs, as leaders and planners, teachers, through pledging and fundraisers and special blessings upon those who clean up after!

I have served a number of congregations in my ministerial life and of all of them, this one has been the most significant to me which I believe has the most potential, not only to grow, but to become a contented, powerful voice, through worship and community involvement that will entice and actively welcome those who are seeking an alternative religious home.

Finally, you have challenged me and I have grown stronger in ways I had not anticipated. You have renewed my commitment to the necessity and the immense value of Unitarian Universalism through all of our ups and downs. We are very close to regaining our strength and focusing our vision, and our trust of one another through the work of our committed members and leaders.

Although the past two years have been financially challenging as it has been for many of you, I cannot do this alone.

Nor could I without a professional staff and any idea of eliminating critical staffing is not an answer. It will take all of us to keep this boat afloat so that we can do our work in gladness, so that we can soften the load for too few who have held this church together for much too long.

This is an amazing congregation and with our course of direction laid out in perspective, I know the day will come very soon, when we feel so good and so clear about who we are and what we stand for that there is no hesitation in taking on positions of responsibility, in filling that collection plate to the brim, pledging as much as you can give and few dollars more, and proudly inviting your friends and neighbors to join us.

I deeply believe in you and in the message of Unitarian Universalism, or I would not have stayed. I wish for you the same commitment to yourselves, the same pride in our history and in our future that created this Society so long ago. I only ask that you give it the love and respect it deserves, as it is a visible tribute to our liberal voice and your combined efforts.

Our staff and our volunteer leadership has worked well overtime to present to you, after this service, a State of the Church forum and I hope you will grab your coffee and all come to hear what they have to say; offer your thoughts your time, your trust and your devotion to affirm this amazing faith and to lend your support to those who have labored so long.

I am so proud to be your minister and deeply committed to the future we have the potential of knowing should we choose to reach out and grab it... Fort the love of this faith, by the sweat of our own hands “so that we may do the work of our faith in gladness.. together”

So be it

Amen

Rev Helen C (Holly) Baylies © 2010