

“To Build a Strong and Vibrant Congregation”
Unitarian Universalist Church of the Restoration
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Do you know what happened at Restoration this weekend? On Friday evening, about 15 people gathered at a home for a dinner for 8! At the same time, another group of children and adults, including me, gathered at the church to play board games and be silly together. We got to admire baby Harry and see how much he has grown.

On Saturday morning, nineteen of us –children and adults, young adults and elders - got together to care for our building, especially to spruce up the nursery. As we worked side by side, we got hot and sweaty. Then Steve took our pictures! We laughed and we admired the warm and inviting yellow nursery walls and the clean carpet. We got to know each other better. And this morning, Sunday, folks came early to set up the chairs, start the coffee and greet us as we arrive. Only then did we worship together!

We are building a strong and vibrant multigenerational congregation! We grew by playing and laughing together, eating together, and working together. We got to know each other better and maybe we learned something about ourselves through engaging with others. We experienced joy, meaning and service. In small ways, we changed the world. This is how you grow community.

Ram Dass founded the Seva Foundation which has three criteria for their work:

1. Do something to reduce suffering in the world
2. Grow in the process
3. Have fun doing itⁱ

Unitarian Universalist theologian, Rev. Rebecca Parker wrote:

The purpose of life then is to discover the joy or well-being that simultaneously please us and blesses our neighbor. Every act we commit is a contribution to the world; the question is whether our actions will be a blessing or a curse. The basic question of life is not, “What do I want?” but rather “What do I want to give?”ⁱⁱ

Today, we again affirm our Restoration Covenant especially the section, “To build a strong and vibrant congregation.” Asking what you want to give and are able to give is essential to continuing to build a strong and vibrant congregation. And this giving and building is also about your own growth and happiness. Albert Schweitzer emphasized, “The only ones among you who will be truly happy are those who have sought and found how to serve.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Last week, I quoted Rev. Alice Blair Wesley's pilgrim covenant which begins, "We pledge to walk together in the ways of truth and affection . . ." Rev. Brent Smith uses the same metaphor, "(T)he freedom to explore and understand one's unique relationship with God is the purpose and aim of spiritual community, of giving one's consent to walk with others. Therefore the basis of a community is an individual's faithfulness to and with others during life, conceived as a spiritual walk with others." ^{iv}

Here at Restoration, we work and walk together, and we invite others to join us. As we work, play, learn and worship together we create an inviting community for others to join.

Rev. Roy Phillips names five meanings around which Unitarian Universalists covenant:

1. We share a common human journey, and so we covenant to value what is common among us over what separates and divides us. (This is what Robert Latham calls diversity in unity. We know that we have differences. We can learn about them and honor them. And we are committed to this community.)
2. Each of us has unique dignity and gifts, and so we covenant to recognize and celebrate the dignity and gifts among us in the common life we share.

In the Christian bible, Paul wrote of differing gifts:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Lord, and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. . . . For just as the body is one and has many members of the body, though many are one body, so it is with [the church] . . . Indeed the body does not consist of one member, but of many. If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?

. . .

As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the members of the body of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.^v

At Restoration, we need each other's gifts. Phillips goes on:

3. We have a responsibility to envision and create a better world, and so we covenant to support and encourage our individual and common efforts toward its attainment.
4. Despite the mystery that surrounds our ultimate destiny as a human race, our lives are worthy of praise and so we covenant to help each other engage the mystery with praise.
5. Religion is a human response to the mysterious otherness we encounter in our lives, and so we covenant to cultivate and explore the religious response among us as a defining and ennobling activity of the human race.^{vi}

We come to religious community seeking meaning and seeking transformation. We come asking, “Are these my people? Do I fit here?” And we come looking for a place to serve, a place to make a difference in our lives, in the world. Strong and vibrant congregations help us to find meaning, service and authentic community.

Building a strong and vibrant congregation, doing our best to live up to our covenant means to make a commitment to the congregation, to support what we value with our time, talents and financial resources. We give our ideas and visions, knowledge and dreams.

Sharing laughter and tears, our weaknesses as well as our strengths is essential to authentic community. Restoration needs all of our hands and hearts, minds and spirits. We are renewed and restored as part of the community. We can grow to become our best selves and grow the congregation’s health and spirit at the same time.

American poet, Carl Sandberg, became a committed member of the Unitarian Church in Asheville, Carolina. His exhortation from a church newsletter rings true:

You can’t go tramping around from church to church and build anything up. Who would want to go on a picnic all the time and eat out of other people’s baskets? You’ve got to feel the importance of your own individual participation in its life.^{vii}

Rev. Tom Owen-Towle tells a silly story about four people named Everybody, Anybody, Somebody and Nobody. It may sound familiar!

There was an important job to be done, and Everybody was sure Somebody

would do it. Anybody could have done it, but Nobody did it. Somebody got angry about that because it was Everybody's job. Everybody thought that anybody could do it, but Nobody realized that Everybody wouldn't do it. It ended up that Everybody blamed Somebody when Nobody did what Anybody could have done.^{viii}

Our covenant calls us to honor and respect the work of our leadership, ministries, committees and dedicated individuals. This is all of us! We can step up when we see something that needs to be done. Just don't do it alone. Invite someone to join you. As part of community, we work together.

The covenant invites us to accept the call to leadership with openness, warmth and humor. At the same time, we promise to be realistic about our commitments, choosing to do what brings us fulfillment and what we are able to complete. Remember "no" is as sacred as "yes!" We can't really say yes if we are unable to say no.

Here's a story about leadership from the Hebrew Bible. It's the exodus; Moses has just led the Hebrew people out of Egypt:

The next day Moses sat as judge for the people while the people stood around him from morning until evening. When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, "What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, while all the people stand around you from morning until evening?"

Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God. When they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make known to them the statutes and instructions of God."

Moses' father-in-law said to him, "What you are doing is not good. You will surely wear yourself out and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God be with you! You should represent the people before God . . . teach them the way to God. You should also look for able people among all the people, those who fear God, who are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain . . . So it will be easier for you and they will work with you. If you do this, and God so command you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people will go to their home in peace." So Moses listened to his father and did all that he had said.^{ix}

Ministry and leadership are healthy and sustainable when they are shared. Beginning this fall, everyone at Restoration, member or friend, 50 year member or new member, child or adult), is invited to be part of an exciting new opportunity to work, play and grow together. Julie Bradburd brought this idea to us from the State College, PA strong and vibrant Unitarian Universalist Congregation. Over the summer, an ad hoc

committee of the Congregational Life Ministry (Leigh Peranteau, Pat Evans and Bridget Flynn) created this Restoration Hospitality plan.

We are building four Hospitality Teams. Each one of you will be part of a team of about 20 people. The teams will be responsible for Sunday morning hospitality on a rotating basis through the year. (But remember we are all part of Restoration's hospitality and welcoming, all of the time.) You could be a front door greeter, an usher or coffee maker. Which is more fun and meaningful for you? Or maybe you are an organizer or a cook. There will be lots of opportunities for us to work together.

Together your team will make coffee, bring snacks, be greeters and ushers and clean up for a month. You will be asked to choose which jobs fit you best and which weeks during the month you are able to serve. A very important part of the teams' responsibilities is to celebrate together! Teams will have parties to celebrate the end of their month of service.

Unitarian Universalist ministers often quote African American theologian, Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman, "Do not ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and then go and do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." The teams and Restoration need people who have come alive to help us to continue to build a strong and vibrant congregation.

As I close, I invite you to stand, take the hand of the person next to you and say these words, "I place my hand in yours, so that we may do together what I cannot do alone." Thank you. May it be so!

ⁱ Owen-Towle, Tom. *Wholly Joy: Being Happy in an Unhappy World*. San Diego, CA: Bucking Rocks Press, p. 66.

ⁱⁱ Parker, Rebecca Ann and Robert Hardies (ed.). *Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2006, p. 161.

ⁱⁱⁱ Walsh, Robert, M.D. Ph.D. *Essential Spirituality: The 7 Central Practices to Awaken Heart and Mind*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1999, p. 254.

^{iv} Arnason, Wayne and Kathleen Rolenz. *Worship That Works: Theory and Practice for Unitarian Universalists*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2008, p. 16.

^v New Revised Standard I Corinthians 12:4-22

^{vi} Arnason, Wayne and Kathleen Rolenz. *Worship That Works: Theory and Practice for Unitarian Universalists*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2008, p. 18.

^{vii} Owen-Towle, Tom. *Growing A Beloved Community: Twelve Hallmarks of a Healthy Congregation*. Boston, Skinner House Books, 2004, p. 30.

^{viii} Owen-Towle, Tom. *Wholly Joy: Being Happy in an Unhappy World*. San Diego, CA: Bucking Rocks Press, p. 94.

^{ix} New Revised Standard Version. Exodus 18:13-25.