

MAKING A DIFFERENCE (Our Prime Directive?)

Some of us were out here working around the church yesterday under Rosemary's direction. Many of us went to the Boggs Tract Community Garden on Martin Luther King Day for our day of Community Service, as pictured on the order of service. Those are certainly some of the ways that we make a difference for our church and for our community, but there are an almost endless list of ways that we can make a difference in the lives of those we love, our congregation, our community and the world. We can be of service through many community organizations, through committee work and hospitality efforts at the church, or by financially supporting the church and other organizations in which we believe.

Most Unitarian Universalists believe in community service, in fact I would argue that on the basis of our UU Principles, service probably should be our UU Prime Directive! We do not need to agree in our beliefs around God, the Goddess, or the lack thereof. We do not need to agree in our meditative or prayer practices, nor in our service activities, but our Principles call us to respond to a higher goal of world community, with respect, justice, and compassion for all persons, and for the great web of all life. We show that commitment by our service to our fellow beings, human and otherwise.

Some of us make a difference by working to change laws around civil rights and equal treatment for all persons. Others work to educate young and old about the world, justice, human needs, and the possibility of building a better world. Some of us work to heal the bodies and spirits of those in need through medical, psychological, and spiritual interventions and treatment. Some of us are friends to all, supporting those who are celebrating as well as those who mourn. Others work to care for plants, animals and the earth!

Though in some ways we are very similar in our thoughts, beliefs, and educational attainments, we also have a wide variety of differences in how we believe and in how we live out our UU Principles. Last year we had some newsprint up for quite a while in the office corridor for people to write about organizations they support and things they do in the community to make a difference. We might try to collect that information again this year because it is a good way to remind ourselves of how many ways Unitarian Universalists serve beyond our congregation. Of course, it also helps to explain why so many people have so little time to take on new tasks within the church! Fortunately, many of us make our church the primary recipient of our service time as well as supporting the church financially. There are always ways to make a difference around the church and we will always need willing volunteers to help in so many ways!

With the needs of individuals and families changing in this country and in our community, one of the most important ways that we can make a difference is in helping to figure out how our church should respond to better meet those changing needs. Even UU churches are slower in responding to societal changes than we often need to be. Today, with our openness to ideas and a variety of beliefs and practices, we ought to be one of the fastest growing organizations of any kind, and yet we are not. Many of our congregations are filled with gray haired folks who give great amounts of time and money to support their congregations, and yet don't have enough energy to do much more to enable changes that might allow more effective responses to the needs of younger individuals and families. And of course, younger individuals and families also need to increase their stake in helping to re-create congregations in the ways that will better respond to needs.

I may have become somewhat more of an old-school humanist on my own personal journey though I call myself a web-force religious humanist, but I try to encourage both those who are more spiritual and those who are less spiritual to explore and grow in their beliefs and to express their highest selves in the workings of this congregation. I would like to believe that we are one of the best places for anyone to explore and discover their own beliefs about themselves, humanity, the cosmos, and whatever Gods may or may not inhabit this or other realms of existence!

The pre-packaged model of church that has existed from at least early in the 20th century and which became the standard of main-stream Christian and UU religious communities by the 1950s is breaking down. It no longer fits many of the people who could benefit from involvement in Unitarian Universalism. Most Unitarian Universalists are on their own journeys and do not always find the support they need for their own explorations in old model church services. Yet those services are comfortable and familiar for many of us, while newer forms of worship and exploration can be unsettling. One of the ways we are trying to explore newer forms of being a UU Church is through our Thursday evening programs which have become quite popular. We are not really intending to replace Sunday mornings, but Thursday evenings, with a meal and a more relaxed format are appealing to many people including younger families, allowing them to stay connected on a regular basis when Sunday mornings are not working for them. This is just one instance of what we hopefully will explore in coming days, but it is one way of making a difference, by building up the community. One of the things people have commented positively on with Thursday evenings is that we don't send the children off somewhere else, but we are all mostly together even though we may be doing different things. After Dinner and a brief worship of songs and readings, children and youth often play games with a few adults, the knitters are in back doing their thing, and others are discussing some topic of interest. It is low pressure, casual, and people come and go as they are comfortable. Volunteers sign up to bring food or lead programs or worship, and everyone seems to have a good time.

There are other things we will be exploring to better meet the needs of our congregation. We will be re-starting covenant groups in March, and hopefully that will be another way of making a difference in the lives of participants. If you haven't already turned in a registration form and are interested, let me know. We also will be exploring other ideas in the future.

We all want to make a difference with our lives and we all do make a difference, sometimes large, sometimes smaller in the lives of those around us. We don't always have the impact that we intend, but the ways that we care for, support, encourage, love, and challenge others cannot help but make a difference.

Some of us dream of being great leaders, making groundbreaking discoveries, single-handedly changing the world, while others just want to make a better life for our children or to care for people in need, or take care of animals. Our world depends on each of us, and we each are making a difference. Those of us who work directly with people in education, social work, medicine, and mental health may become frustrated when it seems there are some people we just can't help, but there are so many others that we are helping in countless ways. Those of us who have raised or are raising families make a huge difference in the lives of our children and grandchildren, and I don't just mean by bringing them into the world. The stories we pass down, the knowledge that we impart, the connections that we give our children will influence them throughout their lives, just as what our parents shared continues to influence us. Few humans are so isolated that they are not affected by those around them, we humans are really social beings and the contacts and interactions all make a difference for good or ill.

We live in a complex and complicated world, a world which is always changing, a world on its way to becoming something else. Everything we do makes a difference, shaping the world that is coming. The ways we raise our children, the work we do, the places where we give our volunteer time and financial gifts all help to shape the world that will be, the world in which our children and grandchildren will live. We cannot help but make a difference, and our choices will help to shape that world in terms of love, community, generosity, collegiality, care for those who are in need.

Though our nation and most of the nations around the globe are internally peaceful much of the time, there are also battles ongoing in certain disputed places most of the time. The middle-East has often been a battleground and there are tensions between East and West. Some such issues may never be solved by individuals until whole communities make decisions to compromise for peace. There are people who can make a difference, but it will take many people working together to bring about a lasting change. The larger the number of people seeking to make a difference, the likelier it will be that real change will happen.

We are each individuals and the things that we do, the people that we touch, the places where we put our efforts, the things that we support will each make a difference. We must decide where to put our limited time, energy, and resources, but the choice will make a difference.

In ancient times, back in the 20th Century, groups would set up tables to write actual letters and cards to send to legislators and the President. I don't know how much of a difference it really made, but it was a tangible way to try to make a difference. It is much easier for us now to sign our name a hundred times a day to some electronic petition or resolution, or even to send an original e-mail to someone we hope to influence, though because it is so much easier it probably also gets less attention than the real letters and cards.

Even further back in time, when prominent Unitarians were among the founders of our nation, we may have had the most influence that our religious tradition has ever had in any nation. Today we are but a few small voices among many, so that in the political realm it is harder for us to make a difference. Even so, if we believe in our cause or causes, we need to persevere, to keep trying until we are heard, or to join with other like-minded folks to have a bigger voice. It is also important to remember that the way we live our lives, the way we touch others, and the way we work with others really is making a difference. There will always be more that we could have accomplished but that should not stop us from celebrating all that we have done, all the places where we have made a difference.

The world is better because we have been here, but there is more that we can do. I challenge us to seek out one thing that we can work on together to make a difference in our community this year. Please e-mail me your suggestions this week and we will make a list to consider. Individually we work on many good projects and we make a difference in so many ways, but let's find one project to work on together this year!

Thanks for all you do! Go out and continue making a difference!

Shalom, Salaam, Namaste, Blessed Be and Amen!