

MAKING PLANNING FUN? DOING WHAT HAS TO BE DONE?
COMMUNITY BUILDING BY SONG!

Some of you may have noticed that I was gone the last three Sundays! At least I hope some of you noticed that I was gone! I was on an almost 7 thousand mile road trip cross country to the Tampa area for the 4th UUMA Minister's Institute and back. The car was pretty heavily loaded and I rarely went much under the speed limit, but my Prius still got 45 mpg or better for the trip. My ex, Jane, came along for the ride most of the way. It is true that I really dislike flying these days, but I also wanted to grab the opportunity to visit kids, grandkids, cousins, and two of my longest tenured friends from childhood and youth at the 1st United Methodist Church in Brookfield, Illinois, who happen to be married to each other and live in Southern Florida. I like road trips, I love the varying scenery, I love to drive, and we were able to avoid any problematic weather. With the middle taken out for the Institute, the driving was mostly quick and the visits short, but overall it was a very satisfying trip. All good except for some bug bites that probably happened at a Motel in Kerrville, TX!

I planned the trip so I could be back for this Sunday, especially after it was set to precede a brainstorming planning session this afternoon. I actually made it home Friday before 6 after stopping for the night in Long Beach at my stepdaughter's house to drop off Jane. The exchanges of e-mails about this service that I shared with many of you came on travel breaks. On my return, I was loudly greeted by Dizzi who seemed quite happy to have me home! Though it was a really good trip, I am glad to be home and glad to be back with you this morning!

During the Ministers' Institute, I made an unaccustomed effort to stay out of UU institutional politics and spent most of the week singing.

I was in the workshop, “Building Vocal Communities: An African American World View,” led by Dr. Ysaye Barnwell, amazing human being, teacher, composer, and vocalist from Sweet Honey and the Rock. Two of the songs in the Teal book are by Ysaye, #1001 Breaths, and #1051 We Are... We claim Ysaye as a UU, though her spirit may be larger than our movement! I also sang in the 70 voice Institute choir with 11 or 12 other basses! The choir provided music for most of the worship experiences, and Ysaye’s workshop provided music for another! In both the choir, led by Dr. Glen Thomas Rideout from Ann Arbor, and in Ysaye’s workshop, we learned the songs without written music, though the choir provided a few pieces of music to take home! It was an amazing experience, and my favorite Institute so far.

OK, what did I learn that would be useful to us, you might wonder. The short answer is that I was reminded how important it is that we capitalize on our biggest strength in building and being an inclusive accepting community. Think back to your most positive experience of being in a group, playing on a team, or being part of a choir or other musical group. Did the group or team, choir or symphony immediately have a sense of unity that would allow it to accomplish great things, harmonize perfectly, or win? Didn’t it take time and effort, practice to become a better whole? Some Olympic events seem like they involve heroic individuals who go out and win all by themselves, but don’t most of those individuals end up pointing to their team, coaches, families, and often God for succeeding? Rarely do we win or succeed all by ourselves. Singing especially is a community experience. Now it was very different singing with 70 great voices than with the handful of amazing singers we usually have in our choir, but in both cases it takes a choir to practice, sing together, harmonize together to make a beautiful sound.

Similarly, it takes a community to make a church successful. It happens that we have established a pretty harmonious and beloved community here at 1st Unitarian Universalist Church and most of us are pretty well satisfied at this point, but there is more that we can and probably should do. We are welcoming, but we don’t go out of our way to invite others.

We have classes and studies and groups for those already here, but we don't stretch to offer and promote many things that might interest others in the broader community. We like having children and youth around, but we don't commit to help support the Religious Education program for children and youth.

We do support Social Justice causes pretty well for a church our size, though we could do more. We are comfortable within our community and we are perhaps too satisfied with things as they are. There isn't really anything wrong with being comfortable, except that our UU Principles and values call us to do more, to be more, to stretch further.

As we continue our brainstorming this afternoon, I hope that we will suggest ideas that will help us to stretch to do and be more than we are and do now. I hope that this effort will help us each commit to giving an extra effort to make this congregation even stronger and better serve our UU Principles.

One of the important lessons of the workshop I attended was that we need to learn to sing together as a community before we can add much harmony. As a congregation, we are pretty unified and we mostly are singing the same tune! With a little more effort, a little more practice, we should be ready to add some more harmony, to stretch ourselves and add some more things that will further our mission and better implement our principles!

Over the last year we have accomplished some great things in caring for our building. Dwane has really done a great job helping to make our facilities attractive and modern. Our support and contributions, and Dwane's great efforts have made this progress possible.

Our organ, which I was often told in my first year here was beyond repair, will be used for a concert next Sunday afternoon. Betsy was the champion of that effort and we need to thank her for finding someone to make the minor repairs needed to the organ and arranging the concert.

I could name names of other people we depend upon in every area of congregational life such as Mary, Cindy, Leslie, Jan, Syd, Mikayla, Janet, Doray, Jeri and Dick, Lydia, Dave and David, Greg and Greg, Rebecca and Olivia, Kari, Christina, Fred and Christie, Amy and Ian, Tony and Rosalie. These and so many more make this congregation possible and keep it functioning. There is plenty of room for others to step up, share ideas, and help move us in new directions. When we lay too much responsibility on just a few, we will likely end up with some who get burned out. When we share the load, each doing things that we are excited about, we all will help to build up the congregation, but it must start with the strength of the beloved community that already sings well together!

Musical metaphors aside, music has also long been a strength of this congregation, though the choir could always use some more voices! We actually sing pretty well as a congregation, better than many UU congregations that are too busy reading ahead to see if they agree with the words! We have a great piano and a beautiful organ that fits well the size of our sanctuary. Perhaps our next pianist will be up to the occasional open choice hymn-sing! The acoustics are good and the music we share is rich and full, with room for more singers and for some brass, maybe a band with a drum kit! Lots of musical possibilities!

One of my hopes for this congregation is that we would find a unifying project to undertake, something that might help us to sing even better together, something such as environmental work, or help for the homeless, or some kind of work for justice for which we might be identified in the community. The Social Justice Committee has tried to choose one or two areas of focus for the last couple of years, to offer a couple things we might do together, but it is always hard to narrow it down with so many needs in the broader community.

Those who are familiar with us know that we are interested in music and in support of the LGBTQQIA community and in justice work generally,

but lots of people in the broader community have no idea who we are or what we stand for. Hopefully we can make a little more noise!

Planning work is hard and takes time. It involves writing mission and vision statements and working to get buy-in from all the stakeholders. Community building also takes time and effort, but it often can be more fun than the meetings required for planning. Community building often is planned but also just happens when we gather for meals and events and especially when we sing together. If we know or learn the same songs and take the time to sing together, we can build a strong choir, a strong community, a vibrant congregation. When everyone is singing, we can really feel the strength of the community, but when there are just a few voices we don't always feel as strong as we might. We need more people singing, more people volunteering, more people sharing the work of the congregation. This is our challenge, to invite more people to actively engage in the life and work of the congregation. We all know people who would fit well, and it's easy to ask them, but there are even more people out there who need the love and acceptance that we can offer and some of them may be unwashed, and some may not even have a bachelor's degree. They may test our comfort level for welcoming others, but everyone should be welcome here, unless their values run counter to our own, but even then we should welcome them in and hope that they will grow in understanding.

We sit on some very important philosophical and theological real estate when we talk about our Universalism. Our understanding may have changed somewhat from the idea of Universal Salvation that motivated our forebears, but don't we believe in the healing message of acceptance that we preach as a kind of this worldly salvation? We may not be comfortable with evangelism, but we have an important message to share and an important work to do. May we take seriously our principles and invite those who need healing into our choir!

So May it Be! Shalom, Salaam, Namaste, and Amen!