

A MEETING HOMILY

By Charles Fawns

January 20, 2013

This service is the prelude to our annual meeting which will happen in the social hall shortly.

Some of what I am about to say, I am paraphrasing from a sermon given by the Rev. M. Lara Hoke of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Andover, Mass.

There is a book that is gaining popularity in Unitarian Universalist circles. It's called *Kicking Habits: Welcome Relief for Addicted Churches*, by Thomas G. Bandy. Bandy writes about growth as what "occurs when a living organism truly thrives." He explains that "Thriving congregations ...do not have to be big. They may be petite or small..." They are sometimes "naturally petite" based on various factors. But that doesn't mean that they can't be thriving congregations. And, certainly the Unitarian Congregation of Taos is thriving. We are internally thriving. This is a congregation in which people really like each other and enjoy each other's company, which is wonderful and truly should not be taken for granted. And this is a congregation that has an amazing number of things happening – wonderful programs and a variety of ways to participate. We have lay-led programming and fellowship opportunities. You will hear more about these in our meeting shortly. We have worked hard to be the internally thriving place we are today, and we all are to be commended for it.

In his book, Bandy explains that many congregations today are in the habit of believing that their main appeal is as an institution. In other words, historically, people in this country have wanted to belong to some sort of religious institution, to some congregation. And historically in this country, there was comfort and even self-esteem and sometimes prestige involved when one was the member of the right congregation. And so, proud church members or proud synagogue

Members, for instance, were basically content to belong to the congregation and to work to keep everything going. It was all about *belonging*. And it was also, in part, like the old sitcom, *Cheers*: "You wanna be where everybody knows your name." And there was – and *is* – real pleasure in this kind of belonging. It can be an incredible feeling to belong to an institution that you believe in, where you like the people and the style and the worldview.

But this model is one for the 20th century. Bandy says, it is not the model of the 21st century. He says that for today's younger adults, and for many unchurched adults in general, there is no inherent desire to belong to a congregation. And so we can present to people a wonderful, internally thriving congregation – which I wholeheartedly believe is what we have here... and yet people still might not come. Why? Because, as Bandy tells us, in the 21st century, people aren't looking to belong to an institution. They're not looking to *belong*; they're looking to *be changed*. They're looking to be transformed. How can the Unitarian Congregation of Taos do more of that? How can we be the congregation where people come not so much to *belong* as to *be changed*?

A few years ago a sermon was delivered by the Rev. Dr. Kay Lynn Northcutt at a UU ministers training. Rev. Dr. Northcutt is not a Unitarian Universalist. She is an ordained minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

It's amazing how an outsider can often help you see yourself and understand yourself more powerfully than an insider can. And so it was with Northcutt. She preached, in part, on the calling, or vocation of Unitarian Universalists. What is the calling, what is the vocation, of Unitarian Universalists? Northcutt framed it very simply: saving lives. Our calling as Unitarian Universalists is *saving lives*.

No, we don't focus on saving people so that they will enjoy bliss in an afterlife. Our Universalist forebears preached that all souls were saved anyway, that no loving God would condemn anyone to eternal damnation. And our Unitarian forebears had something important in common with the Universalists – namely, a focus on *this* lifetime... a focus on living well in *this* lifetime, saving lives in the here and now. And this tradition continues even today, in the 21st century. So how do we save lives?

Like other congregations from many religious traditions, we help to save lives in the here and now through social action. In part, we save lives in the here and now by helping to provide for the basic needs of our fellow humans. Many in this congregation fulfill this focus. Caryle will be elaborating more on how we reach out in the meeting which follows. This is stewardship of the community, an important part of any thriving congregation's vocation. You can never do too much social action. And social action doesn't have to be through an organization – an every Tuesday kind of thing. You never know when your kind words or helpful attitude can make a difference. A Unitarian, open-minded, open-hearted approach **can** change a life. Every moment, every encounter is an opportunity.

This is how the Unitarian Congregation of Taos can increasingly become not only a wonderful place to belong, but also a wonderful place to *be changed*. Because when we stand on the side of love, we save our own lives, too. To use traditional language, we save our own souls when we stand on the side of love.

This is the way that we can, as Gandhi put it, “be the change we want to see in the world”.

When we work to transform the world, we will be transformed in the process. To paraphrase the words of the Rev. Dr. Kay Northcutt, “[We] have a life saving, inclusive religion. [We] have a religious greatness to live out.... [Let us] find [our] greatness!”⁵

And that brings us to a final point... passing the buck.

We have just concluded our pledge campaign for 2013. You have generously supported this congregation in the past and continue to do so. Thank you.

And then a second stewardship request. Please do *not* pass the buck. Please don't pass along the responsibility of your sacred calling as a Unitarian Universalist. You have a vocation: saving lives, right here, right now... continuing to help those in need... increasingly standing on the side of love in solidarity with those facing oppression, right here, right now... doing the work of transformation, and being transformed.

Rev. Northcutt seems to obviously be using “save a life” to contrast with the traditional Christian missionary quest to “save a soul”. As Unitarians we can look at this as a broadened view of responding to and improving a life – finding ways to give to ourselves and to each other, and then to those in the immediate Taos community and beyond. The challenge is to feel nourished enough within our own community – to have enough courage and commitment to give to those beyond.

Being the individuals that Unitarians are, we bring unique talents and interests and each of us may choose a variety of ways to reach out to others.

I hope that we will face the future fearlessly, with love and excitement, with the urge to thrive inside and out! May we dare to dream beautiful dreams of change and transformation together. We need to think about our future. We need to think about how the Unitarian Congregation of Taos can become the congregation it is meant to be.

Blessed be, and amen.