

Raise High the Roof Bar

A service celebrated at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse on 03 December 2006
Chip Roush

FIRST READING The Rev. Ms. Elizabeth Tarbox was born in Hertfordshire, England, in 1944. She served two Unitarian Universalist congregations in Massachusetts, before her death in 1997. This is from a collection of her essays, *Evening Tide*

When the day is too bright, or the night too dark, and your feelings are like an avalanche barreling down the mountain of events outside your control, when you look down and you are falling and you cannot see the bottom, or when your pain has eaten you and you are nothing but an empty hungry hole, then there is an opportunity for giving.

Don't stay home and cover your head with a pillow. Go outside and plant a tulip bulb in the ground: that is an act of rebirth. Sprinkle breadcrumbs for the squirrels or sunflower seeds for the birds: that is a claiming of life. And when you have done that, or if you cannot do that, go stare at a tree whose leaves are letting go for its very survival. Pick up a leaf, stare at it; it is life, it has something to teach you.

You are as precious as the birds or the tulips or the tree whose crenelated bark protect the insects who seek its shelter. You are an amazing, complex being, with poetry in your arteries, and charity layered beneath your skin. You have before you a day full of opportunities for living and giving. Do not think you know all there is to know about yourself, for you have not given enough away yet to be able to claim self-knowledge. Do you have work to do today? Then do it as if your life were hanging in the balance, do it as fiercely as if it mattered, for it does. Do you think the world doesn't need you? Think again! You cleanse the world with your breathing, you beautify the world with your giving, you perfect the world with your thinking and acting and caring.

Don't stay home and suffocate on your sorrow: go outside and give yourself to the world's asking.

SECOND READING Howard Thurman was a Baptist minister and theologian. Born in 1900, he was the first black dean of Marsh Chapel, at Boston University. He mentored Martin Luther King, Jr., and other workers for civil rights, and died in Florida, in 1981.

"Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and then go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

SERMON How many of you know, in the context of weekly church attendance, what the terms "family", "pastoral" and "program" mean? How many know what "single cell", "multi-cell" or "stretched cell" congregations are? How many of you know the characteristics of "civic", "activist", "sanctuary" or "evangelical" churches?

It's alright if you do not know any of that church jargon; I myself didn't know some of those terms, until about two months ago, when the congregation sent five of us to the "Raise the Roof" seminar on church growth.

Before I do anything else, I want to thank you all for sending us. This training was not in the budget, but because our district arranged to get such a good deal— it was about one-third the usual cost— I thought we should at least ask. In one Sunday morning, the congregation gave over \$800. With the attendees paying for their own transportation, meals and lodging, that was enough to send a good team. I am really grateful to serve such a generous congregation. It is really good to see that people value this church community so much that they'll give extra, to help it thrive and live up to its potential.

So, we went to this training, and one of the first things we learned is that there are always people who are better off, and some who are worse off, than we are. As an example of the latter, I'll tell you this story: The seminar was in a conference center, with a dozen or fifteen big round tables. Usually, the folks from one congregation all sat at one table. A few congregations sent smaller groups, and some of them shared a table or two. About halfway through the training, the leader, Alice Mann, said that a congregation should not begin to discuss whether or not to grow if they were already "in conflict." When she said this, the shoulders of all the people at the table in front of us just slumped. The Rev. Ms. Mann said it a couple

more times, and each time, the people at that table flinched. They exchanged looks with one another, with wry smiles and arched eyebrows. Obviously, there was already trouble brewing in their congregation. I later saw the leader of that group talking to Rev. Mann, so perhaps they have gotten some help in the meantime. Seeing the body language at the table ahead of us, our contingent exchanged glances, too. Our looks seemed to express sympathy for that other church, and a quiet confidence that our congregation is in a pretty good place. That is another thing, for which I am grateful.

How many of you have ever worked with membership numbers for a Unitarian Universalist church? The whole thing is a bit confusing, isn't it? You have members who pledge; and members who cannot pledge, but whom we keep on our rolls because this is a church, not a club; there are friends, who generally give at least a little money, and who may or may not attend very regularly, but who like what we're doing enough to participate at least a little; there are folks who never attend, but send a check once a year; and people who attend every week, and always put money into the collection plate, but who never pledge, because that would violate their internal principle regarding the separation of God and Mammon, to use the language of the Bible.

At any rate, keeping track of the number of members of a UU church is often hard work, and it may or may not correlate with how many show up on any particular Sunday. For this reason, the Rev. Ms. Mann does not use membership numbers, but rather bases her research and recommendations on actual Sunday attendance.

If the average Sunday attendance, including young people and teachers, in a congregation is 50 or fewer, it is often called a "family sized" church; if it is between 50 and 150, the church is referred to as "pastoral sized." If a congregation averages between 150 and 400 every Sunday, then it is called a "program sized" congregation.

There is a lot of research showing how these numbers really do have some validity. Of course, a church with 151 attendees is not radically different from a congregation with 149, but congregations with less than 50 really do exhibit similar behaviors, as do churches with attendance between 50 and 150, and so on.

In fact, these size categories are not seen only in churches. Human behavior changes in all kinds of groups, when the size of the group surpasses one of these thresholds. It appears to be a part of our wiring: our primate brains have certain patterns deeply ingrained. There's actually a smaller threshold, around twelve, which is about the size of an extended family. You can have really close relationships with every member of a group of around twelve.

Then, up to fifty or so, we can still have pretty intimate relationships. Now we're at clan size, and we all know everybody else's business.

Beyond that, up to about 150, we can still recognize and remember virtually everyone. Give or take a few tricks of memory, to which at least a few of us might relate, we can be on a first-name basis with *about* 150 people.

And that's why churches tend to cluster in those size ranges. Something like *half* of the churches in the United States, of all religions and faith traditions, have 150 or fewer people as their average Sunday attendance.

Including this one. For the last decade or so, average Sunday attendance at our UUCGT has hovered around 150, give or take 10%. Now, it is still very early in my ministry, so people may be attending out of sheer curiosity, but we have seen an increase to about 180 recently. So it was worth our time and expense to go to this "Raise the Roof" training and get some advice from the woman who literally wrote the book on the pastoral-to-program size transition.

The second most important thing I learned at the seminar was that our congregations is almost perfectly positioned to grow, if we want to.

The most important thing I learned is that growth is *not* always the best option.

Who remembers last week's sermon? What was its title? "Big Is More." I think I said that "big" and "more" are not always automatically the best choices. That's true for church sizes, too.

The Rev. Mann probably said six times: “there are strong small churches, and there are weak small churches, and there are dying small churches, and there are strong big churches, and weak big churches, and dying big churches.” The most important thing I learned was that we should focus on being a *strong* church, of whatever size.

Now, if we *are* a strong congregation, that will probably bring growth. Growth can be measured in a number of ways— it can mean the number of people attending, or the variety of programs offered, or the spiritual depth explored by its members. If we are a strong congregation, if we are doing a lot of things right, then I do think we’ll grow in virtually all of those ways. Because the world is starved for good news, people are ravenous for a community of life-affirming neighbors. It is our duty—and our joy—to nourish them with our hope.

We are a strong congregation. And we are getting stronger. So, I do think that we are growing. Now, how many of you are concerned that if we do grow, the congregation will feel different, and we’ll lose some of that intimacy that we share now?

How many of you are human beings? How many have primate brains, with a built-in threshold around 150? That’s right, virtually all of us. Probably all of us have at least some fear, perhaps at some unconscious level, that growth will change our congregation.

This is a valid concern, and *if* we do grow numerically, we will have to address it. If we grow, we’ll have to build in smaller groups, so we can each get the appropriate amount of intimate relationship. This is one of the reasons I want us to have covenant groups, so all those who want or need such close friendships can have them.

Also, *if* we grow, it does not necessarily mean that this particular Sunday morning worship service will feel significantly different. There are lots of ways we can grow. Yes, we could build a bigger building, with a 500-seat sanctuary, and twelve classrooms, and rent out space during the week to other non-profit organizations, and have our own UU-sponsored day care for pre-schoolers, but there are many other possibilities.

Just to name a few, without trying to suggest we should do any specific one of them, here are some other possibilities for growth: we continue to sponsor satellite groups, supporting not only Benzie and Petoskey but congregations in Kalkaska and Leelanau and elsewhere throughout northwestern lower Michigan. We could develop a campus ministry and offer young adults and NMC students the benefits of our UU message. We could keep our two Sunday services, and hold weekly Wednesday night vespers services (by the way, we’re cohosting a Vespers this Tuesday night, with Congregation Ahavat Shalom— it’s going to be lovely. Y’all come!). We could sponsor monthly or even weekly Soulful Sundown events, which are like evening concerts with a little worshipful goodness thrown in, very popular with the younger crowd. We have a Soulful Sundown scheduled for March, already, and more could really reach a whole different group of people. We could create a mission to the migrant workers, and offer them a life-affirming alternative to the missionaries from whom they hear now. We could do all of these things, if we really wanted to, but why stop there? As long as I’m dreaming, let’s get really big: let’s take over the Turtle Creek property, and build a spiritual spa and retreat center where there is yoga practice every morning, and a Soulful Sundown concert every night and conventioners come to learn and play golf and sail or go snowmobiling and get healed of their worldly soul sickness, all at the same time— and the same 150 or so of us still meet for worship here on Sundays, just like we’ve been doing for years.

But all those numbers, all that talk about growth, is secondary: what is most important is strength. And that raises the question: what makes a church strong?

First and foremost, a congregation’s strength comes from its members: from individuals, walking together in covenanted relationship. Strength is born out of caring, passionate people— people who have “come alive”, in Howard Thurman’s words, working together to support each other and their world.

The poet Rumi once advised, “be a lamp, or a lifeboat, or a ladder.” Rumi was talking to individuals, suggesting that we should live our lives in ways that inspire others, or that we actively save others, or we help people save and educate and grow themselves. It is the same for groups. Strong congregations act as models, inspiring people by their example; and they work to save people— rescuing members and

friends and strangers from the adverse circumstances of their lives— and they educate people, helping themselves and others to grow in spiritual awareness and understanding. People in strong congregations rescue and heal themselves and others; they teach themselves and others; and they do all this in such a way that even those not directly in contact with them can learn from their example.

That's one answer.

A more pragmatic answer is that a strong congregation has an adequate infrastructure and a compelling vision.

If a congregation has a magnificent vision, but an insufficient infrastructure, then it will be unable to achieve its goals, and its members will leave, frustrated and burned out. If a congregation is well-developed organizationally— if it has a great committee structure, with a crackerjack staff, a beautiful, well-maintained building and grounds— but no vision, it will slowly atrophy and wither away, with nothing spurring it on and keeping it vital.

This is one of the reasons why I think it is important to recite our vision together each week: to remind ourselves, and to rededicate ourselves, to that energizing purpose for which we gather and share our labor.

Please repeat after me: We are a congregation creating a better world

{repeat} “We are a congregation creating a better world”— even if we stopped right there, we already know who we are and what we're about. We may not always live up to our vision, but we are *trying* to create a better world. We're not selfishly trying to grab as much as we can while billions of others suffer; neither are we giving in to despair; nor do we merely *hope* for a better world— we are actively creating it. Whether we're cleansing the world with our breathing, or beautifying it with our giving, or perfecting it with our thinking and acting and caring— we are making a better world. We may be working, currently, on that part of the world which is our self, or we could be helping family members, or working on behalf of strangers, or for the betterment of the environment. Regardless, our efforts, and those of others in this congregation, are creating a better world.

And that isn't even the whole first line!

I think we can say that we have a compelling vision. So what about our infrastructure? Do we have the organizational wherewithal to really pursue that stellar vision?

We do— we are fortunate to have people who “come alive” around issues of budgets and financial well-being; whose fire of commitment burns to create and maintain a safe, attractive building; whose passion is the education and mentoring of our young people, assisting them to discover what makes them come alive, and succeed on their own life journeys.

We have so many remarkable volunteers that we even have an annual award to honor them, the Gamble Award, named for its first recipients, Jim and Ruth Gamble.

And we could still use more volunteers, of course. We have a great building, and some beautiful land, and we could use more volunteers to tend to those assets. We have a wide variety of programs, and we could use more people to help run them. Especially in Religious Education— teaching our youth, or other adults— we virtually always appreciate more help.

We do have a strong infrastructure; we have many volunteers who are doing really good work. And, with a few more, we will do even better work.

Finally, one last story about what makes a strong congregation. It helps to be part of a strong movement, to be connected to other strong churches, near and far.

This is excerpted from an email that got posted to our ministers' chat a few weeks ago: “Dear Colleagues, I have a great story to tell you. I was working in my church office ... when a great big, young man walked in. He was dressed in a suit and tie and carrying a bible. I was a bit taken aback because people don't usually just walk in off the street here and it made me a little nervous. He said he lived nearby and asked if I had a minute to talk. I said, “yes,” and he sat down. He said that he was an evangelical Christian and that he was beginning to read things in the bible that didn't support the views of the evangelicals he was associated with. His whole viewpoint was changing and he didn't know where he fit in. We are in North

Carolina and he was just finishing up a theological degree ...at a Southern Baptist seminary. As we talked it turned out he had seen the church and read our website. He said, 'I knew *you* wouldn't reject me anyway!' He read a passage from the bible which to him indicated that Jesus died for all sins to save all people and then said that he is realizing that he is really a universalist in regard to salvation. I asked him what this meant for him in his life and he said, 'I see people differently now. It's no longer "us" and "them". It's everyone together.' ...Anyway, when he left, I felt like I had been visited by an angel... he was so young and earnestly searching. It was quite wonderful... [Good things are] happening in North Carolina." The young man said, "It's no longer 'us' and 'them'. It's everyone together." In a world that seems to emphasize every possible division between some specific "us" and the rest of the world as "them", we UUs stand witness to the fact that it isn't "us" and "them", it's everyone together.

And that, my friends, is what truly makes us strong.

There are people in our congregation who have come alive, and people who are still seeking the particular way that the universe will shine through them. It takes everyone together, to make us strong.

There are people whose candles burn brightly with the fire of commitment, and people whose candles have almost been extinguished. If we walk beside each other, in covenanted relationship, we can share and rekindle our light, and together carry it out into the darkness.

Because, with the power of compassion, and with compassionate power, we are a strong congregation, creating a better world.

So may we be.