

THE FLAME BURNS HOW BRIGHT?

by Rev. Alex Holt

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This morning I am supposed to talk about Stewardship since it's Stewardship Sunday. Now, it would be far better if the women from She Sings got up and did the number they did last night at the soirée entitled "Money Medley". They actually sang about money and in such creative ways that it's impossible for me to do any better. I hope the video of that song along with other great songs and the skits will be on video for the website soon.

So fear not. I am not going to talk about money today. As I have said before, my Zen teacher has said many times that money is simply energy units to get us from one place to another in the journey called life. So today I want to speak about stewardship from three perspectives: community, religion, and about shared ministry. I have been here since July 23rd of 2010. That's 1 year, three months and 12 days for the obsessive compulsives among us who would wonder and look it up online. I've learned a lot about you and you've taught me even more. I've watched carefully as you have demonstrated community, religious life, and ministry.

I'll talk briefly about each of the three themes and how they relate to your present and your future. Again, stewardship isn't about money so much as it's the story of your evolution. It's the continuing story of your vision and how to make it come to pass.

First, let's look at community here at UUFC. From what I saw when I first visited here in early June of last year, you had a pretty good sense of what community means. Sure, there were some tough spots where it got frayed. That happens and there's no way around it in human relations.

I saw a community of caring, loving people who felt a lot of passion for their fellowship. Sometimes the passion got out of control and that's actually a good thing. It says that people care even if they carry their caring a bit too far.

So when I came here, I knew the presence of community was a given. However, in many Unitarian Universalist communities, there's a tendency to be a bit exclusive like the affinity groups that Antony Robinson speaks about in the reading today. True, we are religious liberals who ask questions about the meaning of life in ways that can be uncomfortable to our more traditional religious brethren. Sometimes, our congregations then seem to create an assumed affinity of political or fiscal liberalism. Sometimes we even subtly discriminate against those who are Christian or who it might be better

termed ‘are followers of Jesus and his teachings’. This temptation to be exclusive also can apply to people in the GLBTQ community or those who are from lower income brackets.

In coming weeks and months we will talk more about how to move beyond exclusion however inadvertent it might be. Next Sunday Toni King and I will talk about what it can mean to be a follower of Jesus and a Unitarian Universalist. The next week there’ll be conversation about being a conservative Unitarian Universalist.

What I hope to show is that our idea of community is ready to be broadened beyond our comfort zone. But this will happen only if you are ready to do so. That is a part of stewardship. Why? Because you will be running counter to the divisions in America today that encourages divide-and-conquer or not listen at all to others with whom we disagree.

Your future as a community could be a brave and perhaps misunderstood band of liberals in the South that don’t challenge the status quo too much.

Or you could create a container that opens the doors here to people of rich and diverse ideas, orientations, political and cultural backgrounds and economic conditions. The one thing that would unite you in common would be your role as an inclusive religious community.

That brings me to the second theme of stewardship – being a religious community.

At our General Assembly in Charlotte last summer, UUA President Peter Morales spoke eloquently of our future as a movement.

I am going to repeat a long section of what he said because it speaks for itself and is more articulate than I could be:

“I want to explore what I mean by "get religion."

I am aware that the term "get religion" can be a bit of a shock for some UUs. We link the term "get religion" with evangelical fundamentalism...

So what do I mean by saying we have to get religion?

First, I believe that we must learn to take ourselves seriously as a religious movement. We are not an alternative to religion. Nor are we religion lite. We, like all religious movements, deal with life's core struggles and humanity's most profound questions about life's meaning.

Second, we must realize that religion is more about what we feel and experience than about our opinions. Our religion is about what we love passionately, about how we aspire to live, about what moves us at the center of our being. Religion's source is our experience of being loved, of loving, of belonging, of feeling awe, and of feeling connected to all creation.

Third, religion concerns that which links us to one another. Religion is relational because we are relational beings. Radical individualism may have been a liberating force in the more rigid society of the nineteenth century. Today, in a culture that erodes enduring relationships and isolates people, individualism is a prison. I believe it is the spiritual disease of our time. Religion is something we practice together. My religion isn't about me; it is about us. It is through the practice of our religion that we create community, that we strengthen the bonds that sustain us, and that we build compassionate connection to the wider world.”

That’s a big order. But so is stewardship. It’s not just about dollars and cents.

Morales tells us first that we ought not see ourselves as religion-lite or an alternative to religion. This is important, I think. Part of your stewardship here for the 21st century is to ask “are we a religious community? If not, why not. If yes, what does that mean?”

His second statement says that our cherished opinions about what religion ought to be are not as important as how we feel about it. This means the importance of ritual and the appearance of our building. His words ask us to not rely on intellectual reasoning and clever conversation but to ensure that our feelings of loving, being loved, feeling awe, and connected to all existence are fed regularly.

And his third statement argues that **religion isn’t about me, it is about us**. We Americans love individualism so much that we might forget sometimes that community is an essential partner.

I think you’re hard at work on all three of Peter Morales’ ideas about finding religion. I’d like to add one more idea for you to consider.

It’s simple: **all the world’s religions meet in this room**. Some of you practice the teachings of Jesus; others of you are attracted to Buddhism or Sufism. Over here might be someone who is devoted Jew and other there are folks who are equally devoted religious humanists.

All the world’s religions meet in this room.

The question becomes: what will you do with them?

Will you help newcomers who seek deeper understanding about the meaning of life’s tragedies and unplanned events?

Will you think of beloved friends like Edith Case whose service we did on Wednesday and wonder about life after death?

Will you wrestle with the holy scriptures of many religions to understand their questions and answers?

Or will you toss them all out as superstitious nonsense that doesn't obey a rational formula.

All the world's religions meet in this room and they await your curiosity.

And that's something more I know about you, UUFC. You're a wonderfully curious and questing group of folks. Share those questions and those yearnings. That's stewardship, too.

Now, finally, I'd like to say a few words about ministry as stewardship.

I've always been curious myself about one of those damned acronyms that get tossed around. It's called COSMOS here. Usually it means "COM" or "Committee on ministry" in congregations. I figured out that "COSM" meant "Committee on Shared Ministry" but no one has ever told me about the "OS" words.

While I was at a Buddhist retreat center the last three days, I came up with a possible answer. I think the whole acronym means **"Committee on Shared Ministry Operating System"**.

It's like Microsoft or Apple computer operating systems. You have some moving parts, lots of processors, a goodly amount of memory, and it sounds very 21st century geeky. I liked it.

The problem is that it doesn't really have a heart. It sounds mechanical or out of a consulting manual for Information Technology teachers.

Shared ministry isn't analytical or formulaic.

It has a heart and like all hearts, it must always move the blood of life to the whole body.

I've seen that you have shared ministry here.

I see it with folks like Jim and Cindy Rogers who did so much to move you to complete the first Phase of the Memorial Garden.

I see that shared ministry with the incredibly dedicated folks in the Religious Education programs for all ages.

I know that shared ministry was in couples like Carl and Holley Ulbrich who gave so much over the years to UUFC and will again.

I think of others like Oliver and Edith Case who are gone but not forgotten.

The list goes on and on.

So what is your stewardship for 2012?

It might be tempting to calculate your pledge on the relative importance of this congregation to other groups to whom you give money.

I'll say this to you: **your support of this congregation should be more important than anyone else other than your family.**

Your family is your heart and so is this congregation.

You don't give to an operating system.

You do give to a ministry that begins in your seat where you sit now and it moves to everyone in this building today and then out the door to the whole wide world one seeker at a time.

You have a choice. You can give until it hurts and see how your pain tolerance holds up.

Or you can truly live the words of ministry by Jack Kornfield: "**In the end, when we look at our life, the questions will be simple: Did I live fully? Did I love well? Did I follow the path of the heart?**"

It's your choice.

Please choose well for the sake of your community, your religion and your ministry to the world.

Your flame will burn but its brightness depends on you.