

OPENING WORDS

From the Chinese wisdom book “The Tao te Ching” by Lao Tzu

Verse 33 in part:

33

Knowing others is intelligence;
knowing yourself is true wisdom.
Mastering others is strength;
mastering yourself is true power.

Where does power reside in each of us? Is it our titles or our jobs or how we speak?

Where does power arise in a community and how is it shared?

Let us today explore the power of faith and integrity that flows through us all and is the spiritual practice of wisdom.

Welcome to this sacred space called the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson.

Welcome home.

Draft

WHAT THE BOOKS SAID Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson August 22, 2010

Good morning again, everyone. Thank you for being here today and special thanks to Robin, Paula and Jorge for their roles in the service today. Last week I wondered how many of you had been involved with hospitality. Today as part of my learning curve, I would like to know how many of you have been greeters or handed out orders of service? Thank you all.

The title of my sermon today is different than in the newsletter. It's really ‘what the books said’ rather than one particular book. I will read briefly from each of them as well as the one I did for the reading.

But first, let me mention a saying I promised to share with you back in June when Vanessa and I visited you. I mentioned that I would make a statement early on that might evoke your curiosity. That statement is this: **“your reputation precedes you.”** I’ve said that statement in these places: Roseburg, Oregon, Port Angeles, Yakima, and Marysville, Washington; Springfield and Alton Illinois. In each place, at least a few people in the congregation would mutter, frown or look worried. One person actually fainted and we had to stop until he was revived. I think that was Alton.

“Your reputation precedes you” seems to bring up a curious dichotomy for UU communities. On the one hand, we want to be perfect and stellar examples of how to ‘do’ church. On the other, we seem to take a subtle delight in being uniquely messed up. We believe that our troubles or conflicts are like no one else’s and that brings a measure of pride.

I am sorry to tell you this information now but I believe it’s true here as in the other places I’ve served. **“You are absolutely normal. You aren’t unique.”** And I would add, you are far better at ‘doing church’ than you can imagine.

How so? This is where those books come in.

When I was interviewed by your search committee, I’d not gotten your packet yet. I had to research like crazy and download newsletters, board reports, budgets, and sermons from your website. I read what I could and read in between the lines so I could ask and answer questions intelligently. We had a good interview, I thought, and I was totally thrilled when you invited me to come here.

I finally got the packet as the first book to read. There was a great introduction to the history. The founding story was wonderful. I wondered why there was no annual report any newer than 2007. I wondered what had happened in 2008 and 2009. There was a very elaborate Vision 2018 document and I penciled in a question as to follow up and whether it needs to be revised three years later on.

Then I got to the budgets. I love budgets for some reason. Most ministers hate them but I love looking at numbers and distilling what they might mean. I looked at the curious numbers for the ministerial package proposed for this fiscal budget year. They seemed much lower than the prior year. Hmmmm, I thought. Sounds like a serious attempt to balance the budget and say there’s a fellowship at an important turning point.

And sure enough when I did chat with folks, the very normal issues with professional salaries in a serious budgetary crunch time were present. I added to this my knowledge that Cynthia had been here 12 years which is twice the length of average time of ministry within Protestant and UU

denominations. My guess was that her ministry had completed its work. The fellowship was preparing to move forward into a new generation. Cynthia had done many wonderful things here and I suspect she was exactly what you needed 12 years ago. So much of what you have accomplished has been due to her presence and that should never be forgotten.

The final part of the book I read was the newsletter in March 2010. I read Linda Law's column on Membership and visitors. She says that UUFC is friendly to visitors and how we might become even friendlier. It was very insightful and suggested to me that you really want to welcome and embrace new folks. It implied to me that you wanted to be a Welcoming Congregation not only for the GLBT community but for everyone who comes in your door and wants to live our values.

This first book told me that you are ready to move to the next step of church and outreach into the new millennium. Visitors, budget challenges, visions, and honest understanding of your history were all ways to jump into the future.

Then I read the second book. This was the "Fundamentals of Transition Ministry" when I took advanced interim training in Boston at the end of July. I've done other interim training over the years but this one was particularly excellent. We covered a lot of information in three days but two areas are particularly noteworthy. One area was the typical transition period of the congregation. It was comprised of five elements: understanding your history, discovering a new identity, managing changes of leadership, re forging links to denomination, and committing to a new future. I've shared all of these with the transition team and the board. Each of these will require work from all of us and not just in the hands of your leadership. Here's one example: I hope that we all can take a thorough and heartfelt look at your fellowship mission this year. It expresses why you exist and what your role is in Clemson. It's a good thing to review every few years because it places power in every generation of members and friends.

The second area in this book on transitional ministry dwelt with power. We know about it. We deal with it every day in our jobs and families: power resides at many levels at Clemson University. Power is expressed in our bills that arrive every day. And it's here at UUFC as well.

The Interim Ministry Network says that power is a natural and essential part of church life. They speak of instrumental power, reputational power, coalitional power, communications power and so on. They told us that power is **"the ability to get what we want and the ability to mobilize resources to specific ends."** This goes back to the question asked of me last week about the democratic process. It's messy at times but it's about

mobilizing and transparently expressing our desire for a particular outcome. The workshop invites us to ask these questions of ourselves during this interim period:

What makes things work well at UUFC?

Where is power being used?

What keeps things from working well?

Every religious community faces these questions. I would add here it's a shared power that is far greater than the sum of the individual parts. When you put your minds to it, you are capable of very powerful deeds. Just look at this building, the parking lot design, the work with environmental causes and helping the needy, the purchase of Founders House, the many workshops and the sustainable eating program just to name a few.

This brings me to the third book. One of your long term members, Holley Ulbrich, wrote a fascinating introduction to the history of the UUA fellowship movement. It's quite a remarkable book. One passage in her book struck me about power. She writes that **"...as part of a community, laypersons must also learn to share responsibility and work together to reach common goals..."** She writes these words particularly about the decision to call or hire a first minister. She comments that it's one of the powerful challenges that happen when a fellowship is evolving into a church.

I would propose that Holley's words also remind us that shared power in a religious community is essential. It says that power – real or perceived – flows throughout the group and is not concentrated in any one person or a small group. You give power to your board of trustees. You give some power to your minister. You allow your groups, committees, and individuals to do the tasks of church BUT you never give your power up.

This means that sharing responsibility and working together requires we roll up our sleeves and commit to a few basic realities of shared power. Here are a few:

We enlarge the power pool by committing to a few hours a month to help out with a committee, a covenant group, hospitality or other leadership.

We maintain the right to say "I don't like that decision" but we accept the responsibility to suggest something better.

We are willing to claim our true power as people of spiritual wholeness and tie that into our worldly power here.

This brings me to the fourth and final book I read.

One of the themes in the interim ministry training and also in your many talks with me is the desire to combine worldly power with spiritual empowerment.

Put another way, how do we reclaim our own power in the face of so much power beyond our control? How do we stand proudly and affirm our power to create goodness and heal the hurt in the world?

One of the questions last Sunday I didn't get to answer was what the Buddha said about forgiveness. Like all the others, it was an excellent question. The quick answer is that he said forgiveness was very hard and sometimes took lifetimes. He did suggest an alternative: unconditional compassion for ourselves and all others. This is called metta practice.

In the reading this morning, Ajahn Sumedho speaks of an inner power all of us have. It's the liberation from attachment but it's also liberation from the anger we might feel and the power that anger can give others. It's the power to be compassionate toward those we love, those we don't know, and those we despise. Metta or loving-kindness practice is a meditation for all beings but starting with ourselves.

It's a power that comes from our heart and our intuitive voice as well as our reason and rationality.

It's a power as old as humanity and every one of us has it.

It's a power that acknowledges we are imperfect and so is everyone else. It is a strength based on kindness and compassion. It doesn't ask us to be dreamers or escape from reality. It invites us to embrace it.

I'd like to invite us to end my remarks with an exercise of this power. I'd invite you to close your eyes and relax in your seat. I'd like you first to consider the state of your body and your mind. Are you restless and eager for food or the rest of your day? Good, be kind to that feeling and know it will soon be quenched. Are you learning something this morning to take into the world when you leave? Wonderful, just rest with it and embrace it.

Now I invite you to silently say these words after me and feel them as spiritual exercise to claim a power of compassion toward yourself and then others.

The second verse will be for someone we love. The third will be for someone with whom we have conflict. The final verse will be for all beings in the world right now.

“May I be filled with loving-kindness.”

“May I be well”

“May I be peaceful and at ease”

“May I be free from fear”

For someone we love deeply...

May you be filled with loving-kindness.

May you be well.

May you be peaceful and at ease

May you be free from fear.

For someone with whom we have conflict...this is usually the most difficult practice of loving-kindness. If you find you cannot forgive or express kindness toward someone with whom you have deep conflict, then use metta practice on your own feelings. Be kind and patient with your feelings instead. So for that condition where we have someone with whom we have conflict:

May you be filled with loving-kindness.

May you be well.

May you be peaceful and at ease

May you be free from fear.

For all beings in this world of love, confusion, life and death:

May all beings be filled with loving-kindness.

May all beings be well.

May all beings be peaceful and at ease

May all beings be free from fear.

CLOSING WORDS

Your reputation precedes you.

Your power to help heal the world is in front of you.

May our work together make both reputation and healing an example for all those who hear of our faith.

Peace, amen, shalom, blessed be, Namaste.