

Draft

**REVERENCE FOR OUR BODY**  
**Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson**  
**October 24, 2010**

Good morning again everyone, and thank you for being here today. Some of you may recall that a couple of months ago I did a service called 'we gather in reverence' and spoke about reverence as a condition or state of awe at being in the presence of something greater than ourselves. I said that I'd do more services to speak of reverence with body, mind, heart and irreverence. Today I am doing the first service: reverence for body. Originally I'd thought to talk about reverence for the physical body but I decided to speak of another type of body today.

Here's a story about that type.

Quite a few years ago - the summer of 1988 - I'd decided to start seminary at our Unitarian Universalist seminary in Berkeley, California. I had lived and worked in the Bay Area for some years and decided to take a vacation before I started school. I went to New Mexico and back on Amtrak to see my sister and was returning on a very full train.

For any of you who know Amtrak, there's a routine when you go to the dining car. If you're alone or with another person, you get to sit with strangers at any given dining table. This was what happened with me. I went to the dining car and was escorted to a table with three other people. None of us knew each other. A young woman sat to my right, an older woman in her 50's directly across from me, and a man perhaps about the same age sat beside her. We all introduced ourselves and waited for our meals.

The woman across from me asked me "So Alex, what do you do for work?" I rather proudly told her that I was starting at a Unitarian Universalist seminary in a week. She thought about that for a moment and then asked "oh, so do you believe in the Creator?"

This wasn't a fair question. I'd not even started seminary yet, hadn't taken any theology classes, was a committed atheist and this was a hard question to answer while waiting for dinner. So I mumbled something about God being inside all of us.

She got red in the face and said in a loud voice for all in the area to hear "you're a heathen and you shouldn't be allowed to teach impressionable young children! You are going to hell." And then she turned to the man next to her and said "don't you agree?" He looked a bit awkward and looked over at me. He said, 'well, I don't consider myself very religious but I would say

I have to agree with Alex - but you see, I'm a Unitarian Universalist too."

Fortunately at that point, the meal came and we ate in silence.

Reverence of the body happened at that meal. The body was the body of Unitarian Universalism. Other faiths might call such an event the body of Christ or the body of the church or perhaps the body of the Buddha. In each case, it means the communal group of those who profess a living, breathing faith.

That unknown man and I were for those few minutes a congregation, a fellowship, a community of shared faith. We were larger than the sum of our individual parts.

We created a space of reverence in body and be a reality in the midst of trial and tribulation.

This morning I want to speak for a few minutes about reverence for the body of Unitarian Universalism here in Clemson and the surrounding area. We'll then have an opportunity for conversation before the end of the service.

Many religious traditions have used the body as a metaphor for the whole community of a given faith. I mentioned some of them above. I've not heard of anyone calling us "The Body of Unitarian Universalism" other than Anne Heller in the reading today.

Her book speaks to a metaphor of body and wholeness.

She compares the strong and healthy human body to the body of a congregation that wants to be also strong and healthy and beautiful. Each chapter speaks to a part of the body: the brain is compared to the documents and policies that shape the story of the fellowship; the chapter on ears speaks to good communications, the reproductive system is about growth and membership – and so on.

Reverence for the body means that we make the body as strong and healthy as we possibly can. And reverence for the body is also stewardship for the body of this community of the future.

Make no mistake; this sermon on reverence is also a sermon about stewardship. I will not specifically mention money other than as a means to an end. Money is, as my Zen teacher once said, merely the fuel that gets us from Point A to Point B. You will be asked to pledge for this coming year and envelopes with the budget proposal, a pledge card and a cover letter are waiting for you. Please see Bob and Sandra after the service if you have questions or need to find your envelope.

How do we grow strong for the work and play ahead?

I'd like to propose several ways we can make this body called UUFC stronger and ever more healthy. I'll invite you to do the same in a few minutes. These would be my top picks for strengthening.

The first way is related to what Anne Heller calls the reproductive system of the body. This is about church growth but not by numbers. It is programming and what we offer that will attract and keep people of all ages.

She asks us this question **“do we enjoy our children? Are we an intergenerational community?”** My response so far is that ‘yes we are’ to a degree. I believe and hope that by the time you select a settled minister in two years, your children’s religious education program will have tripled in size. A congregation of this size should ideally have 40% of its total attendance include children and youth. If we average 80 adults on Sundays, we should aim for at least 30 regulars for children and youth. This means making a commitment to expand paid staff and programs for religious education.

Another question she asks is **“Do we sing a lot? Making a joyful noise is a wonderful thing. A congregation that loves to sing is a healthy congregation.”** Elaine has strived to create a choir of many voices. They would love to have more men and always more women to fill out their ranks. Singing together whether as a choir or a whole congregation gives us a way to be in community by sharing all our words together and creating beauty.

By the time your settled minister arrives, I hope that they will discover you have a Music Director who is busy running a broad and deep music program. That means a paid position with adequate hours.

Let’s move from the reproductive system to the heart – the organ that must be healthy and beat regularly in order for the body to live. Anne Heller speaks of ministry as the heart of the congregation. It’s staff, me and you all together. It’s the person who came here for the first time and opened a door for a veteran member. It’s a long time member who remembers to say hello to anyone they haven’t seen before.

All exercises and healthy foods nourish the heart and the same is true of ministry. Your pledges and your helping hands will revitalize the healthy heart of this community.

This stewardship campaign is about money and goals to be sure. However, it is also about making ministry become as visible as this new chalice flame we have used in recent weeks.

I have been here three months and I have seen an astonishing amount of laughter, humor, determination and a feeling that the best is ahead of us. Yes, there will be challenges. Old conflicts will need to be acknowledged in

a heartfelt and loving way. Economic problems affect us here in Clemson as everywhere.

I have come to believe that during such times of crisis as this, those who are most adaptable and quick learners will be the ones to succeed. Churches and fellowships of all denominations that insist on doing things the ways they have always been done will probably fail. I know that you, like myself, have gotten knocked to the ground a few times. We all have whether it was a lost relationship or a job that ended or illness and death. A part of recovery and health is getting back to our feet and standing up again. But that's not the end. We then have to see what needs be done next to make us and the world a better place.

The collective body of this fellowship has lived through painful times. You have started to reclaim a reverence for yourself as a community. This isn't ego. This isn't staring in the mirror narcissistically and admiring our body.

This is becoming more fit, stronger and healthy for the times to come. This body called UUFC did some ministry yesterday. I was privileged to deliver the invocation at the Clemson-Georgia Tech game yesterday afternoon on your behalf.

That invocation was your invocation. It came about because you chose to reclaim reverence, community and ministry as a natural part of your body. I promised a time before conversation where we would do a shared meditation in the Quaker style.

What task or goal or vision do you believe will make this body strong and healthy? Is it religious education and music or else? How is it the heart of your congregation made strong and powerful?

#### SILENCE AND SHARING

In ending, I think back to that man on the train who was willing to speak out even in an awkward moment.

He did ministry then and pointed us to a reverence for the body of community. "I'm not very religious" he said, but was courageous enough to say "but I'm a Unitarian Universalist, too."

May that be true for us all as we reclaim reverence for this whole body of love and great intention.