

***Together Under One Roof:
A Greenhouse for the Spirit***

Preached by Rev. Lee Bluemel
at the North Parish of North Andover, MA, Unitarian Universalist

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At North Parish this month, we have witnessed a flashmob of generosity. You heard it already this morning over 1.1 million dollars, raised in a few weeks to replace the current Religious Education wing with a new Parish House. That doesn't happen- *at least not in New England*- without a lot of soul-searching and stretching and sacrifice... and a willingness to take a big risk, together.

A flashmob of generosity only happens when we have a deep sense of trust and a clear sense of purpose that each of us will do their part in living up to our covenant of community. It only happens when the desire to change is stronger than the pull to stay the same.

The Spanish-Cuban author Anais Nin once wrote, "...the day came when the risk to remain tight in bud was *more painful* than the risk it took to blossom." In other words, there come times in our lives when we realize there is too much at stake if we stick with the status quo. The risk, we realize, is worth it... whether on a personal, communal or a spiritual level.

Ask someone who has left their former religious community to join this one, because the habits and assumptions of their former faith no longer worked for them. Ask someone who set aside ideas of original sin and hell to embrace the concept of life's original blessing and hope for heaven here on earth. The risk, we realize, is worth it.

Ask someone who has learned to speak up for herself and stop hiding aspects of her identity-whether working class or raised poor or privileged, multiethnic or multifaith, differently abled, in recovery- whatever it may be. Ask a person who has taken the huge risk in our society of identifying as transgender, because the pain of being untrue to their inner self was too much to bear. The risk, we realize, is worth it.

No doubt, you can think of your own examples- perhaps from your own life. Perhaps there is an old habit, role or assumption you're ready to give up now, in order to blossom into a new life. Well, the same can be true for communities and institutions. And it is certainly time for us to blossom as a congregation.

For those of you who are new, we're kicking off a Capital Campaign today after years of congregational discernment. Discernment is a churchy word for a kind of decision making that takes time, deep listening and silence. It requires stating one's truth, but then listening—listening to others, listening for the Spirit, listening for collective wisdom to emerge. It requires the patience of a saint.

This is what we've been up to for the past 14 years or so. And that process of discernment has led the congregation a clear conclusion: sticking with the status quo at North Parish is too risky. We are tired of our physical space getting in the way of our mission. We are tired of the financial drain of paying rent each month on the building across the street. We are tired of apologizing to people in wheelchairs for our claustrophobic lift, And tired of worrying about the legal deadline for our whole building to be accessible. We are tired of having to debate issues such as a crossing guard policy...Does anyone remember the crossing guard policy?

Our sanctuary is spacious and gorgeous. But our Religious Education wing is not. We've had to rent Old Center Hall across the street for youth programs, staff offices, and outreach programs like the Coffeehouse and Buddhist Sangha. I remember Lois Fisher-- one of our elders who is no longer with us- saying to me, "I told them they made that RE wing too small when they built it!" (We all know "they" should have listened to Lois!)

Since they didn't, now we're tired of being split between two buildings— limiting the connections between generations, limiting the kind of creative symbiosis that happens when youth, Buddhists, music lovers, staff and youth mentors are all mixed up together with the little kids, social activists, choir members and elders.

And perhaps the deepest pain of all is in knowing that so much of our leadership energy has been tied up for years in figuring out our space problems. It's time we release our leaders from this burden, so we can *all* spend our time and energy on welcoming others to this incredible community and releasing our love and energy into the surrounding world.

I used to run track in high school, and one of my events was the 440 relay. The 440 relay is a mile-long run, in which there are four participants who take turns. Each one of them has to run their hearts out at full speed, and at the end of each leg, still have enough focus left to get the baton into the hand of the next runner- who, by the way, is already starting to run away from them.

Well, we've been running a relay on this project for at least 14 years.

When I got here in the fall of 1999, I remember one of our members, showing me some sketches of a new building. Very nice, I thought, a new building? I just got here! I didn't

know what the heck was going on. That member was Marty Sinacore, one among us who passed away last fall but remains with us in spirit. He and another member, Dick Manning, were working on this together.

Well, after I had a few months under my belt here, it became clear that Marty and Dick were right, and something needed to happen about our space. At the beginning of 2000, the Strategic Planning Committee was formed, *with Marty, Jerry Hall, Dave Cook, Kathy Teplitz and Pat Grimm at the helm*. That was followed by an all-congregation workshop with Rev. Alice Mann, a mission workshop, a questionnaire, many dialogue sessions. In 2002 the Strategic Planning Team gave their final recommendations: move to two services, expand staff and increase the building space.

The rest, as they say, is history. Part of that history is about a building project that involved engineers and architects, studies and scaffolding, drainage and support beams, bathrooms and boiler room, leaks and rot, the weathervane and clock, building codes and sprinkler heads, steeplejacks and electricians, the Paul Revere bell which was off its rocker and so much more.

It involved a sharp learning curve about what it means to be truly accessible and nasty surprises about the extent of the deterioration of the Meeting House. It involved a difficult shift from our dream of a new Parish House to extensive preservation work to save this structure. It involved a Capital Campaign, grant proposals, a move out of the sanctuary and meetings, meetings, meetings. In May of 2009, we celebrated the last piece of work *and re-dedicated the new, accessible front entryway in memory of the Rev. David Blanchard*.

But that wasn't the end of the story. The relay race was still going; the baton was handed on. Some of those who ran early are no longer with us—Dana Fisher, Karl Kober, Marty Sinacore—but this is *their* project too. Thanks to them, we've gone from a rough sketch to a colorful vision- not only of the building but what will go on inside it.

The relay was joined by new teams of runners-- the Old Center Hall Task Force, then the Facilities Task Force, then the Design Task Force, and finally, the Building Task Force of today. And let's not forget the folks involved over the years in Listening Circles, in Social Action and Religious Education Re-visioning, and in the church Visioning project last year.

Visioning told us what we value, what we want to grow: A free-thinking faith with no dogma and exposure to a variety of spiritual resources. A multigenerational community engaged in life-long learning. We value our history and tradition, social action and music, ritual and innovation, an excellent staff. We said we want to increase our diversity and our connections to the larger community.

This is not the vision of a dying church, but a living one. Ours is the same impulse as that of our forebears who met in 1835 after some of the members withdrew to form a new Trinitarian church. They didn't say "*Oh well, nothing we can do about the changing times. I guess we're destined for stasis and inevitable decline. We'll just coast from now on, and not think too much about the future.*"

No. Instead they said, "*Well. We'll show them! We still think we're the hippest religion in town- not that we're biased or anything. Hey, let's build a new Meeting House and show 'em what we're made of!.*" And they did it- 177 years ago- they built this

Meeting House. They voted, and then they voted again with their pocketbooks and elbow grease.

Like them, we happen to be present at a decisive point in the congregation's history. But we've already *done* the *hard* part! This is the *exciting* part, folks! This is it-- the last year, the last lap, the one that comes right before the victory lap. The one to give it all we've got, to tap into spirit, and cross the finish line triumphant. The win will be a big one, for many generations to come.

So many generations have met in this Meeting House before us, many who have gazed out of these same windows. It's probably because of our windows that I like to think of NP as a greenhouse, a place where we grow new Unitarian Universalists. Here, we feed and water tender new shoots, let in the light and keep out the cold. We do this until we are ready to blossom outside these walls, where we can lend our health and beauty and fragrance to those around us.

"By their fruits, ye shall know them," said the rabbi, Jesus. The fruits of our harvest include children secure in their own worth and dignity, youth who take responsibility for their beliefs and sign up for service trips, small groups who support each other and go hiking for the homeless. They include other life-changing organizations—like the People's Pantry, Stand and Deliver, Welcoming Faiths and Jericho Road.

What this harvest tells me is that our people are our treasure, and when our creative energy is released, this little Greenhouse becomes a Powerhouse of Love.

So the more Unitarian Universalists, the better, I say!--even with the new Pope!

Needless to say, Pope Francis is my very favorite Pope so far. He says things like doubt are OK! And who am I to judge a gay priest?

And the church should focus on the poor.

And let's meet atheists where they do good works.

There have been moments when I think he's almost ready to become a Universalist!

But even this Pope doesn't go far enough, so we can't leave the transformation of the world all up to him. I believe we need more Unitarian Universalists, more women clergy, more legally married gay couples, more atheists who come to UU church. We need a religion that doesn't prop up creeds or hierarchies, doctrines of atonement or ideas of hell. Our world can use a simple theology that focuses on unity and love, the gift of life, the potential of humanity, a commitment to beloved community on earth here and now.

And guess what? Other people want this too.

My good friend and colleague, the Rev. Vanessa Southern, pointed this out in her sermon at General Assembly this past June. Quoting religious scholars and historians, studies and surveys, she noted that mainstream denominations are on the decline but other groups are growing. Which ones? Those who say they have no religious affiliation, those who describe themselves as "spiritual but not religious", those whose families are of mixed religious, racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Ask these folks why they reject religion, and they say they associate it with words like narrow, judgmental, homophobic. They associate it with staid rituals and old doctrines. They are used to the radical democracy of the internet! They are used to being able to look up religious questions or watch videos of religious rituals all over the

world with just a few keystrokes! They're used to working and living and playing in a multicultural, multiethnic world.

Those who turn to religion aren't looking for doctrines and judgments. They're looking for direct experience of the divine- what we might call "direct experience of transcending Mystery and Wonder." They are hungry for a faith that makes a difference in real lives, and helps change society's values instead of getting in the way of change. But do they even know about us? Most of them do not.

The Unitarian Albert Schweitzer once said, "Do not let Sunday be taken from you. If your soul has no Sunday, it becomes an orphan." He said this at a time when there were still Blue Laws, when there was no shopping or banking or kids' sports on Sundays. How times have changed.

But his words are even more prophetic, given *our* context today. "*Do not let Sunday be taken from you!*" If your soul has no Sunday, it becomes an orphan." This is what congregations like ours say to the community. Don't let work, sports, shopping, the internet and school take away time for your soul - time to reflect, to sit, to muse, to muddle, to weep, to sing, to daydream, to rest, to confess, to meditate, to hug, to pray, to find small ways to be righteous together.

Our Meeting House stands here like a crusty old prophet saying "Don't forget the Sabbath!" The congregation in a friendlier way says "Come on in; we will help protect your Sundays, your soul." And every week, when visitors come through our doors, there is the magnificent chance that another person will find a place to blossom and a life that includes time for the soul, and times to be righteous together.

The good news is that when they come, we will be ready for them. If we raise the money we need, and do our homework, and go out into the community, we're gonna be ready for the millennials, for the multicultural families, for the non-creedal creative spirits- some of whom may use a wheelchair.

We'll be ready, one year from now- one year from today. When many of us we will be sitting again in this sanctuary. Most of this room will be the same. But when we're all under one roof, new connections will be happening. We'll see the teenagers who've grown up in the RE program, the adults who've been advising the youth for three years, the newcomers drawn by the magnetic pull of our excitement and "can do" spirit. And each one of us, if we choose to join in this Capital Campaign, will be able to say, "I made that happen."

When we see someone come through the new door in a wheelchair or a double stroller filled up with twins, we'll know we made it happen. When we come to early morning meditation or yoga in the flex rooms before the service begins, we'll know we made it happen. When we walk out the new door over here and into the lobby, down half a staircase to the offices to see a staff person, we'll know we made it happen. When we walk up half a staircase to pick up our children in the new Religious Education classrooms on our way to coffee hour...we'll know we made it happen. The risk, we will say, was worth it, as we watch our congregation blossom.

The folks who got caught up in the North Parish flashmob of generosity these past few weeks are inviting all the rest of us to join in. Excitement is in the air. the finish line is in sight. There's one more lap to go. They are handing off the baton. It's time to reach out and grab it. So let's get ready to grab it. It is our turn now. Amen.