

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“Fulfillment Through Passing the Bucket”

January 25, 2015 Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore

Message From UU Church of Delaware County by Jody Malloy

About 7 years ago, I was at General Assembly in Portland Oregon. General Assembly is the annual meeting of UU congregations. While I was there I went to a workshop where I heard a woman speak. Her name is Tandi Rogers. What she said had so much of an impression on me that I wrote to her and asked her if she had it written down, and if she did, would she send it to me. I'd like to share Tandi's words with you.

“I love to make the coffee at church – I go and get real half-and-half and fancy sugars. I'll get the juice with less sugar and more anti-oxidants that I call super juice. I'll make the coffee and pray into it. And as people are standing around after church talking about the sermon or the details of their week, I peer out from the kitchen and watch my prayers get sipped up into bodies and spirit. I watch the real half-and-half delight them, hoping that they will in turn make a decadent decision in the world and go beyond what is necessary. I watch for the juice mustaches of children hoping that their blood-sugar levels will remain stable so they can share what happened in Sunday School with the adults in their lives rather than melt on the way home. I tend to these little details knowing I will not see the results. But I remain faithful to the suspicion, the hope that they have made a difference. Coffee duty is one of my cherished spiritual practices.”

I had never thought of coffee service like this. I had only thought of it as something I should do because it's important. Everybody likes to spend time socializing in coffee hour. So someone needs to make the coffee. I dutifully took my turn. I never once thought of it like Tandi did. And I have to say very honestly, I fairly quickly came to the conclusion, that coffee service would probably never touch me spiritually like it did Tandi.

But by listening to Tandi's words, it came to me. I knew, with all my heart that, while coffee service wasn't one of them, there were ways that I had served that touched me that profoundly. I had led the Coming of Age group and I think I learned more and grew more than the youth did! I had served on the Ministerial Search Committee when

we were searching for a new minister for our congregation. On that committee, I had worked hard, and laughed hard, and learned hard – about our congregation, about Unitarian Universalism, and about myself. I served on the budget committee and learned about the components of fair compensation for church staff, which got me interested in economic justice.

I listened to Tandi speak, and I knew. I knew that I was a deeper, richer, fuller UU and person, because I had served.

As I thought about the ways that I had served and grown, I felt immense gratitude for the opportunity to serve. And gratitude to those who had asked me to serve, for I realized by asking me, they had given me a gift.

And then I realized I wanted that for everyone. I wanted everyone to serve in a manner that helped them grow. I didn't want to see anyone volunteer to do anything in our congregation that drained them, or even that they were indifferent to. I wanted to give everyone the gift of meaningful service. I wanted everyone to learn and grow and come alive by serving.

Sermon

Ever since people started living in cities, fire has been a major problem. The larger the structures, the closer they are together, the more likely a fire will burn them all down. The Great Fire of London in 1666 was an extreme example of the threat city people must deal with from fire.

The ancient Romans were some of the first to come up with using a bucket brigade to put out a fire. Seeing smoke, Marcus Li-cin-i-us Cras-sus would show up with 500 men at a house fire. We would assemble them in a line to the nearest water source ready to move buckets of water, hand to hand, ... if ... the owner would pay him a handsome price to save his house. Bucket brigades, still in use today in under-developed parts of the world, were the main stay of firefighting until pumps and hoses came into common use.

... “submerging in the task, working in a row and passing the bags along,” as Marge Piercy praises in her beautiful poem, remains a common labor saving method for getting work done. Sometimes, as in the case of a fire, the work couldn't be accomplished *without* the line. The building would burn to the ground before

individuals, working alone, could get enough buckets of water on the fire. They'd just get exhausted running back and forth to a water source to fill their individual bucket. Being part of a bucket brigade and being successful in working together to accomplish the shared goal of putting the fire out can be very satisfying and meaningful for the participants. It is a direct experience of the value of coordinated work for a common end, of a sense of community that is *mutually supportive*. It can be a powerful personal experience of contributing to the good of the whole.

Thankfully, it doesn't take a cup brigade to pull off serving coffee after our service in Channing Hall. Yet a coffee hour host can have a powerful personal experience of contributing to the good of the whole. You heard Jody Malloy describe Tandy Rodgers' method of providing refreshments and the meaning she got from that act of service. Offering the half and half and low sugar juice, and seeing little extra effort make a positive difference, gave her a sense of satisfaction. How many of you have had a similar feeling of satisfaction being a coffee hour host?

Well, that hasn't translated into sign-ups for coffee hour volunteer spots. Alyssa, our office administrator, regularly needs to send out a midweek email to encourage people to do so. There are many other volunteer spots that we often have trouble filling. And don't get Leah going about how hard it was last fall to get people to sign up to teach in our religious exploration program.

We've got some trouble here. Either there are problems with our volunteer opportunities or maybe people don't realize what they are missing.

I know a little about this lack of appreciation from personal experience. Back in the 1982 and 1983, I attended the Oakland Unitarian Church in Oakland, California. I worked hard all week and just wanted to come Sunday, hear a good sermon, sing some songs, chat with a few people after the service, then go home. I was a consumer of Sunday services and that was about it. I gave a token contribution but wasn't involved in much beyond that.

Then, after attending Pacific Central District Leadership School in 1985, I got recruited to be chair of the Finance Committee. Naively excited, and maybe a little deluded, with my new-found leadership skills, I said yes. Suddenly, I moved from the edge of the congregation to the center of activity. And I knew I was on a vitally important committee because the congregation had a number of financial problems to work out.

Before joining this committee, I hadn't understood where the money came from and where it went. I also hadn't realized how important my contribution was to the success of the congregation. I made my first generous pledge that contributed to an unanticipated feeling of a much deeper connection both to being a generous person but also supporting the programming, staff and success of the congregation and its goals. My sense of ownership of the place increased dramatically.

The other powerful experience of making the congregation mine was singing in the choir. This meant I had to make a more significant time commitment with Thursday rehearsals. That extra commitment, though, connected me more deeply into the community. And contributing to the Sunday services, making beautiful music, made the services more meaningful and enjoyable for me. Serving on committees and in the choir made a big difference in how much I received from my involvement. Now I felt like I was part of the whole.

Service fulfills a critical role in Unitarian Universalism. Many of our congregations use words similar to these every Sunday morning:

Love is the doctrine of this church
 The quest for truth its sacrament,
 And service is its prayer.
 To dwell together in peace,
 To seek knowledge in freedom,
 To serve human need

Listen to these wise words by UUA President, Peter Morales, from the September 2010 issue of the UU World:

...if prayer is the word we use to describe connecting to what is sacred, I think service may be the best form of prayer. And if the purpose of a spiritual practice is spiritual growth, service is a powerful spiritual discipline. I have seen again and again how service transforms people. No one who commits herself to service remains unchanged by the experience. When we serve we become more compassionate, more sensitive, more understanding, and more aware. We are reminded of how precious and fragile life is. We experience our vulnerability and our deep need for one another. When we serve we experience *what love can do*.

He goes on to say

In the last few years I have also come to appreciate how much people need to serve. I saw this clearly among new members joining the congregation I served in Colorado. As part of our new-member process, we always asked about the activities they wanted to become involved with at church. This congregation is large and active, and they could choose among a broad spectrum of programs. The largest number told us they wanted to become involved in some form of service to the community. In the last several years we found that the percentage who said they wanted to get involved in service kept growing. People need to give of themselves.

This has certainly been my experience over the years of involvement in UU congregations I have been a member of and the ones I've served as minister.

Yet I also know that sometimes people's experiences of service is not this positive. I recognize the leaders in our congregations have a responsibility to organize those service opportunities well. They need to be organized:

- **efficiently** - so people's effort is productive of results and not wasted;
- **meaningfully** – to provide work that has value and uses or develops people's skills and contributes to their growth and development;
- **sustainably** – so no one person carries too much of the load and new people are being prepared to receive the hand-off of the work when the current worker is ready to step aside.

Too often organizations are happy to add new activities without deciding what old activities to stop doing. We are extremely careful about budgeting our money. We do not take the same care in budgeting volunteer time. People are willing to stretch in giving time and money when needed, only up to a point, and then fatigue sets in.

Solving these problems are what the Growth Through Service program is all about. As I mentioned earlier, it's a program several of us learned about at General Assembly last June in Providence, Rhode Island. Jody is one of the visionaries of this program. She came up Friday and Saturday to work with us to begin to adapt her congregation's vision of this program to our congregation.

The driving purpose of the Growth Through Service program is making the service opportunities in our congregation efficient, meaningful, and sustainable. What many congregations neglect is the meaningful part, particularly making the service opportunity one that helps stimulate our growth and development.

Growth and development is the religious and the spiritual component that equips us to fulfill our congregation's mission: to seek truth and deeper meaning, pursue justice through inspired action, and cultivate compassion and love for all connected by the web

of life. To accomplish that mission, we need to grow and develop as individuals. To accomplish that mission, we need to serve each other, the larger community around us and the world community of life on this planet.

Our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors received that direction to serve others from Jesus. In the Book of Matthew, Jesus is very clear. A mother comes to Jesus and asks what her sons need to do to be Jesus' right and left hand guys, to be lieutenants to Commander Jesus. This was and is the way of hierarchical power in the world. She saw Jesus as a messiah who would be king and wanted her son's to get in on the action. Jesus was clear that he would not be a king. Luke reports these words for him (22:25-26)

It is the kings who lord it over everyone, and those in power are addressed as 'benefactors.' But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must behave as a beginner, and the leader as one who serves...Among you, I am the one doing the serving.

Swedenborg, the eighteenth century Lutheran mystic in whom Emerson found much inspiration, had a vision of God who would guide all of us toward service as a way of discovering wisdom and practicing compassion. Through service we could have a direct experience of God's true nature which he believed was identical with love and wisdom.

Yet a love of service isn't bound by any means to belief in God. Bette Chambers, former president of the American Humanist Association wrote:

All human life must seek a reason for existence within the bounds of an uncaring physical world, and it is love coupled with empathy, democracy, and a commitment to selfless service which undergirds the faith of a humanist.

Humanists focus on the welfare of humanity rather than the commandment of God. Since humanists cannot depend on supernatural forces to deal with the world's problems, it is their responsibility. Human effort must be put forth to meet human needs. People can find purpose and happiness in life by developing their talents and using those talents in the service of humanity.

Whether our value of service comes from serving God or serving the good of humanity, it is imperative that service opportunities here have at least two purposes. The first is the good of the whole, be it the congregation or the larger community. The second is the good of the individual, contributing to the individual's growth and development, meaning and satisfaction. Both must be in balance with each other. And that takes

careful intention that drives the Growth Through Service program we are striving to introduce here in our congregation.

So, if you're serving coffee on Sunday morning or at a reception after a memorial service, greeting people as they come in, ushering them to a free seat, following up with visitors to better understand how we can serve their needs, organizing a service auction to help raise the funds needed to support our mission, advocating at the Capitol for legislative change in alignment with UU values, reading to a student at Sheridan Prep a few blocks from here, teaching children how to make a worm bin and compost, how to reduce, reuse and recycle, teaching adults how resolve interpersonal conflicts nonviolently, joining together to make beautiful music in song, or balancing the financial budget lines, or even defrosting the freezer ... all of them can be experiences structured to stimulate growth and development, to be genuinely meaningful and satisfying, and serve needs greater than our own.

May this vision of service inspire us to make all we do here coordinate with our congregational purposes ... and to have the courage and wisdom to stop doing what doesn't.

We don't want anyone to "burn out" or "flame out" at the end of the bucket brigade.

Copyright Samuel A. Trumbore, 2015