

Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church, UU
“The Meaning of Membership”
The Rev. Dr. Morris W. Hudgins
May 3, 2009

Prayer:

We turn aside from an unquiet world, seeking rest for our spirits and light for our thoughts.

We bring our wounds to be healed,

Our hopes to be renewed,

And our better selves to be quickened.

From the world of many things and many doings,

We come to seek the unity of a constantly loving spirit.

We are divided within ourselves by many cares, by many pleasures,

By diverse and selfish aims.

The majesty of the world bewilders our minds;

Temptation and perplexities break us asunder;

Tragedies small and great tempt our faith.

Yet in all the universe, there is no wholly severed thing,

For all things are part and substance of the other.

Nor can any one of us find alone a separate good,

Bound as we are one to another.

We gather this hour, here, together, to restore the soul's freshness and vision.

We seek to leave behind the broken parts, the hurts, the pains,

To find new strength that leads to a trusting spirit and grateful heart.

With faith in one another,

With faith in the infinite possibilities for love,

With gratitude for all blessings known and unknown,

Remembered and forgotten,

We give thanks for this amazing thing;

We live, we laugh, we cry, we love. Amen (Bruce Southworth, [This Day . . . , #35](#)

adapted, [Hymns of the Spirit](#))

Introduction

I have been looking forward to this day for sometime. The events of recent weeks have increased my feelings about this day, the rituals we have shared, being with you, rather than sitting in my recliner with my foot in the air, waiting patiently for the healing of my foot. I have been looking forward to this day especially because of the personal messages I have received—the phone calls, the cards and the emails that have been coming each day. I want you to know how important these messages are to my healing. I counted every email, phone call, and card, cherished each message—over 200 in all from the churches I have served, family and friends from as far away as Transylvania but most from this church. I am so grateful for the computer this day. As I sat in my recliner with my foot in the air and computer in lap, I could respond to each email, share my journey and express my gratitude. To those who wrote a card or felt the concern expressed by others I express my thanks today. My healing has been quick and steady. On Tuesday my final stitches were removed and the doctor gave me permission to return to Virginia.

My experience has been surprisingly painless. In the first hours there was the adrenalin and shock, a period when there is no pain, you are alert, moving to safety, making the survival decisions, telling my wife, Marti, to go through red lights on the way to emergency room. I would never have thought the most painful part would be the removal of stitches.

I promise to keep the toe humor to the smallest of circles, and allow my example, both positive and negative, to speak for me. May we all see this accident as a warning of the dangers of machines, including lawn mowers, saws, guns, knives and the like. What happened to me can happen to others. It only takes a moment., a little bit of moisture in the grass, and a slight hill to fall. May we all be a little more cautious.

One of the important conclusions of this accident is the need to forgive ourselves for our mistakes. Yes, my foot will be an ever-present reminder that I am less than perfect. Add to this my recurring dreams of the accident itself, I will live with this for some time to come. May this accident give me more compassion for the soldiers and others who have their own recurring dreams.

Finally, I hope you all don't need this kind of accident to realize how many people love and care for you. I am thinking especially about my wife, Marti, who has been an amazing partner in this trial, took me to the emergency room, was a voice of compassion and reason with the medical staff, dressed my wounds every day, has kept me on the right path to recovery. Yes, I am a very lucky man.

Imperfection

I use this personal experience in my life as a metaphor for the "Meaning of Membership." First, may you accept the fact that the church is a human institution with its imperfections.

It is my belief that the church should acknowledge where it has fallen short, and make a commitment to doing the right thing going forward. We should ask the same of our members. We are all flawed human beings and institutions.

The Commission on Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association is an important commission given the responsibility to study important issues facing our Association. One of the important issues studied by the Commission in recent years was "Membership." When finished with their study they give a report to the Association. It concludes:

The church is a human institution and it can become all-too-human. When . . . difficulties arise some walk away, others step back. But fortunately there are also those who remain steadfast through these times of disillusionment, whose loyalty grows beyond it. They are not better or worse than the others, just different.

Peter Fleck, in his book, *The Blessings of Imperfection*, writes:

Well, let's be frank and admit that the church has its aggravations. The eternal and oh-so-necessary concern about finances, the annually recurring problems of balancing a budget, of finding money for repainting the (church), repairing the boiler and tuning the (piano). . . the endless committee meetings about the Sunday School curriculum and about the propriety of social actions, the persistent shortage of tenors in the choir? Who wants it? Who needs it?

Fleck answers his question with the answer that I felt every day I was in Tennessee recovering from my accident:

The answer to this questions is that we. . . want it, because we need it. The answer is that the church, and I am now speaking of the liberal church, in spite of its shortcomings, the imperfection that characterizes everything made by humans, is better, infinitely better, than no church.

For those who are relatively new to the church, I want you to know that the value of a church to your life will be in direct proportion to the amount you give. I am not talking here just about money. I often say to new members, the best way to receive what you are looking for in the church is to volunteer. It is in giving that we receive. What I see from people who serve on committees and on the Board, is that the struggles we face become more real to you. You realize that we all want more from our church than we have money to pay.

The Board and the finance committee have faced these challenges this year, especially this year with the economy. Most churches are facing these challenges this year. I know of some who are shutting down for a month, others who have had to cut staff. Here at Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church you have responded to this challenge with the most creative and therefore successful canvass I have experienced. My hats are off to the co-chairs, to the committee, and to those who responded most generously. Yes, there will be decisions to be made, because you cannot do all you want this year. I ask you to be patient with each other as you make these decisions.

Loyalty and Commitment

One of the leading conclusions of the Commission on Appraisal in their study is that the liberal church needs to ask for more loyalty and commitment than we have been comfortable asking. One of the traits of human beings is to question and doubt. This is especially true of liberals. I remember a popular bumper sticker in our churches which said, "To Question is the Answer." For some of us that is our only faith statement. I hope there is more.

The Commission on Appraisal asks us to “inspire and engender institutional commitments, transcendent of the concerns and interest of a given time and place.” The report tells a brief story of Albert Einstein’s wife. She was once asked if she understood the theory of relativity. She replied, “No, but I know my husband, and I know he can be trusted.” The commission responds:

Most Unitarian Universalists are not quite so trusting. Liberalism necessarily carries with it an edge of suspicion. But you have to be trusting to be disillusioned, and surprising as it may seem, such disillusionment plays a crucial role in developing loyalties and commitments. (p. 10)

Part of this suspicion is a result of our experiences. We see devout religious people with the same problems as others, and often say one thing and do another. Religious institutions are often asking for money and doing very little in the community. You may remember one religious organization, led by Jim and Tammy Baker, that sold the same property in their development to more than one person. And that was just the beginning of their misdeeds. Many priests and ministers have crossed the line, have abused their power, and the church has looked the other way.

Joining a UU church means that we are willing to be loyal and committed to that institution. However, we do not ask for blind loyalty. Blind loyalty is what leads to failed governments, business, educational institutions, and churches. It led to a failed war in Vietnam, a failed Nixon Presidency, an Enron collapse, and millions of dollars owed to abused parishioners by the Catholic Church. In the liberal church we ask that you trust the leadership but question their decisions—understand the budget, and know what priorities were used to make the decisions. Does the budget fit your dreams for this church?

If it does, then we ask for your loyalty. I quote from the Commission’s report. We ask for commitment,

Not so much to the institutions as to the values and ideals we exist to promote and uphold—even in periods of failure to do so. We ask for patience with brash young ministers and tolerance of plodding (or should I say hobbling) older ones. We need cheerleaders in the good times and steady supporters through the bad. We need people who keep a perspective, and take longer views.

When I read that quote yesterday I thought of the now deceased member of this church, Al Fernbach. One of the comments made about Al was his steady voice of reason through many trials in the history of this church. He added perspective to any situation and considered the longer view. We always need members like Al Fernbach.

Conclusions

When individuals join a church I tell them that I hope the church will meet their personal needs. We expect many things from our church-- spiritual nourishment, knowledge about religion, help in times of trouble, a place to share our grief and loss, a community of friendship, a place of comfort when you are in pain, a beloved community like no other.

When I was sitting in my home these last two weeks, with my foot in the air, when all I could do was answer my phone or read my emails and cards, I must note that I received no emails from old golfing buddies. I received over 200 from relatives, friends, colleagues, and most from church members. I will cherish these messages forever.

In conclusion, I express my hope that if you ever need the support I needed these two weeks, you will receive it as I did, and it will mean as much. This is the reward we receive for our involvement, our support, our commitment to the values we hold, the committee meetings we attend, the volunteer hours we give in the kitchen, the sound room, the sanctuary, the social hall, the classroom or the office.

I also remind you that membership in our church means that you are concerned about the larger church community and the world outside these walls. I made the decision 37 years ago to join the Unitarian Universalist Association and its ministry after I learned that this is a church that believes in service to the larger world.

Theologian Paul Tillich defined religion as one’s ultimate concern. A student of his, Henry Nelson Wieman, a Unitarian and process theologian, wrote of religion and faith as ultimate commitment. The Commission on Appraisal must have been familiar with their theology when they wrote:

Inevitably in our lives we commit ourselves to something, whether worthy or not. The direction and intensity of our loyalties give shape and meaning to our lives.

Loyalties, commitments, covenants, the promises we make to one another. These are the things that relate to the deepest meanings of membership. They tell us what we belong to. And by doing that they tell us who we are. (p. 12)

In summary, as I learned again these last two weeks, we all need the church, the beloved but all too human community. The church also needs us—our unique perspective, sometimes supporting our decisions and at other times challenging us to be better. We need your energy, your talents and your resources. We can do so much more together than we can alone. We also need your patience, your loyalty and your commitment. May this institution be worthy of your membership, your involvement and your support. May you receive more than you give. This has been my experience. I wish it for all of you. Thank you.