

2009.03.29 Now More Than Ever

Now, More Than Ever
Rev. Dr. Steven Epperson, Parish Minister, UCV
March 29, 2009

I love giving pledge drive sermons; I really do. Now this might sound like a strange, even perverse statement to make. But it's true. Think about it! At least one Sunday morning every year I get to stand up in front of the entire congregation and do some of the following things: first, if the joke going around is true, the one that goes like this: "You've heard the difference between Catholics and Unitarians? Catholics can talk about money but not sex, while Unitarians talk about sex but can't about money," then that means that during at least one service every year, I get to break a *taboo*, and talk out loud with Unitarians about money. (\$=Taboo, NOT!)

Second, to kick off our annual pledge drive, I get to show off my math skills; I do! I get to display and discuss with all of you the real numbers, equations, and sums, the challenges, projections, and opportunities knocking around in our annual budget. Behold! (UCV BUDGET) Simple addition, real numbers—I know how to do that!

Pledge drive sermons give me the opportunity to introduce you to theological terminology like *congregational polity* (CONGREGATIONAL POLITY) that you can share with your friends at social events. You can ask them: "Have you heard about our congregational polity, and would you like to know more?" Impressive!

Taboos, math, big words ...it gets even better. From the first year I arrived here to this very day, each year for my pledge drive sermon, I get to play Don Quixote and tilt at windmills (UCV DEFICIT!) and dance like Tevye the milkman in celebration of the prospect of a successful pledge drive. (\$\$\$)

Do you see now why I look forward with relish to pledge drive sermons every year?

Above all, I appreciate being able to share my thoughts with you at the threshold of our annual pledge drives because it gives me an occasion to share with you and celebrate our values and achievements, our challenges and our vision. And for this, I am deeply grateful. It is a gift to be the parish minister of this congregation. For nearly seven years, you have welcomed me into your lives; you have entrusted me with celebrating births, marriages and death. At times, you have shared with me your anguish and fears, your joys and achievements. Together, we have stumbled through rough patches. More often than not, we have discovered that we walk side-by-side and have been a blessing to one another. I honour you for all of this, and more, and for the gift you have extended to me of meaningful work and service with you.

As well, you have entrusted me with the right and responsibility to speak honestly about the reality, risk, and vision we face together as a congregation as the seasons turn yet again from winter to spring. This past year has been extraordinary. I think of the way Dickens opens the *Tale of Two Cities* and think my!, the more things change, the more they stay the same: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way..."

We have witnessed and been roughed up by something that few of us thought we would ever *really* see—the near collapse of the world-wide market economy and its financial institutions. Many of us, Steven included, have seen large chunks of decades of savings and investments evaporate into thin air. We came

to dread the arrival of financial statements in the mail that would mean a retirement deferred; that would mean money we thought was there for a mortgage just no longer added up.

I don't yet know what it would be like to have my home and my means of livelihood ripped away from me. And I don't have sage words or deep insights into the interior of lives grinding out in that difficult place. *I do know* what it's like to not be able to afford to buy a home in this town. I know what it's like to have your landlord react in panic or need and decide to sell the place you've been living in and tried to make a home.

By now the narrative arc and the complex, sprawling, interlocking contentious story of the credit debacle that continues to unfold in real time, and whose true consequences may not be fully apparent for years, are coming into focus. Numerous legislative, ideological and business decisions—have worked together over the past two decades to create a systemic breakdown. Unregulated financial schemes ran wild. Banks borrowed and speculated with more than 30 to 40 times the capital they actually possessed. Unprincipled lending for residential mortgages, durable goods, credit card debt—you name it—led to a binge of borrowing, spending, consuming and dangerously inflated housing prices. An unquenchable thirst for easy profits led investors and financial institutions around the world to take unjustifiable risks for their own gain, and to justify the huge salaries and bonuses for executives. To top it off, credit rating agencies gave their seal of approval to what amounted to a lot of toxic junk.

The day of reckoning came as it will and does; by the millions, debt defaults soared, housing prices tumbled—pulling down all those investment houses, hedge funds, and commercial banks, pulling down all the wizards, pulling down what we thought was the value of our savings and investments—down the whole mess has been toppling into an abyss the bottom of which we have yet to discover. And with it, the near-total collapse of faith in credit ratings, shadow banks, real banks and governments to boot. And we're having a difficult time figuring out what anything is worth any more, or what or whom to trust.

Combine all that with a near deification of markets—a false, idolatrous belief system that led to radical deregulatory philosophies and practices that trashed rational lending standards and ethical behaviour; that placed foxes in charge of the chicken coop; and that pumped a lot of anesthesia into our culture by mass media and entertainment—and what we have is a full-spectrum crisis of trust, equity, justice, and a crisis of faith in our institutions and the future. (for a good, brief overview see Jeff Madrick, "How We Were Ruined & What We Can Do," *NYRB*, Feb.12, 2009, 15-18)

I want you to know that I am aware of what's going on; and that I have learned from some of you the impact these past months have had on your lives financially and existentially.

Now we've heard frequently as of late that "never let a serious crisis go to waste." And time and again, I have read and heard economists whose voices I find trustworthy say, after a listing the incredible challenges peoples around the world are facing, that the world-wide financial crisis also presents us with real opportunities; real opportunities to unleash our creative capacities to redress unconscionable imbalances in power and wealth, and to reorient patterns and practices of production and consumption that promote prudence, trust, self-respect, and civic and environmental sustainability. I have this obstinate hope that driven to the brink, we discover the resources deep within us to step back and recover and reassert social values and moral behaviours that do justice to what is best and true of us for the sake of a world worth living in for ourselves and for future generations.

That hope is not mere wishful thinking; for while I am far from competent to speak about the global picture, I do know something about this congregation—and that knowledge gives me hope, *now more than ever*. Last fall, when the financial meltdown began to seize headlines and started to batter our savings, our domestic and workplace finances and job prospects—when it started to fill me with dread and anxiety, several of you stepped forward and ministered to me: saying: "*This is bad; things may get worse. But we're all in this*

together, Steven; and something good will come from it. It's a wake-up call, an opportunity to put our own houses in order, and live more simply and sustainably. We may even become more conscientious, humble—wise even—and rediscover what we really value, what is really of worth to us."

Do you see why I love giving pledge drive sermons? Your clear-eyed affirmation, in spite of everything, that something good will come from all this is a powerful witness that the experience of *communion*—of reaching out and being touched in turn with empathy, concern, and love in community is still very strong among us. And I thank you for that; because it gives me the courage to ask you: *"what would it be like if this place wasn't here? or if it was just limping along?"* Where would I have gone fifteen years ago with my deepest spiritual needs and my desire to express them in worship and action in community with others—where would I have gone, if there hadn't been a vibrant, active Unitarian church in Salt Lake City?

I mean it when I say: "I have always wanted to participate in a religious and ethical community that embodies my most deeply held values. I have always wanted to be a proud member of an authentic, progressive, outspoken, and inspiring religious community." (See in SE, "Resilience in a challenging year..." 2009-2010 UCV Canvass brochure.) And thus, I joined a Unitarian church, entered into professional ministry, and serve this congregation because, of all the other options "out there," *this one, this place* most truly strives to affirm and support my values, beliefs, and aspirations.

For this reason, and for the communion, the shared ministry I experience with you here, I can speak honestly about the reality, risk, and vision we face together as a congregation. "Never let a serious crisis go to waste." We are facing an urgent situation, not only in our world-wide economies, over which individually we have little control, but an urgent, concrete reality within these walls—the very life of this community where we do have the power to determine whether we coast along, wither, or flourish; flourish and move forward confidently, powerfully into our next one hundred years. Let's return to our current budget: here it is in black, white, red, and green.

- CUC dues: \$91 /Bulletin and mail: \$109= \$200
- Total operating expenses: \$553,000
- Total revenues: \$469,000
- Deficit: \$84,000
- 3% of income will erase the deficit and fund our congregation.
-

What are we individually and collectively going to do about this picture? With all my mind and heart I want to say: let's not let this serious crisis go to waste. This is a decisive moment for us; an opportunity to exhibit and prove how resilient we are as a faith community; an opportunity to assess and express what we truly value.

What is the purpose of this place? Why are we here? What draws us to cross the threshold into this congregation and to return again and again? This is one of the few blessed places on earth where we can express, celebrate, and nourish our deepest innate needs, hopes, and capacities. The need to connect with people in a deep way: a place where we are accepted for who we are and encouraged in our spiritual and ethical growth. It is a community where we can contribute and experience something grander than the marketplace, more efficacious than partisan politics, more personal than crowds and media, a place where our voice, our vote, our gifts, our giving, our desire to learn, to worship, to fellowship, to serve; it is a community, a communion where we know and feel that our lives really matter. *"What would it be like if this place wasn't here? or if it was just limping along?"*

I'll never forget that day when Stephen Harper asked me "how many Unitarians are there in Canada?" In a heart beat, I was sized up, weighed and judged by him because *quantitatively* we were of no account in his

eyes. It is crystal clear to me that there are people and institutions who want us weak, meek, and silent. They want us cash poor because if we're strapped and scraping by, and weighed down by deficits, they just don't have to take us seriously. They'll let us vent and march, raise our enfeebled voices, but at the end of the day they'll look at our numbers, our budgets, our levels of giving, and they will conclude that they can write us off because we don't even have our own house in order.

However, it is also crystal clear to me, that they don't know how a small group of thoughtful, committed people, a justice seeking people, a welcoming congregation, a community of character and of characters can change the world. When faced with extinction in the 1910s, the members of the small, struggling Unitarian Church of Vancouver took a vote whether they should disband. One vote after another said: no! We have to keep going! And for decades though they struggled, this congregation provided a rare safe public place in this city for honest, critical, alternative discussion about political, social, and cultural affairs.

And for centuries, though small in number, Unitarians knew that reason, justice and compassion demanded that we preach hope, not hell, the right of conscience, affirm the wisdom of other religions, assert the innate goodness and moral responsibility of each person, ordain women, gays and lesbians to the ministry, join our voices with those seeking civil and economic rights—in one vanguard position after another, and by living our principles and passions publicly in community, Unitarians have helped to change the world. They really have! Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, caring, committed, values-living people can change the world. You have changed mine and given me one last, best place to stand as a publicly religious person. Now more than ever, let's not allow this serious, urgent financial crisis in our congregation go to waste.

We can achieve the long-term well-being of our congregation by doing four things:

- *Ensure the authenticity and depth of our spiritual and ethical life* by providing quality worship services, rites of passage, and a full-range of opportunities for UCV members to physically meet, act, and fellowship together in diverse ways.
- *Provide a first-class RE program for children, youth and adults* and making sure that we have the necessary funding and volunteer resources to do it. An excellent RE program deepens our understanding, appreciation and loyalty to Unitarian values and history.
- *Serve the wider community.* There are people who are suffering far more than we are, and we know and feel that we are called to serve them through food banks, helping refugees, boat people, draft dodgers, people struggling with mental and emotional illness, the homeless. Our moral depth is expressed by how act toward children, the disabled, the elderly, the poor. How we treat our neighbours, as we would want to be treated ourselves.
- *Develop this site in visionary ways with a partner organization* that shares our values and vision. I see this as a force-multiplier—a means to augment our voice and outreach, and as a strategy for long-term financial and programming health at 49th and Oak.

If we can focus and build on these areas of strength and vision, we will thrive, not coast or wither into the coming decade and beyond. I don't want to be naïve, but I think that rather than retrenching, cutting and hunkering down, we can be committed and bold in these areas and thus achieve our vision as a vanguard, compassionate community, the kind that so many people, like me, are searching for and need so much.

The founding and sustaining members of the Unitarian Church of Vancouver have accomplished great things; we celebrate them and one hundred years of Unitarianism in this city this year. It is our turn to step up and take hold of the torch they are passing to us. May we extend the dreams of those who preceded us: the vision of this congregation as a confident, vital community giving clear voice: welcoming, liberal, ethical—a community of hope, compassion and strength. Now more than ever!