

Pledge Drive Remarks 2012

On ‘Elephants’ and Wonder

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Well, I have to say there’s nothing quite like a David Marmorek script, a Mark Brunke smack down and a Dr Tim McCormick commercial break for helping us to see the elephants in the UCV living room! Many thanks gentleman for the talk show—and with any luck, and some generous pledging this year by all of us, hopefully, we won’t need a return performance(!); and David—if that happens, you’ll *really* be scrambling for script ideas! No more Mt Sustainability, no more Elephants in the Room...Maybe we’ll finally be able to ask you for a command performance of “At Last, my pledge has come along/my lonely days are over/and life is like a song....” That, I’d like to see!

Welcome all of us (!) to the first Sunday of our Pledge Drive for the 2012-2013 church year—where together, we continue the extraordinary journey of the Unitarian Church of Vancouver.

You know, though it may sound perverse, I’ve confessed that I love giving pledge drive sermons, I really do. Perhaps as at no other time during the church year, the annual pledge drive forthrightly displays the glory and challenge of our religion. It highlights that the Unitarian Church of Vancouver, along with all UU congregations, is self-defining, self-governing and self-financing. This is the gift of *congregational polity*—of our grass-roots democratic government and spirituality; a hallmark of our religious tradition that underlines the fact, the challenge, and the blessing that there is no one else “out there” to save us, rule over us, or budget for us.

All of this takes place here—governance, worship, learning, budgeting, and fundraising reside in our hands, depend on our vision, skill and commitment to the common good of our

congregation and of Unitarianism in Canada. There is a glory in this vision, work and service together.

I do want to say a few things more about seeing the elephant, and about wonder.

Can you remember the first time you saw an elephant live, for real, up close? I was a kid; my first time was down at the railroad tracks on the west side of Salt Lake City, and elephants were stepping down from the train cars of the Barnum and Bailey Circus and milling along the tracks. I can still recall the sight—I was gobsmacked!: the size, the exotic improbability of their shape and lumbering, graceful gait, the snaking trunks and giant leafy waving ears. I was filled with glee and wonderment. Though it was the 20th century, the spectacle, the marvel those beasts called forth in my young self surely was akin to the wonder experienced by 16th century Europeans, those who had the good fortune of seeing the great elephant Suleyman—a gift from the King of Portugal to the Hapsburg King Maximilian II—process along the roads from Lisbon to Milan, then over the Brenner Pass, and all the way to Vienna in 1552. Wonderment and Marvel that there such creatures walking the earth!

Naming the elephants in the room can be a sobering, salutary thing: *to think that such deficits can exist here; to think that so many of us could and should pledge more!* Catching sight of an elephant can also be on occasion for something else. In the 19th century, “seeing the elephant” was a popular way of expressing heightened expectations and overwhelming emotion. Pioneers on the Overland Trails of North America talked of the high excitement and anticipation of heading out west to “see the elephant.” In May 1852, Lucy Rutledge Cooke wrote in her diary: “Oh the pleasures of going to see the Elephant!” In one letter on the trail, a doctor wrote to his family: We are now advanced on our trip 200 miles and yet, I have not seen the Elephant. I am told, however, that he is ahead, and if I live, I am determined to see him.” Storms on the

prairies—tremendous, breathtaking and dangerous—were prime occasions for pachyderm sightings. A ferocious hailstorm in 1851, led Walter Pigman to write: “The boys concluded the elephant was somewhere in the neighborhood.” And two years earlier, Niles Searls averred that during one storm he “had a peep at his proboscis.”

The elephant is in many ways a creature of psychological proportions. Seeing one can be a call to a reckoning—the kind Mark and David placed so creatively before us. It can also be an occasion for delight, in spite of some tribulation. Here’s the story of the optimistic farmer: There was an old farmer who, upon hearing that a circus had come to town, excitedly set out in his wagon. Along the way, he met up with a circus parade, led by an elephant which so terrified the farmer’s horses that they bolted and pitched the wagon over its side, scattering vegetables and eggs across the roadway. “I don’t give a hang,” exulted the old man as he picked himself up, “for I have seen the elephant!”

Well last Spring, and then on January 27th, I felt like the pioneer Lucy Rutledge Cooke who said: “Oh the pleasures of going to see the Elephant!” and the exultant farmer who saw one for real and exulted in the exciting spectacle of it all. Let me explain, because the way I see it, it has everything to do with why we should pledge and give generously to this church community.

For years, we’ve tried to figure out a way to meaningfully engage our young adults; to keep them connected to this congregation and to the Unitarian movement. For years, we played it by the book—successfully wrote grants, hired a part-time coordinator and launched our campus ministry program. Each year, we started out well-enough. Each year, it fizzled out; not because of anything wrong with the work of the coordinator, or the obtuseness and disinterest of the our 20 somethings—there just wasn’t enough time in their lives; the program as laid out by

the denomination perhaps just lacked immediate relevance. So what do you do when the play book doesn't work?

I was talking about this with Galen Elfert and Ariel Hunt-Brondwin, when I had an elephant sighting: on the one hand—an empty Sanctuary and Social Hall; on the other—UCV Young Adults who, one after the other, when you think about it, are musicians, writers, poets, artists, and sound technicians. Put the elephants, *I mean elements together*, and what do you get??? It's like what Jane Slemon has been doing for a couple of years now with our evening Youth Coffeehouse events.

I invited a crew of our Young Adults over to our place, and said: these are your buildings, this is your church home; you guys have a lot of talent and skills—put on a show. And let me tell you, they did! On Friday night, January 27th, they transformed 49th and Oak into a first-rate social club and concert hall venue. Hewett Hall was festooned with lights, art installations, cozy couches, ping pong and do-it-yourself art tables. There were drinks and samosas. When the call went out for a ping pong table, one gentleman in Berlin responded with money wired directly to Vancouver to buy one. At about 8 pm, we all went over to the Sanctuary for a fabulous show of shadow puppets and music groups performing on this stage. Well over 200 young people, most of who had never stepped into this place, crowded in here for the program. There was a sprinkling of oldsters in attendance drawn by word of mouth and posters in the social hall, but the rest found out and showed up due exclusively to their own social media.

The word is out now: our Young Adult Production group, who call themselves “Church Presents,” has shown that this is a great social and music venue. Musicians and performers were well-paid that night, and others are lining up for a chance to perform at “Church Presents.” The next event is planned for May 11th.

I never did figure out how to disarm the alarm system that night; it dutifully kicked into gear at midnight. And though the grating claxon alarms resounded throughout the buildings as we hurriedly cleaned and closed up shop; I'm telling you, I felt like the old farmer in the story: I just didn't give a hang, for I had seen the elephant with my own eyes! When I looked around the Hall that January night filled with music, ping pong, good food and drink, art and high spirits; when I saw the Sanctuary fill up with a whole new crowd of young people brought here by our Young Adults; when I considered how they and their friends had produced, hosted, and pulled off such a fantastic event, I marveled; I was full of wonder and joy and hope!

The point of all this is clear to me: our pledging, our giving built this place, raised these walls, landscaped the grounds, illuminated and heated these rooms, and makes our programming and support staff possible. Our pledging has created a place that our young people can call home; the kind of place to which they can invite their friends with pride and pull off something here that's quite magnificent.

Sustaining a people in community over time through the generations requires the arts and practice of citizenship, of membership, of adults committed to achieving the common good through vision, service, dedication, and generous financial giving.

This church is a living vessel that holds our most deeply held values; in company with good souls here, we explore, express, and serve those values—that's why I am here, why I serve with you, why I make a financial pledge to this congregation—that's the challenge and glory of our religion. Join with me today in making a generous pledge today so that we can sustain the Unitarian Church of Vancouver in the coming year and beyond, so that we can continue our extraordinary journey together with commitment, joy and wonder.