



**The Same Page...
Oh, Or the Meaning of Life**

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“Let us love one another.”

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The early title for this sermon was, “Are You A minister?” One member of the Committee Support Team suggested that maybe, just maybe, since we are Unitarian Universalist, that some of you listening might be put off by the word ‘minister.’

We are not on the same page with that one. Some of us may be looking to see if God has a big toe, others if god has a belly button, and others, well, who’s looking?

Love, too, has a lot of heavy baggage. We’re not all on the same page with ‘love.’ In the New Testament book of the letter of John, we read, “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love is of God.” Coming from the primitive Christian Church, it’s probably safe to say it’s not free love being praised. There’s lots of different pages for this word love!

Since I’m the new kid on the block as your Assistant Minister, and love is an important word in my vocabulary, I want to say a bit about what page I am on with this word. That page comes from the book Larry Pytlinsky read from, ON CARING.

For me, love means caring; but not any old caring. Larry read from Mayeroff, “To care for another person, in the most significant sense, is to help him grow and actualize himself.”²¹ Love is helping another grow. Then, “Let us care with one another.

Pondering this, one of the first items coming to my mind is a time with my son on Star Island, a UU Conference Center 15 miles out of the Portsmouth, NH, harbor. After a week at Religious Education week on Star, you may not know everybody, but every face of the 200 or so is familiar. The main building is an old huge Victorian hotel where Charles Dickens is reputed to have slept. The major hang out on a good day is the porch along the front of the hotel, overlooking a ball field and the dock where the boat drops off and picks up conferees.

One day hanging out on the porch I noticed my eight year old throwing hoops or batting a ball around. Then I saw him go over to an adult male and engage him in conversation. My initial response was fear. Who was this guy my son had approached? Then I thought, Star Island is safe, we’re all together out here. I became jealous: why did not my son come to me to talk about whatever he wanted to talk over. And then I relaxed. My son was reaching out to another adult man, learning from others.

He was growing, and I was too! “Let us care with one another!”

As the new kid on the block, I’m not yet familiar with your ways and while I can find the job description on the hard drive, I know it takes a while to find out the real job. However, some things hold wherever a minister ministers.

The basic thing is that a minister’s work is lifting up the vision, mission of the congregation. And this mission is, of the several pages you are hearing about this morning, the mission is the Capital S capital P, Same Page, of this sermon. A minister’s job is to get everyone on the same page, Babel be damned, the minister gets on his Sisyphus suit, and starts climbing.

If there’s anything UU’s don’t like it’s being herded like cats onto some same page. I’ve heard congregants complaining about Responsive Readings because they put words in their mouths. Hymns do too! Most UU’s would rather be misunderstood than stuffed into some orthodoxy.

Studies of excellence in ministry have shown, however, that excellence arises from lifting the vision of the community, reminding people as to why we are

here: “Let us care with one another!” The Committee Support Team began as the Shared **Ministry** Committee, its job helping committees focus on how their work furthers the mission of our First Unitarian.

So it’s my job to lift up the vision, praise the mission statement. And help the Committee Support Team with this. Okay. Time to get onto the same page.

What’s that, you ask? What’s the same page here at First Unitarian? I’m glad you asked. On our website, I find this: “***Our urban Unitarian Universalist community celebrates and SUPPORTS ONE ANOTHER on our SPIRITUAL AND ETHICAL PATHS. We work for JUSTICE, dignity and respect for the web of life.***”

That’s the specific mission statement for our congregation. Several Sundays ago, our Senior Minister, Rev. Sharon Dittmar, spoke of the general underlying mission common to ALL UU congregations: personal and social improvement. In other words, helping the individual, the congregation and society to grow. “Let us care with one another.”

This focus is in line with our liberal heritage. In tune with rebellion against theocracy and orthodoxy, the founder of Unitarianism, William Ellery Channing said long ago, Unitarianism began as a protest against mental slavery! A protest **against** mental **slavery!**

If we are to grow we need to shake of the chains of the past, dump the old baggage and scripts. To care for another is in part to help them shake of the barriers to their growth. Abraham Lincoln put it this way in his Second Annual address to Congress, “The dogmas of the quiet past, are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise -- with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves.” If we are to grow, we must shake off the chaff, separate the denial from the core of our being.

Why bother with some mission statement? You might as well ask, why bother living? What is the meaning of life? Our mission statement is saying what our, what First Unitarian Church’s meaning is.

Fran Turner works with First’s membership Committee, as Volunteer Coordinator. When someone joins, signs the Membership Book, she chats

with them, gets to know them, answers questions. As part of that, she works with new members filling out the Gifts Survey.

Two years ago my predecessor, Rev. Annie Foerster, preached on this same subject. Speaking about the gifts inventory, Annie said:

I think this is an important kind of inventory for us all. It isn't about blowing your own horn, unless blowing a horn is one of your gifts. It's about accounting for your life; taking an audit; balancing the books. Doing so is itself a gift. When we understand what we have to offer, where our hearts are open and how our mode of operation becomes one of sharing, we find we aren't alone, we aren't alienated, we are still growing, we are co-creating our universe. And, when we find ourselves in a place just right, a place to offer our gifts in the company of others, we discover the same magic as we find in compound interest. (I count compound interest as one of the more magical, mystical experiences in life. Think about it. You get back more than you give.)ⁱⁱ

The gifts inventory helps us explore what you take to be the meaning of your days. And then it helps us to know how to engage with you about what your life is about, we explore how you care for First Unitarian and we care with you.

Of course because we are growing, changing beings, each of our personal gift surveys goes out of date. So not only does the Committee Support Team help committees find interested people, it keeps the data base and updates the data. We change, we grow, as we care together, we are transformed into our higher self. We need to update each of your inventories every year or so.

We gather in spiritual community to explore what might be the meaning of our days. In part we are impelled by pain and suffering. In TEXACO, Chamboiseau says:

Lives don't make sense in reality, they come and go and often, like tsunamis, with the same crash, and they sweep away the dregs stagnating in your head like they were relics, which are treasures to you but don't stand still.ⁱⁱⁱ

We fear our days our empty, from the void we come and to the void we hustle. We seek meaning. And what do we say: "Let us care with one another."

While I am the new kid on the block and hardly know my way around, I have a main focus in Pastoral Care. So I have an extra ear out for the pain and

suffering in your lives. We get old and get dementia, we're in car accidents; children are born with extra demands upon us.

“Let us care with one another.”

One thing that has struck me through out my ministry is the struggle some families have in raising their children. Gibran is right when he says our children are not our children. I tend to think of this as our kids going off and doing things we never thought of. But it is also true that all too many children, your children, never realize their potential. The holy chaos of our days keeps some down. “Let us care with one another.”

A principal element of our liberal faith is that if suffering, if pain does not kill us, it will help us grow. Pain is, what do they call it? ... *a growth opportunity*.

Oh, yes, and today's *learning experience* is

We grow in part due to the challenges we meet. And this is where it is so important that we care with one another. We help someone grow, we care with them, when we share, ‘yes I've been through that. I've been there, and done that.’ I share my experience strength and hope, my hope in part being that my sharing will be caring, helping them grow. Not giving advice, but simply sharing that part of my story that connects with theirs.

Growing others, growing ourselves happens in small groups, as Sharon and I keep saying. Once again Margaret Mead, “Never doubt that a *small group* of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

But the small groups in which we grow and are transformed need connection. Just as individuals we need to be part of something greater, so groups need to be, and so do First Unitarians' committees need to be part of something greater, working towards our mission.

Sometimes the best way to care about society is to care about some chunk of it that is local, where we can get our hands on it, wrap our brains around it. Within our congregation, the Committee Support Team helps committees stay on message. What's the committee message? What's its meaning, what does the committee care about? What are the committee's goals, what procedures? A lot of people like sausages, but as the saying goes, they don't want to know

how sausages are made. I'm not sure what the vegan equivalent to this platitude is, but maybe you would prefer it. And while none of us gathers at church to learn how sausages are made, yet we need to keep ourselves, as person and committees, focused on our mission, sausages and all.

In our story this morning, the mission the King gave his people was to find out if God had a big toe. It is our faith that if our mission is about the meaning of our days, we will not go off in separate directions, but be on the same page, at least some of the time. As our opening hymn said,

We would be one in living for each other,
To show to all a new community.^{iv}

“Let us care for one another.”

¹ Mayeroff, ON CARING, page 1.

¹ http://firstuu.com/Sunday_Services/Sermon_Archive/2010/3-7-10.pdf

¹ Dean Grodzins, LANGUAGE OF REVERENCE, page 48.

¹ SINGING THE LIVING TRADITION, # 318

ⁱ Mayeroff, ON CARING, page 1.

ⁱⁱ http://firstuu.com/Sunday_Services/Sermon_Archive/2010/3-7-10.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Dean Grodzins, LANGUAGE OF REVERENCE, page 48.

^{iv} SINGING THE LIVING TRADITION, # 318