

Building the World We Dream About

Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to a church door and ignited a theological revolution that toppled a culture that had been alive for a thousand years. With the articulation of his ideas, Europe was set on fire with an energy similar to the liberation of the sexual revolution of the 1960s and no one in the Western World was ever to be the same. The Protestant Reformation transformed the religious, social, psychological, philosophical and political framework of a continent and arguably of every continent.

Martin Luther had an idea whose time had come, an idea so powerful it sparked a transformation too large for him to fully grasp, an idea that reached far into the future, long after his own life would end. Luther had a vision so big, he couldn't possibly live long enough to see it happen.

His courageous truth-telling created the freedom for others to speak their own truth and to organize around the secrets they'd been keeping. The Roman Catholic Church, once itself the pioneer and bearer of the good news, had become corrupt. Protestantism refreshed the antiquated system, making Christianity relevant and salvific once again.

Out of the burning fires of Reformation, Francis David became one of the modern founders of Unitarianism. Theologically speaking, Unitarianism dates back to the beginning of Christianity, but Trinitarianism had become the popularly accepted dogma. In 1568, David convinced the King of Transylvania, also a Unitarian, to issue the Edict of Toleration, making Transylvania a leader in religious pluralism, during a time of religious chaos fueled by intolerance. While he never actually said it, David is often credited with the popular line "We need not think alike to love alike", one of our foundational faith statements. But, shortly after the king died, David was found guilty of the Crime of Innovation, was imprisoned and died shortly thereafter. With his death, the promise of Unitarianism and religious pluralism went underground. It resurfaced again in England and found room to grow in the American colonies where many Reformation theologies had the freedom to blossom. David, like Luther, had a vision so big, he couldn't possibly have lived long enough to see it happen.

In the early days of this nation, the messages of both Unitarianism and Universalism were salvific for many early Americans. The infusion of reason into faith, the prioritizing of the human condition, the acceptance of many religions as valid paths to truth, the necessity of the democratic process and the idea that all people are loved equally were foundational concepts in the forming of this nation and were embraced by Thomas Jefferson who abided Unitarianism philosophically and John Adams who also embraced it religiously.

I am grateful to Luther and David and Jefferson and Adams and all of the other men and women who moved our planet from where it was to where it is and who created the faith I've made my home. Any one of them could have been accused of the Crime of Innovation and every one of them had visions so big they couldn't live long enough to see them happen.

This congregation was founded in 1856. When we each arrived, it was here. Other people, committed people, courageous and free-thinking people, knew what was needed and made it happen. They had a vision larger than themselves. Even before the official founding in 1856, Unitarians and Universalists met on Sunday mornings for a combination of spiritual nourishment and social action. They wrestled with the urgent questions of their day and they organized to make manifest their values in the world. That original Gothic Church was abuzz with new theories of evolution, compulsory education, abolition, child labor laws, and women's right to vote.

When we look back at the work of religious liberals of the 19th century, it's clear that we enjoy many of our rights because of their work. Most, if not all, of the major social movements have been propelled by religious people and owe their success to congregations like ours.

Karen Armstrong, the brilliant writer and lecturer said: "Religion is not about accepting twenty impossible propositions before breakfast, but about doing things that change you. It is ...an ethical alchemy." And the members of the First Unitarian Society have, for 160 years, been working together to alter ourselves and our community, to move us forward, ensuring that the long arc of the universe bends toward justice. We have all experienced the joy and the power of this congregation.

Kids are taught here. Grieving families are cared for. Old prejudices are broken down. New self-images

are built up. Beautiful music is offered. Meals are delivered. Great fun is had. Minds are stirred, disturbed, changed. Hearts are lifted, bolstered, filled. Deep needs in and outside our walls are addressed. Stories are told and problems are halved. And a spirit of welcome, of profound welcome, is offered and accepted.

Raise your hand if your children have been or are being educated here. Raise your hand if you have ever been taught by a child here. Raise your hand if you've ever felt inspired here. If you've ever inspired someone else. If you've been challenged. Raise your hand if, as a result of your membership here, you have ever behaved better in some area of your life. Have you ever been fed? Have you had an emotional need met? A spiritual one? Has a part of you that once felt alone or different found a kindred spirit here or otherwise started feeling "normal" or accepted? That's who we are and what we do.

All this brings us to the question of stewardship. Today marks day one of our annual Pledge campaign. (This year, we're doing this in the Jewish tradition. Last night we celebrated the first night of Stewardship; today is the first day.) For those of you who don't know how this works, the way every UU congregation is funded is through pledge campaigns and they almost always happen in the spring. This congregation, like every UU congregation, is wholly independent. It's our polity. The good news is that no one can tell us what to do or how to do it. We belong to an Association of Unitarian Universalist Congregations by choice which has both costs and benefits, but ultimately, every decision is ours. There are no popes, no bishops, no one directing us other than ourselves. The bad news is, whatever we want to do, we have to fund. We have both freedom and responsibility.

We generate a bit of rental income, but almost all of our budget comes from our members and friends. Our goal this year is \$200,000. Last year we raised \$190,000. At 200 with 160 members, we need each member to donate \$1250. For some, that's an easy number to hit. Set up your bank account to send \$105 a month and don't think about it again. For some, doubling, tripling or quadrupling that isn't too hard either. And for some, that number is way out of reach. No one will tell you what you need to pledge. Every member is asked to make a discernible financial contribution- no amount is attached. \$100 for the year might really be all you've got. We've all had years like that. There have been years in my life I couldn't even do that. And I've had years when \$1,000 a month for something I really believed in was perfectly reasonable. That's how it goes. We're all in this together- no single burden is on anyone. We all give what we can. This past year I pledged to two congregations. This one where I am not a member and my home congregation in Mt. Kisco. I pledged \$1200 here.

I thought I'd avoid some of these details this year, but we have so many new people and there's a lot going on here, so I'm taking the time to talk numbers. \$190,000. That's our current budget. What happens to that money? This congregation's leading expense is me. Having a full time called minister isn't cheap. You pay me \$54,700 a year. In addition to that, you pay about 25% of my family's health insurance bill and put money in a pension for me. Your next big bills are for our Director of Religious Education and Administrative Assistant both of whom also get some money toward health care and pension. We pay two pianists and our child care workers and the bulk of the rest goes toward all the programs we enjoy like Religious Education and the maintenance of this building including the things in it like the copy machine and our tuned piano. We're not spendthrifts here; in fact, we are quite the opposite. Everyone does with as little as they can, but life costs money.

This year, we're hoping to raise an additional \$10,000. At least \$4,000 of that, and possibly more will go to a new staff person. We are eliminating the job of Administrative Assistant and creating a job that's often called a Church Administrator. Don't worry, we'll just use the term Administrator. Different from the current position, we are going to have someone here who will do more than congregational communications. We are looking to hire someone who will manage things for us. Someone who will, in addition to the newsletter and the Scoop and the Sunday program and answering the phones, will contact plumbers and electricians and manage rentals and might even do bookkeeping. Roseanne is retiring so we are hiring someone new with more hours and a different kind of expertise.

This new position is important for us. You're all busy. It's important to me that no one here is overburdened. While we, as a congregation, are responsible for everything we do with no outside help from the denomination, even with 160 members, we just can't do it all. We need our members to be doing the work that you love, the work you feel called to do. But very few people feel called to or inspired by indoor

plumbing.

That's fine. The Board decided to hire someone to fill the gaps. So, we need some extra money for that.

In some way, it's awkward for me to be asking you for money. Ministry is a weird calling. I am your minister. I am also your employee. I am the spiritual leader of this community and I am also one of our primary fundraisers. I am the person you invite into your most vulnerable moments and the person asking you to remember First Unitarian in your will. Like I said. Weird.

But, I don't believe it's contradictory. I believe in this congregation and I believe in Unitarian Universalism. I believe that we are a natural manifestation of what Luther ignited. He was seeking the use of reason in the religious life and we have found a way to make that real. David was seeking to create a world in which all peoples, regardless of belief, could live together in peace. We have found a way to make that real. When those first Unitarians and Universalists alternated Sunday mornings in 19th century Yonkers, creating the First Unitarian Society in Westchester, they dreamed of a day their work would blossom, when they would be history and their dreams of liberal religion would have found embodiment. I might even bet that their minister, during one Sunday morning sermon, challenged his congregation to follow in Francis David's footsteps and become guilty of the Crime of Innovation. Which, they clearly were. They dreamed this congregation and put their time, talents and treasures into making it happen.

Those early members were dreaming of a better world, a place women and men, black people and white people could be treated as equals, where children and animals would be treated tenderly, where their powerlessness wouldn't be exploited. And people today continue to dream of a place better than the one we have, where same sex relationship can be accepted, where mixed race families will feel at home, where atheists can find a place to worship, where believers in Jesus can worship along-side Buddhists and Jews in a fully shared experience, where transgender people can be accepted and embraced.

Unitarian Universalism is as absolutely necessary in today's world, as it was in the 16th and 17th and 18th and 19th and 20th centuries. We are necessary in the fight against racial and gender discrimination and the fight for human rights for our immigrant and prison populations.

We're here to bring love into the world, to save humanity from ultra-individualism and to provide respite for everyone, including the marginalized. We're here to embody the grace of love, to learn how to be loving and to work together to create a community- both within and outside of our walls – that loves so much we manifest justice.

The Unitarian Universalist charge is, as I've said before, three-fold. It is to create beloved community in our congregations, to create beloved community so strong others want to join by the sheer beauty of who we are together, and to create beloved community so bright our light and warmth is known for miles around. Because of our Beloved Community, the hungry are fed, the grieving are comforted, the lonely are befriended, the poor are empowered, the marginalized are embraced. It is our charge to live lovingly, and to do it so well, we change the world.

I said once before, for our work to be sustainable, it has to be grounded in kindness and connection. It also has to be funded. The Stewardship Campaign gives us a chance to dream big and to put our money where our dreams are. This is our time to have a vision so big, we may not live long enough to see it happen, but to know that what we dream is possible and this is our turn to push the dream forward so the next generation and the one after that and the one after that can accuse us one day with that magical, dastardly, faith-filled Crime of Innovation made manifest in our vision of hope and love and welcome for everyone.