

Building Our Bridge to Tomorrow
A Joint Sermon by The Revs. Makaanah and Robert Morriss
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Makaanah:

Bridges – structures which enable us to cross from one place to another. Bridges can be of many types and sizes. It may be a simple yet sturdy wooden bridge to help us get from one bank to another of a rushing stream out in nature. Or it may be a large and famous bridge like the George Washington Bridge or the Golden Gate Bridge, which offer connections and major arteries of transportation for urban centers. Bridges have always seemed somewhat special to me.

One of my most memorable “bridge” moments was the day when I was 12 years old and I rode the first pony my twin sister and I owned out on the trails. It was special because we had to share the pony and this was MY day to ride Little Abner. And it was also special because I was getting to ride out on the trails for the first time. It was a wonderful ride, a magical ride – because it was a dream come true. Here I was riding our pony out into the beautiful woods of Connecticut. Our instructor lead the way and sure enough we got to a log bridge over a fast running stream. The pony looked at it carefully and then very willingly walked across.

Somehow crossing that bridge on my pony was symbolic to me of the transition that had just occurred in my life. We had been taking riding lessons on school ponies. Now we had our very own pony to know and love and grow with. And here I was out in nature riding our pony on trails and over bridges – not just around and around in a ring. Crossing the bridge (at which some ponies balk) was a symbol of the kind of exciting transition this was.

If you look up the definitions for “bridge” in the dictionary, one of the first definitions is “a time, place, or means of connection and transition.” A time, place or means of connection and transition.

This abstract form of bridge is just as important as the concrete form of bridge in our lives. Building our bridge to tomorrow might be said to be what the present is actually always about as what we do today impacts and shapes our tomorrow.

However, there are times in our lives when our tomorrow asks a bit more of us in our mindfulness, clarity, and intentionality.

I invite you to think of a time when you might have committed yourself to a training or educational program, a job or relationship which you knew was a bridge to your tomorrow. It was a way for you to move toward a vision, a dream, a goal which was important to you, something you knew deep in your heart and soul was worth the investment of your time, energy and resources.

When I decided to go off to graduate school to get a masters degree in religion, that was one of my most profound “bridges to tomorrow.” I knew that I wanted to work as a professional in a church setting, that I loved religious education, counseling, community building and social action. I did not know exactly what type of position I

would eventually hold, but I did know that I needed to create a bridge toward this new future.

We build our bridges to tomorrow with our courage, our commitment, our creativity, our vulnerability, flexibility and our generosity. We need courage – strength of heart and mind – to propel us forward. Our commitment to the vision, dream, and goal provides us with energy and perseverance. Our creativity helps us stay open to all the possibilities and options that are opening up – images and ideas we have and that others share with us. Our vulnerability is present not as a liability but as a way of being honest and open in this new situation so that we may experience the fullness of potential, instead of being rigid and closed. Our flexibility offers us support as we encounter the unexpected and need to be able to bend in the wind and perhaps shift our direction slightly. And our generosity of spirit helps us connect with the interdependent web of life in ways which enable us to give and receive love, laughter, support and kindness in times of transition.

This wonderful congregation is entering a period of transition this next year. As Bob and I retire this spring, the Unitarian Universalist Church of Cheyenne will begin bridging to the next exciting, rewarding, inspiring, and enjoyable phase of its growth and development. This next church year will bring an “Interim Minister” who will be with you to help you reflect on aspects of congregational programming, activities and structure which you like and want to strengthen as well as helping you explore some new ways to do things, new perspectives and programs to imagine, new types of volunteer ministries and times of fun you’d like to have.

This “bridge to tomorrow” will be asking you for your creativity, your commitment, your flexibility and your generosity.

Winston Churchill once said that “We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.” Sean Dennison, our colleague and friend and the U.U. minister serving the South Valley UU congregation in Salt Lake City, suggests that:

“Unitarian Universalism is a faith that asks us to pay attention to more than making a living. It asks us to pay attention to making a life. Making a life means asking ourselves, ‘What contribution do I want to make to the world? How do I want to make my generosity manifest?’

“Our intentionally liberal and diverse religious community is all about generosity – generosity of spirit, of time and of resources. The building of community takes energy and commitment and the rewards we receive are profound.”

Sean suggests, and I agree, that generosity is a spiritual practice. “When we give we are asked to take stock of what we have, measure its worth, and then share some of it with others. Each step is a spiritual task.

“The ‘taking stock’ – what our ancestors called ‘counting our blessings’ – helps us remember all the gifts in our lives. When we are honest we realize that much of what we have has come to us through the work, trust and investment of others.”

Our Unitarian Universalist Church is here thanks to the vision and hard work of our founding members some of whom like, Wavis and Bob Twyford, Annette and Al

Aldrich are with us this morning. And UUCC is here thanks to our many longtime members also present this morning who have helped support, encourage, prod and cheer on the growth of this religious community.

This congregation began in 1961, 45 years ago. We moved to this wonderful building seven years ago and raised the money to pay off the new mortgage from the congregation that existed at that time. We have doubled in size since that move. But that move was just the next bridge to the future, which built on all the foundation blocks created by the founding group.

The openness to diversity, the encouragement to spiritual and philosophical growth, the commitment to social and community action, and quality lifespan religious education are the foundation from which our congregation has grown. We are blessed by all those who have offered their time and energy, their resources and dollars to help support UUCC.

The next part of the spiritual practice of generosity is measuring the worth of what we have. Sean Dennison writes, “We can measure that worth in dollars and cents but a more important measure is ‘How is this money, commitment or activity contributing to my life and to the lives of others?’” By taking time to really ponder the value of things, we are able to think through priorities and look more clearly as ways we want to spend our time, energy, creativity, and money. We may find that we’ve been letting what is truly valuable slip away. And often we discover that we have undervalued what we have to give.

What is of value to you about this religious/spiritual community? What aspect or program do you value most highly? What activities, events or parts of congregational life bring you the greatest sense of fulfillment, inspiration, and enjoyment? What aspects would you like to make sure are maintained and/or strengthened?

This leads to the third aspect of generosity according to Sean Dennison, “sharing with others. If we have really engaged in the first two parts, we’ve come to see exactly what we have and what it is worth. We can see that we are connected to others in this congregation in ways that matter a great deal. We’ve stood on others’ shoulders and now it’s time to reach out our hands to those we can help. We have come to see that we do indeed have valuable gifts to give.

“Giving, and giving generously of our time and resources feels good. It helps us feel connected. It reminds us that we are not alone and it helps us remember that we are really valuable. When we’re generous with our time, attention, energy, good will, and money, we know we’re part of making the world a better place.”

Bob:

Our Annual Canvass is one of the major ways we invite you to practice the spiritual discipline of generosity. It is the time of year when we ask you to reflect deeply on your connections, your hopes and dreams, your sense of gratitude for this congregation. Let me give you some practical information about how the canvas works. Each UUCC member and pledging friend is contacted by one of our volunteer canvass team. They share with you information about the proposed budget for the coming year – a budget created from the requests of church committees, activities, and programs, a

budget that reflects the hopes and dreams of these groups to maintain and enhance the life of our religious community.

Each UUCC member and pledging friend receives a form which asks for your pledge of financial resources as that is possible for you— paid over the next fiscal year (July 1, 06 – June 30, 07) in that way that works best for you. And the form also invites you to “pledge” your time and energy to those aspects of our congregational life that you are wanting to help support and enhance.

This is a “bridging” year and the process of building bridges asks us to stretch. The transition to an Interim Minister and to the next called Minister requires a increase in the staff cost section of the budget. This bridging year also includes requests for increases in many of the vital and growing program areas of church life. And the proposed budget reflects the fact that if we want to keep the lights on and continue to heat the building, it is going to cost us more money this coming year.

From where will this increased support come?

John Wolf, the Minister Emeritus of a church in Tulsa, once wrote:

“There is only one reason for joining a Unitarian Universalist church and that is: to support it. You want to support it because it stands against superstition and fear. Because this church points to what is noblest and best in human life. Because it is open to women and men of whatever race, creed, color, place of origin, or sexual orientation.

“You want to support a Unitarian Universalist Church because it has a free pulpit. Because you can hear ideas expressed there which would cost any other minister his or her job. You want to support it because it is a place where children come without being saddled with guilt or terrified of some celestial Peeping Tom, where they can learn that religion is for joy, for comfort, for gratitude and love.

“You want to support it because it is a place where walls between people are torn down rather than built up. Because it is a place for the religious displaced persons of our time, the refugees from mixed marriages, the unwanted free-thinkers and those who insist against orthodoxy that they must work out their own beliefs.

“You want to support a UU church because it is more concerned with human beings than with dogmas, because it searches for the holy, rather than dwelling upon the depraved. Because it calls no one a sinner, yet knows how deep is the struggle in each person’s breast and how great is the hunger for what is good.

“You want to support a UU church because it can laugh. Because it stands for something in a day when religion is [often] still more concerned with platitudes than with prejudice and war. You want to support it not because it buys you some insurance policy towards your funeral service, but because it insults neither your intelligence nor your conscience, and because it calls you to worship what is truly worthy of your sacrifice. There is only one reason for joining a Unitarian Universalist church: to support it!”

I think John Wolf makes a good point. We wouldn’t be here if we didn’t think the church was worth supporting. And the truth of the matter is that there are many ways to support this church and its work in the world, ways in which many of us act week in and

week out. This church runs on the energy of its members, whether it's the volunteer hours they put into the church's many ministries, the money they put into the plate on Sunday mornings, or the checks they write to fulfill their pledges on a weekly or monthly basis.

Supporting UCC in this bridge building year will require more money from pledges than we have had in previous years. To attract the new ministry the congregation is seeking, the board and search committees have committed to having staff salaries be within the recommended guidelines for our sized congregation and geographical region and that requires an increase in ministerial compensation.

One of the things I have loved about serving this congregation is the fact that we are an economically diverse group. If someone has little money they can give, but can give extra time helping organize the RE closet, or with filing in the office, enabling our paid staff to get their jobs done in the number of hours for which we pay them, we celebrate this fact. If someone wants to pledge a given number of hours a month towards assisting staff with their tasks we would be delighted. And there is a reality that we also need more money - the equivalent of a couple of lattes per week for every member of the congregation.

I wish there were a way to responsibly address this congregation's bridge to tomorrow without talking about money, but I'm not sure how to do that so let me tell you a story I heard from Naomi King.

The story is of a southern evangelist – and to get the full effect it's important that when I say, “and the people said” you say AMEN! Let's try that. And the people said, AMEN! OK

Well, this evangelist is talking to his flock and he says, “Brothers and Sisters, there's work to be done. Great things to be accomplished. But first we have to take the first little step. And then the second. Then we got to walk together, and not grow weary”. (And the people said, AMEN.)

“We got to run together and not grow faint.” (and the people said, AMEN)

“We got to spread our wings and rise up like eagles and fly.” (And the people said, AMEN.)

“But,” said the preacher, “we all know that today it takes a lot of money to fly.”
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Well, there were a few scattered “Amens”, but mostly silence, till a voice piped up from the back that said “then preacher, let's walk.” And the people said, “????”

Well, here's the truth. Even if we are gonna walk, if we're going to make it over the bridge to the future, we will have to build that bridge. And so we are inviting you to stretch as much as you can to help us build that bridge.

Makanah

Whether some of us walk, or some of us decide to fly, our bridge to tomorrow asks us to stretch – (so take a little physical stretch right now) – see how your body feels better as you stretch, more energized, more filled with life – that’s how stretching for UUCC will feel as well.

The stretch you just showed me looks like a \$4 stretch – what do you think, Bob? A \$4 stretch is a VERY good stretch – one which gets you feeling energized and ready to go without causing undue stress or pain.

If all of us here were to stretch our pledge this year, by just \$4 per week, that’s \$4 per week, we will be able to build a strong, vibrant, creative bridge to tomorrow. \$4 per week, the same as just one fancy coffee or tea concoction from Starbucks, can make all the difference.

If we multiply that by say 50 weeks it ends up being an additional \$200 for this congregation which you love. Just \$4 more per person per week will make all the difference. That sounds like the kind of bridge-building expense which I know this congregation can meet just fine.

The canvass process is simple yet profound. Your canvasser will contact you and set up a time to meet with you – maybe for lunch or a mid-day break, here at church or at place of your choosing. They’ll want to hear your hopes and your dreams, the things you love and appreciate about UUCC. They’ll ask you to consider the ways in which you want to pledge your resources and energy in this “bridging to tomorrow” year.

If you are not yet a member or pledging friend, Jan Andrews will have a special table in the Social Hall after the luncheon for you to stop by and pick up canvass information if you’d like to be a part of this process.

And during the delicious soup and sandwich luncheon which follows this service, we’ll all have a chance to share the “heart” of our dreams for tomorrow – as we create a bridge of hopes and visions and as we decorate small bridges on the luncheon tables and a giant bridge on the wall.

Your visions and dreams, your energy and commitment are what will create our bridge to tomorrow. I invite you to reflect on:

- What do you value most deeply about this congregation?
- What programs, activities, outreach do you want to help strengthen and expand?
- What new images, visions, dreams do you have for our religious community?

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Cheyenne is all of us, individuals with unique perspectives, talents, gifts joined together on this journey of liberal religious faith.

May our bridge building be strong and creative, fun and inspiring, rewarding and exciting.