

WITHOUT SUPPORT,

THE FINEST WEB WILL FALL APART

A Sermon Delivered to the

Unitarian Society of Menomonie, Wisconsin,

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My wife Jayne and I took Friday off together and spent the day planting trees. You might remember how it rained—soft, gentle, spring rain, lightly pelting the ground and dripping from the roof into shallow puddles that reflected the gray, austere sky. That’s how it may have looked from inside, which was where we’d have preferred to be. Outside, in that rain from 10 o’clock until 5 o’clock—and it rained nearly all that time—it was a watery hell that deluged the ground and made inches-deep glop that sometimes sucked the big rubber boots off my feet. We planted over one hundred fifty trees around our property, and while that may not sound like much, one hundred fifty trees for two middle-aged people who’ve done no more planting in years other than ideas in other people was trying. We walked back inside for showers bent over like actors playing old people in a stage farce.

Still, it was good to do, and given that yesterday it snowed, good we did it on Friday. We aren't terribly good gardeners and we wouldn't think to call ourselves growers, but we expect to have a tolerably healthy survival rate for these trees, and in ten years or so the survivors should have grown to a respectable height where we can look out the windows and doors and see fresh silver maples and poplars and hydrangeas and white pines and even ten apple trees.

Last Sunday Juliana Schmidt gave a sound talk about the seventh UU principle, the one which declares our intent to be aware of and our "respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." A web is an excellent metaphor for this reliance of existence. Each strand of the web affects the others, so that you can't have an effectively operating web, ready to catch flies and butterflies and other delicacies for your spider's dinner, if one part is sagging and shoddy. The morsel will simply roll away from the web or break off the strand it's attached to. A web therefore must be solid in its construction in order to be an effective one; remove a part and it falls apart.

But equally important, and rarely remarked on, is the importance of the leaf or tuft or window ledge or tree or whatever supports the web itself is attached to. That too has to be well-constructed and pretty solid in order to withstand the buffets of wind and struggle the web itself invites. Without support, the finest web will fall apart.

Many of you are aware that our congregation is a member of the Prairie Star District. The Unitarian Universalist Association, which is the national organization overseeing the administration of its many churches, societies, fellowships and congregations, is divided into districts, and our district runs from just east of us in Eau Claire, to all of Minnesota, Iowa, North

and South Dakota, Nebraska, and as far south as Kansas and Missouri. Each year the district holds a conference in one of its membership cities, and this year's was in Omaha.

Unitarian Universalism prides itself on its polity, which keeps administration for a congregation within the congregation—what a congregation does and its policies, what it chooses to believe as a corporate entity and who it chooses to be led by, stay on the congregational level. Ministers aren't sent out by some mothership to the farflung regions to bring enlightenment to a benighted Podunk-ville. More often, a Podunk congregation has its choice of whether it prefers to be led by a Podunk local minister and a Podunk chair of the board and it makes its Podunk decisions in Podunk ways, taking Podunk-ville and its special circumstances into account. Podunk is the web.

The UUA and the District are the twin supports on which this web relies. I've talked a couple years ago about what the national and the district organizations lend us in money and resources so I'm not going to go into that again here. Instead, I'm going to tell you what it was I learned in Omaha, a sort of "what I did on my vacation" report.

I think that one of the most important things that I've—well, not learned nor relearned, but am reminded of time and again—is that we are a part of a larger web than merely our own congregation. I love this congregation, of course. It has done many good things for me. But there is a larger congregation of which we are a part and it's an important thing because we are often tempted to think of ourselves out here in Podunk-ville as if we are all alone. As if religious liberalism in Menomonie is a Fort Apache and we are surrounded on all sides by murderous savages bent on sacrificing us and our freedom to their unholy, bloodthirsty, angry god. I don't want to extend this analogy too far, to the point that the Prairie Star District is the white-hatted

7th cavalry riding to our rescue, but I think you get the point. That is occasionally how we see ourselves but we aren't in that situation. We are in some respects more in the position of a franchise, owned and operated by its employees but able to call on resources of the larger organization in order to get important things done. It's a little wanky to call ourselves the McDonalds of religious communities, maybe we're the Sylvan Learning Centers.

Be that as it may, we're small. No getting around that. This is, even in the parlance of a larger group whose megacongregations like All Souls in Kansas City and White Bear in Mahtomedi number in the hundreds, not the thousands of Christian congregations like Cedar Brook and Willow Creek, a tiny, tiny congregation. We are not the smallest by any stretch of the imagination—within the Prairie Star District the tiniest I'm familiar with is the Ocean of Grass UU Fellowship that meets in Dickinson, North Dakota, and is so small it has no official membership list on the PSD website, but I'm told numbers about 5 regular attendees—but we are nonetheless small. Even with our smallness, we've grown. This year we were honored as a Green Star congregation, a congregation whose growth in a year's time was among the greatest in the district. For us, that was an increase of 17 percent. True, in our case that meant 5 new members, and in the ensuing year we lost more than that many members. Well, we didn't exactly lose them, we know where they are, or rather where they aren't. Perhaps we should become a mystigological faith, where rather than baptizing congregants, we put them on a tether so we can reel them back in.

But at 17 percent, however you slice it, we are still in the top four greatest growth congregations of the past year, up there with Gaia Community in Kansas City, the UU Fellowship in Topeka, and our own neighbor UU Society in River Falls. And just last week we welcomed three new members. And another three individuals have expressed interest in

becoming members. We are small, but this is no small matter. The important thing to remember about life in a web is that changes to one part of the web lead to changes in other parts. We expand and we contract. This is called breathing, and just like in an individual, it means life in a congregation.

I love going to conventions. I'm a chattering type of guy and I love to find new people to talk with as well as people I see only at these things. I immerse myself in the convention, attending everything that even hints at interesting, especially the worship services. There are generally three at the convention—the opening night's service after the keynote address, the youth-led service on Saturday night, and the home congregation's service on Sunday morning. I never tire of watching how others conduct their services. I once told Eleanor Rice, who used to be the minister here and who was my mentor in the Lay Leadership program, that I could spend the rest of my life reading about and discussing religion and visiting other congregations. That's not of course what a minister's life is like, but oh how pretty to think so.

This year's convention theme was "Rebuilding a Faithful Democracy," and our keynote address was given by Dr. Charlie Clements, a Vietnam veteran and physician who now directs the UU Service Committee. Charlie admonished us to have faith without borders by which he meant we should have no limits to what we're faithful to. This segued into his remonstrance that every dollar spent on war is a dollar less spent on crumbling infrastructure or education or healthcare—not a new observation by any stretch of the imagination, but an observation that needs to be made over and over because we tend to ignore it over and over. And at vespers later, Fritz Hudson, the minister at the Lincoln congregation, reminded us of our responsibility to be not just hearers but doers of the word. The words to "Dona Nobis Pacem," unmistakable in their ferocity, were softened by the round in which we sang it. And the lyrics to another song, one

with which we're intimate, left me feeling at home. "Gathered here in the mystery of the hour. Gathered here in one strong body. Gathered here in the struggle and the power. Spirit draw near."

If life was only worship services and workshops—how sweet that would be. My wife Jayne, whose work with the Lutheran Board of Pensions keeps her informed of this sort of thing, tells me that the number one affliction of ministers is depression, and it's not hard to imagine that most of us go into this field thinking our daily lives will be taken up with exactly that. Worship and religious conversation. And the crash that inevitably must come when we realize it isn't even partly that. It's Work with a capital "W," and not because congregations are screwed up, or not just because of that, but also because congregations are full of people and people are full of—well, all kinds of stuff. Forces drive us to be separate and forces drive us to be closer. This is the tension between defining the self and being with others.

We have to be patient with one another because not everyone is as enlightened as we are. Certainly not in Menomonie. But we must have patience with the process, not only with one another and not only with society, but with ourselves. Within our congregation, within those we covenant with. We must stay in touch even when there is tension between us, maybe especially when there is tension between us.

I took a lot of notes at this conference. In addition to being a chatterer, I'm a note-taker. Not so adept at it that I'm anything like a good student, because what I note aren't the things most people would call the most important but the things that strike me as I'm listening. The conversation that goes on in my head, to which the outside lecture is often just a stimulant. Thus, my notes during a workshop called "Growing in a Small City" by Reverend Roger Mohr

of Burlington, Iowa, a former Marine, stock broker and Pentecostal minister, are arrows and question marks and notes to myself. “Is this us?” I wrote next to a copy of a slide reading “UUF Burlington: Culture. Sanctuary model congregation. Lots of internal tensions on a range of issues. Ministerial trials and tribulations. Disillusioned, frustrated activist minority. Declining participation. Low congregational energy level. Very few visitors. Almost unknown in local community.” “We do this” I noted next to another slide that read “Action Steps. Identify potential public issues (try to balance controversy with positive, informative topics). Schedule speakers (speakers are newsworthy if they are from out of town and can be construed as experts. Budget for stipends/mileage). [A side note here: Mohr identified this as the single largest guest-bringing activity in his experience as a UU and as a Pentecostal. An audience member from Mankato noted that bringing in an expensive outside speaker with money from a grant on a secular topic brought in over 100 people.] Prepare press releases (who, where, when, what, why? Remember to get a photo if possible). Engage media (email list for press releases; cultivate relationships with reporters and editors).”

Mohr advocates taking our message to the streets—“coming out as a UU,” he calls it. He articulated a series of congregational models I’ll call SCAM: the sanctuary model, in which the congregation is a place of haven for its members; the civic model, which is community-minded; the activist model, whose members are out and about doing things; and the missionary model, whose members proselytize, although not necessarily in the way we’ve come to think. No single congregation should be a single model but should develop into a congregation which is made up of parts of each model. This is hard to accomplish, and to my mind it ought to be, in the way that anything worth doing ought to be hard to accomplish. He has two interesting takes on how he sees the divisions in most UU congregations. In most, the old guard, the longtime members,

tend to be thinkers, while the young turks, the newbies, are often feelers. Further, most contemporary UU congregations break down roughly in this fashion: 50% identify themselves as humanist, 20% as pagan, 10% as Christian, and a final 20% are unaffiliated seekers. It is that final seeking 20% to which most of our visitors and newer members belong.

It's important to note we live in a world in where there are consequences, and in the experience of Burlington's UUF, most of the consequences were negative. Mohr offered himself as an object lesson of how one can do things too quickly and too bombastically—can you think of any better word for an ex-stockbroker, ex-Marine, ex-Pentecostal minister than bombastic? In the experience he shared with us, the results of a concerted attempt on the part of the congregation to make a sustained push for membership growth, the results were greatly increased tension and anxiety in the congregation; much pressure on the members from friends and family; the alienation of some members and friends; intense pressure on Mohr himself from within and without the congregation; and a real increase of only 6 or 7 new members in 2007, and only 3 or 4 total after some others left.

The most important lesson he had to give was contained in his final slide: “Remember: UUism can change the world and your community. But you have to let them know that you exist.” The most important lesson I took away was a note I made in a margin: “The congregation is not your community—it is a part of a community.” This was a direct result of a train of thought that had started in me that morning, listening to Reverend Meg Riley of the UUA's Council on Advocacy and Witness. She referred to what we do as social justice seekers as a dance of justice, and as in a dance there is time when one leads and one follows. We are new at this, and just like our first dance lessons, there are times when we miss the opportunity to lead and times when we push ourselves forward and trounce on someone's toes. My own feeling

is we don't trounce on toes often enough, but that's a debatable point. What isn't are Riley's characterization of UUs as a people who meet every idea with an open mouth, and of UU congregations that, while they are made up of not many people, each one takes up a lot of room. "What if you trusted that following your heart was enough?" she asked. What if saying out loud what it was we want to accomplish really was half the battle, the hardest half? What if we acted on our beliefs in the same way the same way the religious right or mujahidin did: as if we had faith that what we believed was right and good and the best thing for the world, and there was no better way to spend our energy or our money, and that our very existence in whatever form depends on our accomplishing it?

"The purpose of a church is to call people to serve and to offer a compelling vision of a way of life that is worth living." This quote from Michael Durall's *The Almost Church* leads not to my final point but to a series of questions I took in the margins of my notes. My final point, ultimately, is unimportant because it's your final point that matters. I offer these questions to you for reflection, not for a set pattern of responses and not for an argument. We will forgo our usual opportunity for congregational dialogue this morning but not our opportunity for the congregation to have the final word. Instead, I will ask you to brainstorm with me what it is we can do. There is a new social justice and social action committee forming in this congregation, and you have at least several members of it here today for you to bend the ear of. Each of us, I know, has a conviction what it is we need to do, and each of us will probably insist that it is what everyone needs to do. What's important for us, however, is to hear what you think we need to do. This is your opportunity to plant a tree in the glop of congregational responsibility with the potential to see it grow.

First, are we an authentic faith? Do we believe that UUism can change people's lives for the better? Not just a pleasant way to spend a Sunday morning, but can be a genuine force for good? Do we have the willingness both to act and be acted upon? Is our commitment to the community of faith or to the process of self-enlightenment?

Can we reclaim our heritage of faithfulness and service? Can we be a community of meaning and purpose? Or do we simply want more volunteers and more money? Why do we come here every week? Why are we a congregation? Are we here to serve the people now, or are we serving the members of the future? Are our lives here tangibly different than our lives elsewhere?

Finally, do we think we can provide what is needed in the world? Do we have "it," whatever "it" is, whether it's good news or common sense, whatever "it" is the world needs? I solicit your responses.