

Sermon on the Amount

Given by Janine Larson, PNWD District Executive

Presented to the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Whidbey Island

October 10, 2004

Good afternoon! I am very pleased to be with you today! I would like to thank Peggy Bardarson and your capital campaign committee for inviting me to join you in celebration as you prepare for your campaign kick-off party next Saturday. And I thank all of you for welcoming me so warmly.

I bring you greetings from your fellow Unitarian Universalists throughout the Pacific Northwest District – Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Alaska – and indeed from your sister and brother UUs throughout the country. Each time we come together in fellowship, we do so in solidarity with all the congregations who covenant together as the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Over the past three years or so, I have come to know your congregation a little through the opportunities I've had to work with you and some of your leaders in the area of stewardship planning and inspiration. Prior to my appointment as District Executive for the Pacific Northwest District of the UUA, effective just this August 1, I visited your congregation several times as a District consultant for the FACT team, which supports member congregations seeking help with financial matters. The acronym stands for "Financial Assessment, Consultation and Training."

As you may have read in announcements related to my appearance here today, I am a lay person and immediate past president of the Woodinville Unitarian Universalist Church. My professional background is in nonprofit organization management, with a particular focus in fundraising. When I began working with the District as a volunteer about three years ago, this expertise immediately led me into consulting work with our congregations, and my very first invitation to do something along those lines was with the UU Congregation of Whidbey Island. You challenged me with an invitation to come be your Canvass speaker in April 2002, asking me to present a sermon which would inspire you all to give generously to your annual drive to support the work of this church community.

I am in no way a preacher, and have never intentionally sought a role as a public speaker. In fact, throughout my life, I have intentionally done everything I can to avoid the limelight. I'm much more comfortable behind the scenes, and I consider it my rightful place to make it possible for others to be the shining stars. I've become pretty good at that, and I have never felt a strong urge to be on stage myself, except maybe in those fantasies we

all have from time to time, where we envision ourselves transformed into completely different people.

But, sometimes “rightful place” really translates to “comfortable rut” – and as much as I desperately want to stay in that well-worn place, I’ve learned that it is not where growth happens. Painful as change is for me, like for most people, I do my best to be open to it and welcome what may come.

For whatever reason, when Baird Bardarson called me back in 2002 asking if I would give that sermon for your canvass kick-off, I agreed. Maybe I felt sorry for him – I think he had tried several other “known quantities” and was now desperately seeking anyone with a pulse. I think I guessed that if I didn’t say yes, Baird would end up leading you in rousing choruses of “99 bottles of beer on the wall” or something. At any rate, I agreed, and I did my best to be brave and approach it as one of those good “learning experiences” we try to bear with fortitude, telling ourselves that what does not kill us, makes us strong.

So it was that I showed up here with the sermon topic, “Churches, Charity and How to Say No.” That title didn’t exactly make your canvass committee feel encouraged, but they let me go ahead. I’m sure Baird was ready to bump me out of the pulpit and start singing at any moment, if it became apparent that this would be the stronger option in terms of pledge productivity. Things turned out o.k., though, and we all made it to the cookies and coffee portion of the service. And, I guess that your canvass drive did o.k., too, since you are still here. I was even invited back the following year to conduct training for your canvass team, and again later to advise your capital campaign planning team on steps to readiness for a building fund drive – which, ultimately, brings us to today.

I am no more comfortable in a “preaching” role these days than I was two years ago. But now, as the District Executive, I must at least accept that people are going to expect me to step into the limelight willingly now and then. I wish I could say that I received full transmission of wisdom at the time I took on the position of DE, but what I have to offer you is still just the insight of my own direct experience, as a church lay leader, as a fundraising professional, as a charitable organization executive, and as a human being. And this, really, is the message I bring you: To have faith in yourselves as ordinary people, to do the seemingly impossible, even with resources that may seem inadequate to the task at hand.

We UUs are particularly good at doubting ourselves and others, being critical, and using analysis to calculate which risks are worth taking and which are ridiculous. We pride ourselves in our intellectual capacity and our

ability to use skill and applied intelligence to control our fates, or at least guide us around life's greatest pitfalls. We like to make wise choices, considered decisions. We prefer to follow well crafted strategies, and we have come to trust the reasoned way.

This works for us, for the most part, and we believe in this way so strongly that we have even incorporated it into our religious tradition: Consider the 4th Principle affirmed by congregations of Unitarian Universalist Association, "A free and **responsible** search for truth and meaning." I've always defined "responsible" as reasoned, well thought, and evidence based. More pointedly, consider one of the acknowledged sources of our living tradition: "Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit."

I have always been very confident in the wisdom of this advice, and I am very comfortable putting my energy into the truth that I am able to demonstrate objectively. Sometimes, this has had the unfortunate affect of putting me into "analysis paralysis," and I have lost some singular opportunities by deciding to delay action until I had more data to consider. But for the most part, I continue to count on my ability to pick apart the options and make action choices based on sound reasoning and practical action plans. For every opportunity I've thought to regret losing, I have found an equal ability to congratulate myself for disasters averted through my wise processing.

Lately, though, I have thought more and more about the role of emotion as a possibly valid measure, and the corollary of instinct or gut feeling as a valid guide to life's choices.

Often in my work as a fundraiser, I was asked to prepare and present a campaign plan to illustrate how my organization would raise its annual budget, or some more astronomical sum of money for a much needed or desired capital project. Campaign plans are projections, which really are just articles of faith – there was always some element of the unknown, and some reliance on the grace of what *might* happen.

In the best of circumstances, it was possible to list prospect names and demonstrate probable results based on giving histories and the strength of known detail – current financial, family and business circumstances of the specific donors and the number of positive interactions with the institution, for example. But, as in every investment prospectus you receive, I would always caution, "past performance does not predict future results." There are simply too many variables to factor. In other words, life is too big for us to control. That is where we must be satisfied with the limited detail we

have available, and depend for the rest upon the grace of what *might* happen. Though we've done the responsible analysis that we have had available to us, ultimately we must trust our gut about which steps to take when we've reached the end of the defined path.

Often, the fundraising project, institution and community with which I was associated, were all strongly enough defined and well enough matched that my audience – typically business people and social leaders who made up a board of directors or a development committee – bought my pitch and signed on to support the plan. Usually, I felt great about that. Sometimes, though, things didn't go as I had hoped, in one of two ways – both of which would be accompanied by a nagging feeling of “wrong-ness” on my part.

One possibility would be that, despite my best efforts and absolute belief that the campaign would go well, the plan would not be adopted. There was not enough faith in the “unknown” factors. The other possibility was that, despite my best efforts to illustrate that the “unknown factors” were too great and the campaign had little chance of success, the committee would adopt the plan anyway and go against my recommendation to delay or completely re-think the campaign.

I have had the experience in both cases that sometimes I was right, and sometimes I was wrong. Sometimes a campaign went forward despite my grave misgivings and then was successful. Sometimes a campaign that I had counseled against launching did indeed fizzle, just as I predicted.

Sometimes, a campaign that I believed in with all my heart just didn't pan out. I'm pleased that most of the time, my picks were very successful, even if my campaign committee originally had its doubts.

The consistent point for all of the successful scenarios, however, was that someone – or more likely, a small group of someones – carried the torch, felt the call, did the work, convinced others to join the cause, and their blood, sweat and tears paid off in spades. The consistent point of failure for those campaigns that did not succeed was that no dedicated followers really adopted the cause as their own and worked it the way it needed to be worked.

In many cases of success, all the logical evidence pointed to another result. Yet a highly motivated group of people chose to make it otherwise. I often asked what made them decide to move ahead when such action appeared to be against all odds. Always, I received an alternative interpretation of the facts, one which consistently chose the more optimistic result and went from there. When I would press for a reasonable explanation of why they felt this

was the way to go, I would inevitably get a response that went something like, "Yes, I can see that success wasn't necessarily *probable*, but it was *possible*. That was good enough for me. I just had a gut feeling that it would work out."

Certainly, this was the case with the Woodinville congregation's recent building project. I actually left the church for about a year when that campaign was adopted. I came back eventually because, after all, this was the church in my own back yard. It was my church, and I needed to support it come what may.

To my astonishment and against all the advice congregational leaders received from very qualified fundraising consultants, the funds were raised, the land was purchased, the walls went up, and we dedicated the building last April. Our membership – and the financial commitments that go with it – have soared, even with the fact that our brand new part-time minister was nearly killed in a car accident last Christmas eve. Faith has been a big part of the Woodinville congregation's reality. Instinct for what was possible became belief in what was right, and that became the self-fulfilling prophecy.

I've come to suspect that gut feelings might just be rationality working on a higher level. Maybe there is evidence that we just don't pick up on at an intellectual level, kind of like those silent dog whistles or sub-sonic elephant communications that are carried through the earth for miles. They are there, but we don't perceive them. Maybe our gut instincts are taking advantage of experience we've gained through our emotions, and using those measures to give us practical advice we don't quite know how to read in the usual, rational way.

I guess I'm always going to trust my learned, observable fact finding abilities, but I'm intrigued by the notion that I might be missing some signals I just haven't learned to observe. I'm experimenting lately with being more open to those experiences that I sense, but can't quite name. In the cases where I've acted on that information, I have to admit, with some amazement, that I have not been disappointed with the results.

Sounds pretty woo-woo, doesn't it? I can't entirely defend this theory, but I can't explain love entirely, either. I accept that it's not rational to love my spouse, my children, the goofy little dog who is slowly dying of heart failure, but who is the last living piece I have of my mother and who still brings me joy when we take our incredibly slow walks up and down the driveway.

I can imagine that not everyone here is convinced that this small congregation is ready to take on a building campaign. Next week, your campaign committee will do its best to convince you that they have done the homework, and you can trust their recommendation that, together, you will be successful in this campaign – that it's the right project, at the right cost, at the right time, and for the right reasons.

There's a Zen saying, "Leap, and the net will appear." In some ways, that is what you are being asked to do by your capital campaign committee.

With this campaign, you are going to be asked to measure your faith. I can't really explain faith, but I have come to trust it. I understand it as Buddhist writer and meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg defines it: Trusting your own experience. I am more and more content to trust that my experience will guide me even when I can't entirely discern all the integral parts. I am learning to trust faith that I can't completely see, and I am getting to be o.k. with that.

Our Unitarian Universalist tradition includes faith, and I encourage you to explore it, that it might have the chance to rest alongside the reason we are more comfortable with. I believe that this is necessary if we are to be whole, and if we are to be wholly successful in offering a religious home for those in need – critical thinkers, like us, who also need to find hope where it may not be apparent, comfort in a society that seems to assign more value to aggression and self-absorption, solace in a world that seems unsafe.

We must demonstrate what it means to be compassionate and not allow it be characterized as weakness. We must be discerning and not allow it to be called waffling. We must show what it is to be loving and not allow it to be dismissed as naïve. We must trust and not allow it to be decried as treachery. We must live with faith and not allow it to be replaced by fear.

If we are to create a world of peace, we UUs must be the first to blend disparate interests and agree to work together. We must commit and honor that commitment. The diversity of our community is our strength, but only if we figure out how to create unity from that diversity.

It is my conviction that Unitarian Universalism has a saving message for our world, now more than ever. So what does all this have to do with the "Sermon on the Mount"?

In what is perhaps the defining sermon of Christianity, Jesus climbed to a spot where he could be seen and heard, and taught his disciples that the meek would inherit the earth, that the salt of the earth was of value only so

long as it retained its power to season bland food, and that light must be visible to enlighten. He went on to other messages, too, but I'll focus on these particular teachings, because I think they have particular meaning for Unitarian Universalists.

What I hear in these lessons is that we UUs need to step up as leaders and show this country and our own local communities a better way. We need to find our faith and proclaim it far and wide. We need to invite people to find sanctuary with us, that we may renew our energy and go out and fight the good fight once again. We need to embrace generosity as a spiritual practice, because our gifts and assets when combined will allow us to open the door to miracles.

When you attend the capital campaign kick-off celebration next week, and as you consider your pledge and your doubts, think hard about this community and what it needs. Think hard about what this church, at its best, brings to you and what it can bring to those who need your saving message, and who haven't found you in this shared space, under another church's banner.

My wish for you is that you find your faith, trust your deepest experience, and leap. The net will appear, and it will catch many in this community, now and for generations to come.

I leave you with the words of Marianne Williamson, from her 1992 work, *A Return To Love: Reflections on the Principles of A Course in Miracles*. By the way, there is a rumor that these words are taken from Nelson Mandela's 1994 inaugural address, but Marianne Williamson is the true author and Mandela's address is quite different.

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
 Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
 It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.
 We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous?
 Actually, who are you not to be?

You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world.
 There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you.

We are all meant to shine, as children do.
 We were born to manifest the glory of God that is within us.
 It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone.

And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.

As we're liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.