

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, 405 Washington Ave. Albany, NY 12206

### **10.7.13 Sermon: “Unifying Purpose”**

Presenter: Rev. Sam Trumbore

To survive and thrive, every organization needs a compelling and unifying purpose.

We can learn a lot about the process of organizing from the animal kingdom. Their compelling purpose, when they do organize, isn't mysterious. They are driven by survival and propagating their genes. But some species resist social life while others enthusiastically embrace it.

You'll rarely see a flock of hummingbirds. They are very territorial, guarding a large area of nectar producing plants for themselves. They may decide to adopt a hummingbird feeder and drive off other hummingbirds.

Not only do birds defend territory, they also express dominance over other birds. Both these behaviors can interfere with their willingness to be part of a flock

But birds still do flock together. The benefits of flocking are:

Reduced predation risk (safety in numbers)

Increased time foraging (time not watching for predators can be used to look for food)

Cooperative foraging strategies

Behavioral thermoregulation (huddling to keep warm as bats do) and

Information exchange (see where someone else has found food)

Birds use their brains when they get together to forage. Ground hornbills in Africa walk in a horizontal line across fields cooperatively flushing insects. When they share an abundance of food, there is little need for expending precious energy defending territory. Better to use that same energy defending a mate and chicks.

But when it comes time for mating season, that cooperation can start falling apart.

Not so for ants since everyone in an ant colony is genetically related. While many other species gather in groups for mutual defense, none have the kind of cohesion that ants do. Bees, termites and ants really understand being all for one and one for all. They do not hesitate to defend their colony or hive with their lives. And that is one of the reasons why they are the most successful super-organisms on the planet.

As the reading points out, ants create community as autonomous beings not so unlike how our cells relate in our body. Ants have specialized roles and functions to serve the well-being of the whole. Ants use touch and chemical scents to communicate as our cell groups communicate with nerve impulses and chemical signals. Our white blood cells correspond to soldier ants. Each cell just like each ant functions autonomously but their activity is highly coordinated. It makes sense to talk about an ant colony as a whole rather than individual parts.

Dr. Genet chronicles our evolutionary path from being tribal hunter gatherers driven by

improving technology and population growth gradually to start behaving like a super-organism ourselves. This happened in a very short time scale given the length of time it takes for significant mutation to reshape a species. We are still mostly genetically equipped to be good hunter gatherers and not successful super-organisms. But if we want to eat, mate and reproduce successfully for the foreseeable future, we've got to learn to behave more like ants than chimpanzees and hummingbirds.

In lieu of significant genetic adaptation, the most effective strategy so far to get people into the hive mentality has been religion. The Hebrew Scriptures are a wonderful record of that struggle to get people to forgo their self-interest and their kin-interest to participate in a greater sense of unity. As groups got bigger than a powerful leader could dominate, the super-organism forming power started coming from an invisible, supernatural source. Monotheism trumped all the other local gods by creating the biggest God imaginable. Putting aside the metaphysical questions of the reality of that God, functionally the idea of God worked perfectly to create a Jewish super-organism. Christianity and Islam basically follow the same Jewish template to demand social conformity to the higher God ordained good.

What world religions have been mostly good at and getting better at is integrating people from different cultures, races and ethnic backgrounds into one super-organism to fulfill its purposes. What they have been less good at has been coexisting with each other. Nazi's aside, most human super-organisms aren't as vicious as ant colonies that fight until they kill every last member of the other colony. Religions do have the idea of assimilation of converts once they have defeated the other. While war continues between different religions, the advent of weapons of mass destruction is putting a damper on genocide as a way for super-organisms to relate to each other. Much as the world has been exploring interfaith dialogue as a way to prevent war, most faith traditions still have elements that prohibit accommodation with other faiths.

Unitarian Universalism contains an evolutionary adaptation to solve this problem. We are striving to create a super-organism that binds people together through universal religious values rather than through sectarian religious beliefs.

That binding process can be stronger or weaker depending on how clearly and effectively we articulate those values. Without a clear, unifying purpose, informal factors such as race, culture, politics, ethnicity, and social norms can become the driving organizing principle of any group. I'm sure many of us are highly tuned to when we feel comfortable in a group. It takes a powerful purpose to overcome those interfering social factors and create unity in a diverse group.

So how are we doing in that regard here in Albany?

I want to assure you we are doing better than many Unitarian Universalist congregations. We do have a good mission statement, poetically cast as our chalice lighting, that articulates our unifying purpose. Our strategic plan we've been implementing over the last four years reflects that purpose. I think about welcoming seekers, exciting the human spirit, inspiring growth and development, responding to a troubled world and sustaining a vital and nurturing religious community on a daily basis as I go about my ministry here.

My challenge for us today however is this: Is this statement compelling enough? Could it be stronger and more powerful?

I ask that question as I contemplate a world in crisis. We have a dysfunctional government in Washington DC that can't agree on funding its own services and programs. We are facing an environmental tsunami as the effects of increasing greenhouse gases stimulate massive global climate change. The swing away from liberal religious values toward conservative, orthodox, anti-progressive, anti-science, religious values threatens hope for world peace. Technology is changing the nature of work and our sources of meaningful employment. Resource depletion, water shortages, soil erosion, and environmental destruction and species extinction threaten our very survival. I could add to this list but I sense you appreciate my point already.

How well does our unifying purpose equip us to apply ourselves to these problems? How does it help us organize our personal lives in ways that will alleviate our own suffering and the misery of others? Could revision of our mission do this better than the current one?

I read books and go to workshops and trainings on strengthening congregational health, growth and effectiveness. I'm very active in our denomination monitoring what is happening in other congregations. If someone has figured out how to create a better congregational super-organism, I'm all over it wanting to know more. I'm striving to bring back home all the best ideas I can find. Here's what I've learned about the importance of a unifying purpose:

A unifying purpose effectively communicates congregational identity to non-members increasing inclusion and diversity.

A unifying purpose structures efficient use of our time, talent and resources by members and staff.

A unifying purpose organizes, hones and directs our activities to promote our values in the larger community.

One bane of every voluntary organization is becoming inwardly focused on serving its own needs rather than serving a purpose greater than itself. An organization's purpose can soften to become about its own survival rather than about the greater purpose which caused it to come into existence. A strong unifying purpose becomes a tool for the organization to evaluate what it does as it directs its time and money.

So what might be elements of a stronger unifying purpose for the First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany?

I expect there will be overlap with the same unifying purposes found in the Purposes and Principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association. A core value of those common purposes is individual freedom of conscience in answering metaphysical questions without the compulsion of scripture or religious authority. No book or clergy person may command what we believe or don't believe about God, heaven, hell, an afterlife or the meaning of birth, life and death. Each person is free to come to her or his own conclusion, guided by their own personal experience and process of study, dialogue and reflection.

This free search means we don't have formal answers to the big questions of life we all accept.

We may have personal certainty, but ultimate uncertainty. This ultimate uncertainty permits us to accept each other and create a community of theological diversity. Rather than tolerating our differences, we aspire to have our growth and development stimulated by those differences. We think of those differences as sources of creative tension. This is a very new, counter-intuitive way to do religion with great potential we have yet to fully tap.

That ultimate uncertainty also opens us to questioning humanity's place in the planetary ecosystem. Rather than a launch pad we can despoil before we blast off for heaven, maybe this blue-green cradle of life has a purpose that transcends humanity. Maybe we are out of balance with it as we violently devour it and reshape it to serve our desire. Maybe we are an expression of an evolutionary process toward a far greater goal than we can now imagine.

And there may be uniqueness to the purpose of this congregation based on our history, our location, and the people who have been part of its growth and development over the years. Our congregation is not a blank slate any one of us can write our name on and make its purpose self-centered.

Which is why, much as I could be tempted, I can't stand here and say what our unifying purpose is. Our ancestors, remembering the excesses of the Catholic Church before the Reformation, put the members of the congregation in charge rather than the minister.

I think they were quite wise in doing so. Democracy is one of the hallmarks of our faith. There is great power and intelligence in our collective mind, much as can be witnessed in an ant or termite colony. The whole can be much smarter than any individual when facilitated by good process.

While we may discover lessons from ants considering their ability to sustain a super-organism, we don't want to be like the Borg. The Borg are

a collection of species that have been turned into cybernetic organisms functioning as drones of the Collective, or the hive. A pseudo-race, dwelling in the Star Trek universe, the Borg force other species into their collective and connect them to "the hive mind"; the act is called assimilation and entails violence, abductions, and injections of microscopic machines called nanoprobes. The Borg's ultimate goal is "achieving perfection" (from wikipedia 2013-10-05)

Remind you of any religious traditions?

They are opposed by the United Federation of Planets

The Federation members agree to exist semi-autonomously under a single central government based on the principles of universal liberty, rights, and equality, and to share their knowledge and resources in peaceful cooperation and space exploration. (from wikipedia 2013-10-05)

And what religious tradition does that sound like? The Borg would say, resistance is futile. We would say, resistance can be creative and affirming.

Now I'm not saying you have to be a Star Trek enthusiast to be a Unitarian Universalist. I am suggesting the beautiful vision of the future created by Gene Roddenberry be a source of inspiration to allow us to flock together and share our values with the world.

May this congregation accept the challenge of reconsidering and potentially revising our mission statement, our unifying purpose as a path to strengthen it and call it to greater service to the Spirit of Life and the Spirit of Love.

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