

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
“A Bridge Over Troubled Water”
Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore April 5, 2009

Sermon

Friday night, during the Annual Dinner Skit, the thought briefly crossed my mind to change the title of this sermon to one of the "boring" sermon titles suggested such as:

- The Spirituality of Intransitive Verbs
- Pastoral Care and Particle Physics
- Emerson: Transcendentalist, or Stand-Up Comic, or my favorite
- Awakening Through Stamp Collecting

I'd enjoy the challenge of writing such a sermon and making it interesting, even inspirational.

The Annual Dinner Skit is my yearly check against hubris. The Annual Canvass Sermon is an equal yearly challenge to encourage generosity without being boring or intimidating. After all, you know what I'm planning to say.

There is no doubt that this is the toughest economic climate we've had to face in many years going into our yearly fund raising campaign. Those living on investments have seen a dramatic drop in their portfolio's value and yield. Unemployment is moving toward double digits. The credit markets are still frozen. Those who would like to borrow to buy a car or renovate a home can't get the money to get started. Everyone is hunkering down expecting another great depression that will last for years to come.

The effects of facing these difficult times are real and taking a toll on members of our congregation. I know of several members who have confided in me their distress as they consider what to pledge this year.

Our congregation's Finance Committee and the Board of Trustees are quite aware of this situation. They are planning a budget with no new spending initiatives, holding expenses down as best they can while fairly compensating our staff.

So that's the bad news. I want to get that out of the way as quickly as possible because there is much good news to talk about.

First, let me address our economic situation. For those holding a long-term view, this is a fabulous time to be investing. Stocks are very inexpensive right now, pushed far lower than their value by mass hysteria. In my view, the best time to invest is during times when fear undervalues the market. The great time to invest was in the middle of the Great Depression when stocks were very cheap. Those of us who do have resources to invest for the long term would be wise to be getting in while the getting in is good. That will be while the news is still very bad but before things start to turn around. Do it for your portfolio, but also do it as a way to help support retirees who must live on their investments. Investing can be an act of loving

kindness right now. I've been putting some of my savings where where my mouth is.

Even if the economic situation today parallels the crash of 1929, we live in a different era where things happen much more quickly. When the market tanked and people stopped buying, the slowdown was immediate because of the way business is done today. Businesses keep little inventory and often order their parts in response to immediate demand. This allows them to practically stop production on a dime. It also allows them to start up again quickly in response to increasing demand. Once the banking system is stabilized and the credit market thaws, I expect things to change dramatically with an upsurge in pent up demand. Some of the latest indicators suggest this is already happening.

The biggest source of my confidence in a quicker turn around is our new President. He is doing everything humanly possible to respond to the economic crisis. And if it doesn't work, I know he isn't going to throw in the towel. Obama has a crack team working on the economic problems and I have every confidence, if anyone can figure this mess out, they will.

Second, there is good news here in our congregation: we're growing. We're close to 370 members, the highest membership number in the last dozen years. The feeling of energy and excitement in our congregation, that began with our commitment to expand our facilities, continues to build. The vision of being a beacon of liberal religion continues to integrate into our institutional DNA. The Capital District needs a strong congregation to offer this support and sanctuary. We've had several years of major growth and improvement in space and service in which we can take much satisfaction. As I believe you'll see in the work coalescing through the Dream Catchers, who are helping us envision our future, we have high aspirations in this area as a congregation.

One of the ways we're growing is in connection with and caring for each other. In February, in response to my sermon calling for us to create an "Economic Distress Support Network," over sixty members of our congregation stepped forward ready to offer support with financial counseling, resume writing, child care, transportation, networking and referral and financial assistance. This network is already in use serving as a bridge over troubled waters. Even if we don't need to take advantage of the resources offered by the Economic Distress Support Network right now, the network of emotional support here can help us feel more secure and maintain our resolve to face the future together.

It is in times like these we recognize how important our FUUSA family is to our quality of life. In good times and bad, this congregation supports our quality of life and can support our capacity for recovery. In hard times, knowing you're not alone and part of a congregation that cherishes its diversity can make all the difference.

Which brings me to my third source of optimistic good news: the economics of Albany. We are somewhat insulated from the big swings in the economy given our stable base of employment. The base of our economy is government, education and health care. People are not going to stop sending their kids to college and visiting the doctor when they are sick. Yes, there will be belt tightening and some layoffs – we're not immune to the economic troubles. Still, I expect most of us will weather this economic storm. Thankfully, many of us have good, fairly secure jobs with decent salaries. And some of us will even be getting raises this year.

Which brings me to my message of generosity. Our members freely support this congregation. We do not assess each member a fixed amount to fund our budget. There are no dues charged save a bare minimum gift to remain a voting member, and even that can be waived in the case of poverty. What we recommend is giving based on two criteria, your level of commitment and your means. Your canvasser can share with you a suggested “guidelines for giving” table with commitment level on the y axis and income on the x axis. The goal of the guidelines is helping people feel they are giving their fair share to support our congregation.

We understand that everyone has special circumstances that affect their ability to give. The guidelines are a equitable method of figuring out how much to give. They allow those of limited means who can only afford to give a little to feel the same level of satisfaction as those who have greater resources and give generously. Both can feel satisfaction in their generosity by meeting the guidelines. If everyone can give at the level suggested by the guidelines, we'll have no problem reaching our bare bones budget this year.

This is critical this year because some may have to decrease their pledge this year due to a change in their income. My hope is that some who are not at the recommended level in the guidelines who have the means to get there, will decide to work toward achieving that level of giving and increase their pledge. Between a commitment to a fair giving distribution for our congregation and the additional income from those pledging for the first time, I have every expectation we'll meet our fund raising goals. To do that, it is imperative that you respond quickly to your canvasser so we can get our canvass done, allowing us to approve our budget at our annual meeting, Sunday, May 17th.

Even though the news appears to be grim on the outside, I hope you'll recognize that there is much to be optimistic about on the inside of our congregation. So much of what ails our financial markets right now is fear. The Guardian's Alexander Chancellor writes, “Despite the economic gloom, Barack Obama is sticking to his message of hope, forecasting better times ahead, warning against fear and despondency, and urging people not to “short-change the future” by taking decisions based on pessimism.” Obama is making significant investments in building a better, more sustainable future. I can guarantee you that an investment in the health and wellbeing of this congregation will yield great results whatever happens with the economy. Through the ups and the downs, know this congregation will be a place you'll find support and encouragement.

The sun will come out tomorrow. When it does, FUUSA will still be here, ready to serve your needs for community, for excitement, for inspiration, growth and development. We will also be here serving the wider community of humanity and the green community of all life.

Remember to be generous ... or I might preach on these sermon topics:

- Systematic Theology of Interpretive Dance;
- He Walks with Me and He Talks with Me ... In Esperanto; and
- Spiritual Well-being Through Origami (or Don't Get Bent Out of Shape)