



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Growing Our Future

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Good morning!!!

It's so wonderful to be with you today. Thank you for having me on this special Celebration Sunday. The Celebration is for us to be together in this gathering, taking our worship out of doors and onto our beautiful labyrinth courtyard. Who says Unitarian Universalists don't do revivals? It's also incredible to gather both services of our congregation together into one strong body for worship. Where ever we gather beloved community together for matters of the soul and the spirit, there is worship.

A week ago, I found myself in the gym of St. Jude Educational Institute in Montgomery, Alabama, where 2000 marchers sheltered there on their 54-mile journey to the Alabama state capital. As we know, music was the soul food of the Civil Rights movement . . . On the night before the final push to Montgomery, Harry Belafonte rallied famous musicians together for a "Stars for Freedom" concert.

Tuesday I had the occasion to remember the experience in person with Peter Yarrow of Peter Paul and Mary. Peter recalled being awed by the sense of hospitality and unity of purpose. He remembered that there was no stage or proper sound system. The local funeral director provided plain pine box coffins, stacked up on top of each other, to elevate the stage, and the musicians shared one mic.

For 600 Unitarian Universalists and comrades, the gym became our sanctuary as we sang "Wade in the Water," hand in hand. It was a defining, life-giving moment of worship that moved us out into the streets for another kind of prayer – the slow march across the historic Edmund Pettus Bridge. In the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel: "For many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lips and walking is not kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying."

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I want to switch gears from Selma, to now, and to this gathered community, united as a whole congregation this morning for a common purpose. Today we uplift the ministry of generosity in our congregation, we will break bread together and we will share our own defining moments, those stories that have given this place life throughout our history. I want to start by sharing the story of a church closer to home.

First Presbyterian Church of Altadena was gathered in 1913, evolving out of a Presbyterian outreach mission to Japanese families facing internment. The church had its defining moment during the Civil Rights movement, when its commitment to inclusiveness ballooned its membership to 600, including many significant community leaders. Come the year 2000, after a

transition in leadership, the church was a shadow of its former self. Its Japanese heritage was being muted by the diversity of new generations. The longtime members fondly recalled stories of the church's defining moments, but wondered when those days would return and felt uncertain about the unknown future.

Rev. Mark Branson is a Presbyterian minister and professor of Ministry of the Laity at Fuller Theological Seminary here in Pasadena. When Mark and his family moved to Pasadena for the start of his professorship, they looked for a local church for worship. Mark and his family were immediately compelled by the history of First Presbyterian. Bringing skills and interest, Mark and his wife joined the congregation's Mission Assessment committee, formed to help prepare the church for a new era. The key tool the Committee used was Appreciative Inquiry. Here's a great working definition from Jane Watkins and Bernard Mohr, from their book *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination*.

Appreciative inquiry is a collaborative and highly participative, system-wide approach to seeking, identifying, and enhancing the "life-giving forces" that are present when a system is performing optimally in human, economic, and organizational terms. It is a journey during which profound knowledge of a human system at its moments of wonder is uncovered and used to co-construct the best and highest future of that system.

What they discovered along the way was remarkable. The attention to this process slowly began to restore the congregation's sense of purpose. Branson himself became so taken with the process that he documented this congregation's experience in the book *Memories, Hopes and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change*. For Branson, what makes this model so compelling was its orientation towards change.

When we usually approach change, we begin to identify problems that a future leader can help fix through a series of solutions and interventions. This can lead a conversation down the road of focusing on the faults and inadequacies, or what's called a "deficit approach."

"Deficit thinking" abounds in our culture – we are quick to identify what we don't have in nearly every area of our lives – our bodies, our health, and especially our finances. Everywhere we turn, there is some commercial or advertisement preaching a deficit gospel of "not enough" – messages that we are not thin enough, not rich enough, not successful enough. To solve these "problems," we throw money, time and energy at them in attempts to feel "enough."

In our churches, we like to think we are immune to this "deficit" thinking, but if we are not careful, our approach to church can slide into the same patterns of thinking. An appreciative approach to change takes a very different perspective. Appreciative inquiry looks at organizations as living organisms – changing, flexible and dynamic. Organisms are eco-systems designed for balance: containing flaws or weaknesses as well as strengths, with a sense of internal resilience to adapt to difficulties. Appreciative inquiry takes a systems approach that sees the wholeness of an organization with a capacity for wellness, growth and change.

This afternoon in Arvid's workshop you will take time to look at Neighborhood Church through an appreciative lens, telling the life-giving stories that shape our congregation and provide hope and direction for our future. These conversations will add to the dreams you have already captured over these past few weeks, which I have been following with such joy from afar. These dreams are inspiring testimonies about how your experiences at Neighborhood have already fulfilled your dreams. What is clear is that you and your families feel that Neighborhood Church is already living its dreams of being a beloved spiritual community, and that you see that dream only expanding – strengthening beloved community and sharing it beyond our walls.

I want to share a few of your dreams:

Dream Fulfilled: To meet friends and neighbors who live in Pasadena so I can be part of a community.

Dream: I dream that in the future there will be no barriers or walls between the people of Neighborhood Church at all. Whether they be cultural, emotional, or spiritual.

My dream of a community of productive optimists is possible. I dream the church continues its outreach to all.

Dream: Continuation of events that promote community, locally and globally.

Received: Community for strength.

I encourage you to spend some time looking at those dreams today. Dreaming together isn't merely an empty exercise. This is how we develop our imagination for our future. After asking the questions, telling the life-giving stories, and dreaming the dreams, we organize what we have learned, looking for themes that can help guide us into the future. Once these themes have been identified, they are our blueprint for innovation, taking what is wonderful and life-giving about Neighborhood church as seeds that we will plant to grow our future. Already, I can see patterns emerging that could inform how we innovate together. I see these dreams shaping an imagination for a flourishing future.

Today we pledge our commitment for next year's budget, which will create the foundation for our first year of ministry together. Our 2015 Pledge Drive Campaign is called *Dream. Give. Grow*. I can't think of a more appropriate set of themes to "seed" this beginning of our ministry. Today's theme is *Grow*, and I want to share the words Jennifer and George Waters have written:

Grow. Our gifts enable our beloved community to grow, to serve a wider world with the saving message of Unitarian Universalism, and allow more people to fully partake in what Neighborhood UU Church uniquely has to offer: from our gorgeous campus to the beautiful lighting in the sanctuary; from Beloved Conversations and a more welcoming congregation to Soulful Sundown alternative worship; from all the opportunities to serve our community through our social justice offerings or within our beloved community through the Pastoral Care Team. Imagine with us what more we can do.

Imagine indeed!! This is an incredible vision of how our pledging today can grow our future. This is a generative process, which you began and we are now in the midst of together. From last year's spring and summer, the fruits of your labor of search turned into your fall harvest of our call. After the fall harvest, we planted seeds together, promising to revisit them together in the spring when the ground was fertile. You bid farewell to Jim, allowing a time of celebration and dormancy during the winter, to pause, slow down. Hannah and the staff have done a great job tending and preparing the ground.

And now, the seeds we planted are developing their fragile root systems and daring to rise into fresh green shoots. We nourish these seedlings today through our growing relationships and our pledge for a financially strong future.

I want to bring you back to an image from Branson's appreciative inquiry book. He wisely notes that organizations are heliotropic. Branson writes, "This is a botanical term about a plant's orientation – plants lean towards the sun. Similarly, organizations lean toward the source of energy. As memories and imaginations are engaged to nourish participants with the best and most life-giving resources, the church will lean in the direction of those narratives and practices."

Today we consider two forms of life-giving energy: the sunshine of the defining stories of Neighborhood church, and the nourishing water of our financial stewardship. Money is energy, a resource we can use to ensure our values are lived in the world. I want to share a story illustrating this from Lynne Twist. Lynne is one of the original co-founders of the Hunger Project and served as its chief global fundraiser for over twenty years. From the most resource-rich and resource-poor areas of the world, she has seen vast differences in how people relate to money – having it, not having it, and giving it away.

I want to share a story from her book entitled *The Soul of Money*. When fundraising for the Hunger Project, she describes a demanding workday in 1978. She started the morning in downtown Chicago at upscale corporate offices, receiving a large donation from a corporate executive. As she tried to share a "generosity testimonial" about the impact the gift would have on hungry people's lives, she was surprised to find herself quickly dismissed. The gift, though robust, felt empty.

She then boarded a plane to New York City and found herself in the very different world of a rundown church basement in Harlem. It was raining and there were buckets placed all over the floor to catch the drips from the leaky roof. Twist knew that they might not have a lot to give, but she felt strongly about following through with their request to help their congregation better address the issue of global hunger. She shared the mission of the Hunger Project and asked for donations. Two minutes of absolute silence followed until one brave woman spoke up from the back of the room.

“Girl, My name is Gertrude and I like what you’ve said and I like you,” she said. “Now, I ain’t got no checkbook and I ain’t got no credit cards. To me, money is a lot like water. For some folks, it rushes through their life like a raging river. Money comes through my life like a little trickle. But I want to pass it on in a way that does the most good for the most folks. I see that as my right and my responsibility. It’s also my joy. I have fifty dollars in my purse that I earned from doing a white woman’s wash and I want to give it to you.”

Gertrude’s generosity testimonial inspired other church members to follow until they had collected nearly \$500 to end global hunger. Though it dwindled in comparison to the corporation’s check, Twist felt that the church’s money carried an energy of blessing, and a belief that it could make a real difference in people’s lives. Gertrude inspired one of Twist’s most powerful observations about money:

Money flows through all our lives, sometimes like a rushing river, sometimes like a trickle. When it is flowing, it can purify, cleanse, create growth and nourish. Like water, money is a carrier. It can carry possibility, and intention or it can carry control, domination and guilt. It can be a current or currency of love—a conduit for commitment.

I love this image, of money as water, carrying our values into the world and nourishing the commitments we cherish. Especially in this place of drought, where water is so scarce. Just as the seed needs sun and water to nurture life, our congregation needs the nourishment of our financial resources. And not just a trickle or sprinkle that merely refreshes what is visible, but a soaking, steady flow, deep down to the roots, allowing our roots to grow and spread even wider and stronger. Even though the land is parched, we know our life together can be rich and lush.

What a great privilege it is to use our financial energy to fund an organization like Neighborhood which so directly ensures our Unitarian Universalist values are transforming lives within and beyond our congregation. So how might this image of money help us to think differently about our stewardship today? What would an appreciative approach to our Pledge Drive, rooted in the “flow” of abundance be like?

There are a lot of stories going around about the financial troubles liberal congregations are facing in the world: the albatross of our historic buildings, the difficulty of energizing new generations to contribute. With so many good causes to contribute to, it’s true – overall giving to religious institutions is down, and all churches are finding it harder and harder to support their ministries.

We also know that your financial resources feel more like a trickle than a rushing river these days. Your contribution, large or small, is a way you and your family invest in the difference Neighborhood makes in your life and in the world. I believe, as Lynn Twist does, that “Our money carries that energy and generates relationships and partnerships in which everyone feels able and valued, regardless of their economic circumstances.”

Churches that are thriving are the ones who are taking bold risks in their giving and embracing change. The pledge we make to each other today ensures that Neighborhood Church doesn't just survive, but it thrives. We have too much good news to keep it to ourselves. Nourished by our contributions today, may the roots of this sacred community grow wide and deep. May the seeds we nourish today grow tall and strong, reaching towards the sun, and may the fruits of our dreams be abundant and multiply. May this new beginning bring Neighborhood church new life.

Blessed be, and Amen