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**Stewardship Moment** – Barb Brown

For just over 10 years, I served our association in various volunteer roles, including president of our district, the Central Midwest District. During my last district assembly meeting, one delegate asked why pay association and district dues—“THEY ARE MAKING US PAY MORE EACH YEAR.” “They?” I asked? “We are they. We are our association...’We the member congregations of the UUA....’”

In this the 50th year of our merged association of congregations, Emerson UU Chapel celebrates providing more than 30 years of a liberal religious home for responsible searchers in west county. Our founders, whose names can be found on a plaque in our vestibule, took a leap of faith that there would be more people like them in West County, and began meeting. A small group of us took a leap of faith, when our minister Rev. Leonetta Bugleisa and then president Mike Murphy called on us to find a sacred space to call our home. A bit larger group took a leap of faith to call a full time minister while having a mortgage and under 120 members, and while that road has been bumpy, but through another leap of faith we are back to full-time ministry with Rev. Taves and are continuing to grow. Those leaps of faith have led us to where we are today. A vibrant, diverse group of people seeking truth on each of their own responsible searches, but sharing a larger vision of the life saving message that this congregation provides. Each leap of faith that we have taken as a congregation, has led us to greater and larger ministries for ourselves. As we look to the future of Emerson, wherever that vision and mission takes us, may we always be willing to take a leap of faith to get there. We know there are many more people are seeking this vision of what we hold out to them. We need to reach them. How many of you here who did not grow up UU, found us and then asked yourself, “Why didn’t I know about Unitarian Universalism before?”

On this Association Sunday, I ask each of you who are able, to consider a gift of \$20 or more. Our association is poised to grow, just as Emerson is growing. Let’s do our part to grow UUism in the world. It is in this wonder of faith, that we will take this morning’s offering. May your generosity fill our baskets to reach those people who don’t yet know they are UU, so that they can find us.

**Testimony** – Neil Lichtman

I am the UUA’s Annual Program Fund representative for the Central Midwest District. I am here this morning with Don Hawkins from our Midsouth District. I’m the guy that tries to pleasantly ride herd on our congregations to donate in right relationship to the UUA. Some folks think I’m a tax collector for the UUA. Others see me more like a beggar. Occasionally, I’m seen as the good sheriff.

Roughly five years ago, I was asked to do this job, and, frankly, had no idea what it was. All I knew was that it had to do with money, and it would be a personal opportunity to see a

sliver of the UUA up close, and likely meet some very interesting people like Barb Brown, and, I did have some experience with money in the context of UUism.

I'm a Past President of my congregation in Naperville, Illinois. I'm currently Co-Chair of the Capital Campaign for a new building. I'm the type of UU who says "yes" first and asks questions later.

I knew I wanted UUism to succeed and that financial health at the national and congregational level would be critical to success, but success at doing or being what?

This is far from an easy question to answer. Past President Bill Sinkford, whose business career crossed paths with mine some 34 years ago told me once he had gone through reams of yellow pad paper searching for the right single idea that captured what UUism was all about. Personally, I think that whoever thought up "standing on the side of love" found an excellent expression of much of what we are about.

About six months ago, I was having lunch with Rev. Alan Taylor of the Oak Park, Illinois congregation, and I put the question to him. His response was: "Neil, what we at Oak Park think is that it all comes down to this idea: how do we choose to live together."

From that moment on, I have felt that this phrase is the big UU idea. Of course, I know that if we have 20 UUs in a room, we're likely to have 20 different takes on the big idea, but that's so far the one for me under which other big ideas like "standing on the side of love" gather.

How do we choose to live together? Human diversity takes many forms: spiritual, intellectual, physical, social, economic, ethnic, and others. These are all opportunities for humans to be divisive and worse. Nevertheless, not only can no person be an island, no group can be an island either. The phrase "how do we choose to live together" has these critical elements: (1) it's a "we" issue not a "me" issue, (2) it's a choice...we can make good ones or bad ones, (3) and the outcome is "together". The question is not: How do we choose to live apart. Think about it. Is it possible that many of our woes come from the possibility that the premise we have been using to guide our civilization and our planet has almost always been: how do we choose to live apart? Or, how do we make bad choices because we have chosen to live apart?

Once we challenge the notion of apartness, we may be on the right track, and UUism can lead the way, if not in numbers, at least in presenting this superior option.

Now, allow me to dig deeper with the Annual Program Fund in mind.

Speaking personally, my faith in the power of the idea of how we choose to live together has grown in seeing generosity from congregations that have been "heroic" in the sense that they are composed of financially average folks who dig deep for both the health of their congregation and the health of the UUA. They are people who are financially mature. While they may have disagreements aplenty about how to operate the congregation, these folk do not let those disagreements get in the way of getting the money into right relationship with their goals.

From my own history, as Board President of the DuPage UU Church in Naperville, Illinois, I had to confront my own congregation and ask them to change from a culture of “financial immaturity” to a culture of “financial maturity.” With the help of other strong lay leaders and a tough interim minister, we made that transition.

My faith takes forward leaps and bounds when congregations lean into adversity to solve their financial problems or solve their financial behavior and emerge stronger...better committed to both themselves and to each other. When that happens, the congregation has demonstrated how it chooses to live together.

I'd like to close on a few more thoughts that can be gathered under the idea that UUism is about how we choose to live together.

Each of our 7 Principles implies choices about how we choose to live together. We could debate the intricacies of them for hours I suppose.

I like to go elsewhere as I near my conclusion. I like to explore just a few examples of choosing to live together in a UU context.

Since the official reason-for-being for the UUA is to support the roughly 1000 congregations of UUism in the country, there must be a distinctly local flavor to the mission of UUism. Even how one would interpret the 7 Principles or see Social Action would differ locally.

At one level, we exist to provide a place for folks who want “religion”, but not the flavors typically offered. This creates a lot of dissonance since we do not stamp out congregations like fast food restaurants. In a place like Appleton, Wisconsin, the congregation offers theological breadth to a community dominated by the brands of ultra-supernaturalism with few liberal alternatives. Compare that to 3rd UU in a Chicago ethnic neighborhood, a congregation that focuses intensely on social action and social justice. This is a good example of two valid answers to how, at the congregational level, smart, but different, choices can be made about how we can live together.

For many people, UUism offers community in a comfortable theological context...a place where one can create enduring friendships. Choosing to live together can almost always lead to great friendships.

And some people join the UU world to give their kids a religion and the knowledge to survive the challenges of the school yard. That's a choice. In an odd way, it's a choice that is in the direction of choosing to live together.

Face it. We are a very unique religion. As I used to tease my first UU minister, we will always have a low market share. The big brands of religion make the big brand promise of life after death in a really cool place forever. Our promise is that if we choose to work together really hard, we'll make the one home we know about for sure, this planet, at least a little better.

## Sermon

On May 23, 1960, Rev. Donald Harrington stood before the 1317 delegates of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Conference of America. That afternoon they had voted 83% in favor of consolidation into the Unitarian Universalist Association. He spoke these words to them:

“We stand tonight at ... a milestone, which is partly a birth, partly a commencement, partly a ... marriage, and which involves also a degree of death, an end of things which have been precious to us and of institutions with which we have been lovingly familiar. We have achieved a union which is the result of more than a hundred years of striving, and which now, at last, ... has come to completion. It is our tremendous potential, born of the world's response to our new relevance, caused by this ... world's need for a religion which is dynamic instead of static, unitive instead of divisive, universalistic instead of particularistic, history-making rather than history-bound, that has made this Unitarian-Universalist merger necessary and inevitable.”

When churches decide to merge, it's a special way of choosing to be together, often because things are very right and very wrong at the same time. You don't make big changes in your life unless something is not working. You are motivated by your discomfort to act. The only reason, for instance, that we at Emerson Chapel are finally starting to make long range plans about our building is because it's become so uncomfortable. What's very right is that we are growing because we are living our mission. What's very wrong is that our building is no longer serving us. It is too small. When the Unitarians and the Universalists considered merging in the 1950s, it's because things were very right and very wrong at the same time.

The Unitarian church was growing by leaps and bounds. When World War II ended, there was a huge desire for all things normal, like traditional family where father worked and mother stayed home, or having lots of children, moving to the suburbs, and going to church on Sunday morning. They couldn't build churches fast enough in the 1950s.

The hunger for normalcy also created a deadening conformity. This is when the phrase “keeping up with the Joneses” came into common use. This is also when the fear of communism allowed Senator Joe McCarthy to whip the nation into a frenzy about communist infiltrators. Unitarians, known for their liberal tendencies, were often targeted. But they turned lemons into lemonade, marketing their churches as havens of free thinking and resistance. It worked. Thousands came for themselves and their children. We couldn't build churches enough.

The 1950s weren't so great for the Universalists. Their congregations had been dying off for more than 50 years. How different that was from its beginning. By 1900, Universalism was the 6th largest denomination in the U.S. because the Universalists were amazing evangelists. In a land filled with fire and brimstone preachers, Universalists ministers preached the message of universal salvation by an all loving God from town to town. The problem was that they were better at starting churches than running them. A preacher would enter a town, whip up a crowd in a series of revivals, give them a bunch of literature, call them a

church, and leave. The attrition rate was tremendous. To make matters worse, by the early 1900s, other churches started taking on the theology of unconditional love, which meant that Universalists weren't the only ones in the "God is love camp," and they weren't able to compete.

There was one thing they had that the Unitarians didn't, money. This generous faith of generous love created generous givers. Most Universalist churches had large endowment funds, and as those churches died, their funds were turned over to the Universalist Conference of America. The Unitarians, being generally distrustful of organized religion, had a bad habit of starving the very churches they loved with very low pledges. Simply put, the American Unitarian Association was broke.

So the Universalist denomination was dying and the Unitarians needed money. There were all kinds of other reasons they could have merged years earlier, but it never happened until the 1950s because each denomination was facing a deep internal discomfort that motivated them to act.

Doesn't sound very glamorous does it? Usually people want their birth stories to be romantic and glorious. We want our religions to be pure and noble. One of the things that we hold as Unitarian Universalists is that revelation isn't necessarily neat and pretty. The manifestation of the divine doesn't usually come wrapped in glory and drama. It comes in the normal things of normal life. Truth, wisdom and beauty come in many forms, and higher truths and values are present and strengthened even when the motivation for change is simple survival.

So can you see that when the Universalists and the Unitarians began talking, things were both very right and very wrong? And out of these realities, they began to build a dream. The need for people and the need for money made them ask the big questions, like who are we? What are we here for? What is the holy calling us to now? Who are our people? There was excitement and hope, fear and distrust, impatience and reluctance, love and compassion. There was a desire to move forward, and there was tremendous grief, especially among the Universalists. They were allowing their denomination to die in the hope of new life.

So let me tell you a bit about how the Unitarians and Universalists struggled with each other, and what they saw that made them realize they wanted to be together anyways.

The origin of Unitarianism in the United States is distinctly upper class. Unitarianism emerged from the ivy leagues of New England. Universalism emerged from working class, rural and poor people. For years the Unitarians looked down on the Universalists and the Universalists judged the Unitarians for being snooty. Have you ever heard the saying, "Universalists believe that God is too good to damn them, and the Unitarians believe they are too good to be damned?" That's an indication of what kept them apart and these feelings often got in the way of their negotiations. Everyone had to re-examine their assumptions about each other.

The Universalists believed in evangelism and a religion of the heart. Unitarians believed in rigorous study and reasoned thought. So even though Unitarians adopted universal salvation in the 1800s, and even though Universalists came to question the Trinity at the same time. The way they did religion was so different. Universalists feared their faith of emotion and passion would be overwhelmed by Unitarian intellectualism, and Unitarians feared that an unthinking charismatic faith would water down their reasoned approach.

Other things made it difficult as well. By the 1950s, Unitarianism was dominated by humanists, many of whom professed a disdain for the supernatural. There were also Christian Unitarians and non-Christian theist Unitarians, meaning those who believed in a higher power outside of a Christian framework, but they were minorities in the denomination and felt under siege. In contrast, Universalism had fewer humanists. Most Universalists were Christian or non-Christian theists. Christian Universalists were very afraid that if they merged, Universalist and Unitarian Humanists would outnumber them and drive them out of the movement. Unitarian and Universalist humanists had the same fear about the Christians – that they would join ranks to stop the advance of humanism. So there were all kinds of reasons they had for distrusting each other. But out of that, remained the conviction to try and be together. What could that look like?

They did have some important things in common. Those who believed in God, saw God in the same way, as a God of unconditional love and grace who manifested in all the religions of the world. This God didn't pull puppet strings by rewarding some and punishing others. This God trusted humanity and worked through humanity for the manifestation of pure love and justice. Those who were humanist used the same language and had very similar ways of looking at the world.

Both had been declared heresies by orthodox Christianity and had suffered ridicule and ostracism. That experience resulted in two non-creedal traditions committed to open-mindedness, diversity and a broad understanding of truth and wisdom. Having been rejected themselves, they were loath to reject anyone else. Both of them were also strongly committed to social justice. They had fought for the end of slavery, for the rights of women, they had worked to end poverty and hunger. They believed in equality of opportunity and were deeply critical of McCarthyism. In the 1950s they both saw the deep pressure to conform as a form of spiritual abuse and saw their religious traditions as spiritual antidotes to the excesses of their time. What all this means is that Unitarians and Universalists basically held the same values and priorities. This is what they built on.

May 1959 in Syracuse New York, the Unitarians and the Universalists met to merge. They came with the blessing of their congregations, for every Unitarian and Universalist in Canada and the United States had been given the right to vote yes or no on the merger. 75% voted yes. The delegates now joined to hammer out the details. The Unitarians meet in one room. The Universalists meet in another. The draft proposal came to both at the same time. The Universalists unanimously approved it. The Unitarians erupt in stiff disagreement amongst themselves about this clause: We unite to cherish and spread the universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition, immemorially summarized in their essence as love to God and love to man.

You know how Neil said that if you have 20 UUs in a room you have 20 opinions? That did not come from our Universalist heritage! The Universalists, in their tradition of spiritual generosity, had followed the lead of 2 Corinthians 3 where Paul says, "the letter kills but the spirit gives life." The Unitarians focused on the letter. The Humanists wanted to remove the reference to God. The Christians wouldn't have it. They argued all day and finally gave up at 1:30 a.m. It looked like the merger was going to fail. That night, a few desperate and dedicated souls came up with this wording: "[We] unite to cherish and spread the universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers in every age and tradition, immemorially summarized in the Judeo-Christian tradition as love to God and love to man." The next morning the Unitarians came on side.

What started out as a need for people and money turned into a deep journey about identity and what we believed at the deepest level that went beyond mere belief about the details of God and into the heart of the matter, our convictions about what we trusted in and would stand for. This merger saved the Universalists from certain death, and saved the Unitarians from an inner divisiveness that threatened to separate them from their roots. Pieces of both died, and they resurrected in ways no one had imagined.

When the Unitarians and Universalists reunited in Boston in 1960 for the final vote, the mood was festive, and in the celebratory worship service, they began to sing the hymn that we are about to sing, "As tranquil streams that meet and merge and flow as one to seek the sea, our kindred hearts and minds unite, to build a church that shall be free." They sang it over and over again, many with tears in their eyes for what they had created. They ended the service with this unison affirmation: Let us together build the free and universal church of tomorrow... We declare our allegiance to the new Unitarian Universalist Association, and pledge our lives, our fortunes and our faith to its high purposes and its sure upbuilding." May it continue to be so. Amen.