

“More Than Tables and Chairs”
Presented to the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Huntington
Celebration Sunday, March 14, 2010
Rev. Paul Ratzlaff

More than 25 years ago this congregation faced apparently insurmountable problems – problems that would limit its growth, its future. There was the problem of the water tower. Sure it was distinctive, a landmark; but it was also a nuisance. It was a threat to insuring the entire piece of property. It was much loved; kids had been sneaking up there to get overview of the harbor. It was a landmark, a point of identity for the Fellowship. (From the contemporary vantage point, one can only imagine the intense debate about tearing it down.) In addition, there was the problem of the overflowing Social Hall that had been used for the Sunday services for so many years.

Among the many qualities that I prize about this congregation is this: faced with the difficult, you say “let’s get going.” You did that 25 years ago. We rightly celebrate the anniversary of the first Sunday service in this space. You do that now.

We’ve just come through the worst financial period since the Great Depression. Sure we had to make cutbacks in staff; eliminating an RE Assistant, and reducing the hours of the Administrator to $\frac{3}{4}$ time; holding senior staff flat; eliminating programs and dipping into reserves. But we did it, not necessarily joyfully, but I would say the “let’s get going” attitude helped us through.

Now that the congregation has weathered the downturn, we turn to addressing the problems that refuse to go away – the deferred maintenance that an old, historical building demands. I say “hallelujah.” We’re beyond survival mode; we’re in the “lets-get-going” mode.

I want to honor the ancestors – the people who faced squarely the problems; who debated (seemingly endlessly) alternatives; and the leaders who emerged to solve the issues before the group. Some of these we rightly remember and celebrate today! But there are so many more who are forgotten, or overlooked – all those who pledged their dollars to build this lovely space; those who served on the committees that made the decisions about architects and furnishings. (History may record the chairs, but who served with them?) Those who volunteered to do the dry wall, the painting and finishing that the space required. We have an incredible gift! May we never take it for granted.

I remember the first time I saw this what I would call “sanctuary.” (I mean in labeling it that name a refuge for the spirit; it is a haven where the soul comes out and dances with delight.) For me, personally, “Main Hall” is too prosaic; but I recognize that we have different reactions to words – that’s part of the diversity that I so treasure here. The first time I saw this room, my spirit lifted. With soaring ceilings, the interplay of natural and artificial light, the North Wall with its chalice and its candles, it was a joy to me.

And then as I’ve come to know the people who fill this space each Sunday, my joy has increased even more. Sure the space is wonderful and inviting, but the people who fill it are even more wonderful and inspiring! Each of us can think of people who model for us what the good life, the just life would be. How many of us say, “When I get old, I want to be like so-and-so?” This space makes possible the people who assemble.

All of the money that you pledge today is in support of the mission of the Fellowship. None of it is to simply keep around tables and chairs. It's about more than "tables and chairs."

Let me remind you of what you already know. Everything you give points to the Fellowship purpose in four areas: worship, caring, education and social justice. It's about exciting and inspiring worship. It's about wrestling with profound questions. It's about truly honoring the differences among us, differences expressed in how we frame what is ultimately meaningful to each of us. It's about spiritual striving for fulfillment. It's about transformation; saving people from despair into hope. When a member of the congregation shares with me a six word summary of their life, "it's better than I expected," my heart soars because I can only imagine the full import of that short summary. From a life of despair, one has found through this community a life of joy. Amen! It's about connection rather than isolation.

Do we accomplish this every Sunday, for everyone? No way. But we try. It's the underlying intention to all that we do.

This congregation's purpose is about caring. It's about taking people who are isolated from their families, and creating a chosen family. (One doesn't have to be cut off from one's family of origin to be a member here. Far from it, as we honor the multiple generations that love one another. But, too, we honor the chosen families that are so meaningful.) It's about inclusion – taking the people who would be otherwise ostracized and providing a home for them – a circle that takes them in. It's about the outpouring of support that one receives when one faces that trauma that comes with living.

This congregation's purpose is about education. It's the transmission of values and the formation of values that make this world a better place. Often, on Sundays when the children are called up to the steps, I feel the richness of what we do. I witness in their faces and enthusiasm the delight of being part of this congregation. Our many volunteers, rightly celebrated this day, are creating the relationships that will be remembered, not necessarily consciously but in the bones, as it were.

Not only for young people, this congregation also offers education to all ages, reflected in yoga, in Herstory, in discussions of "Speaking of Faith," in the Friday morning meditation, and in so much more. I think of the Humanists' discussion of end-of-life issues.

Having illustrated some from the areas of worship, caring, and education, this congregation's purpose is about social justice. It's reflected in the 15 or 20 people who show up for a Huntington Town Council hearing on a project that will create greater diversity in the housing stock in our town. It's reflected in the nearly 100 volunteers who shelter the homeless during the winter months. It's reflected in the people who persist in asking the questions, and doing the analysis, of how short our congregation is, and society at large is, in being the beloved community that welcomes all in the wholeness of their being. It's reflected in the extraordinary generosity of you here week-in, week-out in your support of the split plate, and of Beyond Our Walls. It's reflected in the Peace-Making Caucus, the Ethical Eating Study Group and so much more that invites people to serve others, and to "help heal our world."

When you fill in your pledges of what the volunteer finance people can anticipate so that they can budget for next year, you are doing so much more than keeping this

congregation as an institution going. You're providing the foundation that supports all these and more purposes. You're providing the fuel that all this mission-work requires.

25 years ago, our congregation met for the first time in this Main Hall, this sanctuary. In 2010 we have received this legacy of those before us, known and unknown, remembered and forgotten. Let us be grateful for the bounty we have received – the loveliness of this space; the vitality of this congregation – and may we make the commitment to pass it along to future generations. 25 years hence, when the 50th anniversary of this space is celebrated, may other folks remember with joy our commitment. May they feel grateful for our stewardship, that we cared deeply and that we shared our resources wisely for the sake of this congregation that we love.