

**Force for the Future:
Where Are We Headed?**

September 17, 2017

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Roger Jones

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #347, Gather the Spirit; #391, Voice Still and Small; #1048, The Fire of Commitment. Special music: “Poor Man,” trad. American, Ross Hammond, steel guitar.

Reading

This is a poem by Hafez, a Persian mystic poet who lived in the 1300s.

“A Great Need”

Out
Of a great need
We are all holding hands
And climbing.
Not loving is a letting go.
Listen,
The terrain around here
Is
Far too
Dangerous
For
That.

Sermon

Many of us gather here with great needs for serenity, purpose, courage, belonging and compassion. And we gather here in a time of great need in our world. That is why this congregation was founded nearly 150 years ago. That is why this congregation exists today.

Great needs arise from things like ... an epidemic of loneliness and isolation. A growing culture of mistrust, ugly disrespect, and a rejection of kindness in this country. The violence of poverty, terrorism, bigotry, addiction, hatred of others and self-hatred. We hear stories that break our hearts, see deadly disasters that break the spirit. Climate chaos and voices of denial about it, swirling together. The largest movement of refugees on the globe since the 1930s--people who flee war, oppression, starvation, but who are too often met with hostility instead of mercy. Corruption and abuse in high places, and shrinking liberties in many places.

I bet you’ve got your own list showing the great need.

In this nation at this time, we see finally the unmasking of a social, economic and political system built on racial oppression and racial privilege, but we also confront the renewed unleashing of white nationalist hatred. Among nations, we hear foolhardy threats of nuclear war. If you’re not angry, if you’re not on edge,... well, you’re doing better than I am.

Out of a great need we are all holding hands and climbing. The terrain is far too dangerous to let go of our connections.

In this congregation, we do this climbing and holding hands as we take the time to discern who we are as a church, what our shared purpose is, and where we are going. Together, we consider how we can make a difference.

In just over a month we will take the time to do that. It's the Long-Range Planning retreat, right here at UUSS, on Saturday, October 28. Everyone is invited to sign up—new friends, long-term congregants, children, youth, and adults of all ages. If you can't make it for the planning retreat, there will be opportunities later for small-group conversations. If you can make it on October 28, I hope you will.

This process will generate a set of goals to guide our life together for the coming five years and beyond. We'll distill a summary of those goals, and members will vote on them in May at our Congregational Meeting. Yet that summary—that plan—is not the purpose of the meetings—the purpose is **harvesting the power of conversation, simple, real-time, face to face conversation**. A radical thing. A religious practice. A source of creative energy. Conversation.

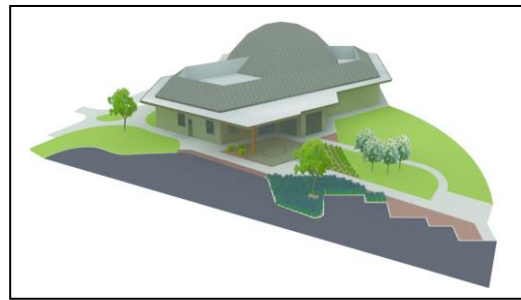
The last time this congregation took the time to create and adopt a set of goals was in 2007 and 2008. How many of you were part of UUSS in 2008? —please rise or raise your hand. [Almost half did this.] I joined the ministry staff here just as those conversations were concluding, but in time to see a unanimous vote on three broad goals at the congregational meeting.

How many of you have become part of UUSS sometime after 2008? —please rise or raise your hand. [Half or more of those in worship did this.] *From where I'm standing, it looks as if we have a new congregation.*

To give you a sense of the benefit of a good planning process, let me tell you about **the goals identified by our folks back then, and the creativity those goals have made possible**.

I'll start with the most obvious goal that we set and accomplished. That goal was to: **Look at our facility needs and make a plan**—to plan for the kind of space we needed, the beauty and accessibility we longed for, and the

environmental stewardship to which we are called. Thanks to the clarity of this goal, and with the help of architects, we adopted a Master Plan for our building and grounds. In 2012 we conducted a capital fundraising campaign for the first phase of the Master Plan. We moved away from here for 13 months for the construction work. These achievements took amazing generosity—money, time, talent, and heroic levels of patience and persistence. I'm glad we made it through. But in addition to that, we had goals that went beyond building new bathrooms and a Welcome Hall and an outdoor labyrinth, beyond wood and steel, beyond air conditioning and drought-tolerant landscape.



So another goal was to: **Deepen our ministry to families with children**. Promote a stronger, deeper and more loving community of all ages. Build bridges between and among the generations, build connections between the big church and the little church. Build only one church community. Over the years since then, we've had more volunteers working with children and youth here who don't have children in their own homes! We've got the Community Garden, our youth programs, and OWL, our UU sexuality education program. We tried out Spirit Play as a more sustainable and spiritually oriented program for children; today it starts its eighth year. We have experimented for years to create structures and themes for all-ages worship services, like the one last week, or the "fire" service in February, or the "tee-shirt theology" service in July. Now we have one all-ages service every month. We are always working hard on the balance of multi-sensory engagement, management of time, and learning

to be patient and flexible in the chaos. Flexibility is a useful skill in many areas of life, so the church is providing a useful opportunity. And did you hear about the Kids Freedom Club? For five years, they have been raising awareness about and raising money to end modern slavery.

One more goal was to: Deepen the involvement of members and build the relationships among us. Rather than watch the revolving door of people coming and leaving, we wanted to ensure meaningful connections and promote a sense of belonging. Over the years we have enlarged our team of ushers and greeters and improved our process for welcoming new folks. We expanded our offerings in Adult Enrichment. Members have experimented with starting discussion and activity groups. We started the Connections Table in the Welcome Hall. We have Soup Sundays, which have inspired other kinds of lunches. And there is Theology on Tap: building spiritual community one pub at a time.

We have launched a new website. Our Spiritual Deepening Circles are now starting a fourth year, with 85 people participating in small groups twice a month from October to May. A volunteer Pastoral Visitors program has begun. Also in the works now is a system of neighborhood groups of USS members. Folks living in the various local areas of this large region can connect with other UUs for fellowship and support. In addition, our numerous ministries for social justice are building connections among us here, as we reach out in support and solidarity with our neighbors. And, did you hear about the all-ages Prom coming up? (It's October 7.)

To tell you the truth, most of these accomplishments which I have listed, and the ones you may be thinking of, *were not specified* in the long-range planning conversations or the

plan itself back in 2008. Yet those conversations made it all possible.

In preparation for the session on the 28th of October, your Long-Range Planning team has had online conversations with two ministers from the regional staff of our denomination, which is the Unitarian Universalist Association. We told them about those goals we established in 2008. The facilitator coming for the retreat is the Rev. Tandi Rogers. She asked our team: "Did you hold any celebrations to mark the milestones of progress you made on those goals?" We told her that for the building renovation and the capital campaign, we did party a lot. *Well*, Tandi said, this time it will be good to **set benchmarks for future progress in all categories. Then you can celebrate the milestones along the way.** All of us on the team were up for that. Can I get an *amen* from you? [I did.]



This reminds me: A few years ago, Rev. Lucy I went to a seminar on congregational vitality, led by a minister from another denomination recognized as an expert on growth. That minister told us: **never pass up an excuse for a celebration, and make it a public one.** When that minister had arrived as a turnaround pastor for a congregation in Atlanta, he sent his partner out to buy several cases of champagne flutes, glass ones, reusable. Every chance they get, they go out on the front steps of their church and make a toast of sparkling water or sparkling wine to celebrate a recent accomplishment. The neighbors of the church can see: there's life in that building. What an idea! Can I get an *amen* to that? [I did.]

In a community, the heart of strategic planning is not setting benchmarks, as useful as they might be as tools. Nor is creating goals for a community the simple trick of conducting consumer surveys. **Planning is the work of discernment.** It's not a survey process, it's a group spiritual practice. It's an organic process. We like organic things, right? They do take

effort and intention. They cost more—in our case, more time and care. Such conversations can help us learn and remember who we are and what our common purpose is. In conversation, we consider possible areas for living our common purpose more deeply and creatively.

We are doing not only an organic thing, but a counter-cultural thing. **In this congregation, what we do is counter-cultural.** Not because we have no creed or because we claim a diversity of beliefs and spiritual practices, even though those things are true. What puts us at odds with the individualistic attitudes and consumer culture of this land is the practice of covenant. Members and friends of UUSS put their trust in the shared wisdom that emerges from dialogue, disagreement, compromise, and faith in one another.

As a covenanted community, we can make room for things we may not ordinarily choose as individuals. We can decide that a compelling purpose is larger than competing preferences. Moreover, we *find* that purpose and shape the goals to embody it through conversation, compromise, and creativity.



Gil Rendle and Alice Mann are congregational planning consultants. They say: “The important part of a planning process is [the] conversation that changes a congregation.” They say that people in a values-based community feel called to pursue a goal or travel a path together *not simply* because they agree with it. “They pursue it because they would feel unfaithful if they did not do it”—they’d feel unfaithful to their guiding values and shared purpose.

At UUSS, our shared purpose was discerned and articulated by members of this

congregation a number of years ago. Our shared purpose (our Mission) is this:

we come together to deepen our lives and to be a *force* for healing in the world.

The name and theme of this year’s Long-Range Planning process is **Force for the Future**. The volunteers on the Long-Range Planning team and I want this congregation to be vital, effective, and relevant in the coming years—a force for the future. The ideas about how we will do that, how we make a difference in our lives and in the world around us—all of that is not “up for grabs,” so to speak; it’s up for discernment. Now, if this comes across as vague, I apologize. But I ask you to trust me that the retreat on October 28 will be well-guided by an expert facilitator. Tandi been a companion to numerous UU congregations in

this discernment of creative possibilities. And if that isn’t enough, there is food—snacks, tea and coffee in the morning and lunch at noon.

Speaking of food, that makes me think of cereal. Consider the multiplicity of cereal brands on the shelves of the supermarket—the styles, ingredients, and flavors. The consultants Alice Mann and Gil Rendle have said: “We live in a culture that teaches individuals to be sensitive to their own preferences.” In such a culture, you need to know yourself in a new way. “If there are 35 brands of cereal on the shelves..., you do *not need to know* more about the *cereal* in order to make a choice.”

Rather, as the shopper, “you need to know more about yourself.”¹

That is how you make the choice. For example: “Do I need more vitamins or fiber [or protein] at this time of my life? Am I watching my calories, cholesterol, or carbohydrates? Or do I just want something colorful and fun to get me going in the morning?”²

Rather than investigating all of the choices and being overwhelmed by the choices, it’s better to know yourself.

So it is with congregations. Rather than thinking we can do everything and feeling bad because we don’t do everything, we could pursue what fits our purpose.

Our values and our mission are points around which to have dialogue and healthy disagreement. We can trust in the spiritual practices of conversation and shared reflection as fruitful ones. Real change comes from these conversations.

This congregation has tried out so many things in the last few years, and accomplished so much. We’ve had exciting programs and new ventures, things that were not even dreamed of specifically back in 2008.

These were not a specified set of goals in the last Long-Range Plan, but we have made them happen nevertheless.

The reason is the simple force of human conversation. The conversations we have together can help us to connect with one another, to inspire one another, to be creative and experimental.

Margaret Wheatly is an author on the science of leadership and community. She writes:

“There is no power equal to a community discovering what it cares about.”³

Our planning retreat on October 28 is not a requirement, or even a “great need.” But we are taking the time to be together for it because this congregation has filled a great need. It can continue in the coming years to fill a great need for a great many people—and for a planetary home in great need.

It is our purpose, all holding hands and climbing and loving and not letting go. It is our calling—to travel together, and to hold on to the love that holds us and connects us, the love that will not let us go.

So may it be, blessed be, and amen.

¹ Gil Rendle and Alice Mann, *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations* (Alban Institute, 2003), xxiii.

² *Ibid.*

³ Margaret Wheatley, *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2002), 22.