

## **Embracing Community: Shaping the Future**

Pledge Drive Sermon by Rev. Dr. Roger Jones  
Sunday, March 30, 2025  
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: 1064, Blue Boat Home; 123 Spirit of Life/Fuente de Amor; What Really Matters to Your Heart? (Maggie Wheeler); Special Music—Choir: Hope Lingers On (Lissa Schneckenburger, arr. Andrea Ramsey); Special Music—Piano: Incantation 2.0 (David Hicken), Suite Bergamasque, L.75, I. Prélude (Claude Debussy).

Personal Reflection by Andy, Worship Associate, printed after sermon

### Sermon

Our Soul Matters theme for the month of March has been the topic of trust. We've reflected on many kinds of trust, but one that's relevant on this day is our trust in one another here at USS. As a voluntary organization, nothing forces any of us to support this congregation. Yet we come together to provide that support—with money as well as time. Three quarters of the revenue to operate this congregation comes from financial pledges that members and friends make every year. The budget is based on these pledges. It is built on trust that over the coming year, our donations will come in. The pledging process is an act of trust; all of us are counting on one another.

I know that some of you are here today for the first or second time, as you explore our congregation, in person or online. And here you are, just in time for the pledge drive! I am tempted to apologize for this, and say you'll probably enjoy next Sunday's sermon a lot more. But instead, I'll say that what you see today is an example of how a free congregation pursues its mission—by talking openly about our goals and about the values that matter to us. Thank you for being here as we do this. On the other hand, if you have been getting used to us and you feel moved to make a pledge toward the coming budget year, you are more than welcome to do so.

Most people, including me, think we participate in an organization or a community because we get something out of it. We contribute our time and money to it because we value what it does for us. While this is natural, it is worth remembering that our shared participation touches many other people, including those we may never know.

Two weekends ago, I was visiting the Midwest. On that Sunday morning, I was the guest preacher at the Abraham Lincoln Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Springfield, Illinois. Being there was a homecoming for me. I began attending that congregation 40 years ago, and joined it later that year, 1985. I moved there for my first job in my first career, in State government finance.

Springfield was a socially conservative small city surrounded by flat farmland. And it still is. But back in 1985, I was 24 years old, lonely, unsure of myself, and barely out of the closet. I was idealistic about public service—and naïve about it. Among members of that congregation, I found middle-aged and older adults who were eager to welcome and get to know me. They seemed happy to know me for who I really was. I remember how some of them listened as I spoke of my disillusionment at the frustrations of bureaucracy and the harsh gears of political machines.

It was good for me to get involved in that church and in other groups in the local community. At the church, I learned about board meetings and committee meetings, teaching children in Religious Education, and the practice of making a monthly financial pledge. I even led a few services. Soon I started thinking about the ministry as a career. When I confided in a few other members in the congregation about my sense of calling, they were encouraging. After several years, I followed that calling, entered seminary and became a UU minister.

So when I was standing before them two Sundays ago, I said, “Thank you for changing my life.” To be clear, I recognized only a few of the current members, and few remembered me, as many have died or moved away. Yet I was giving thanks to the whole community. I said: “Thank you also for all of the other lives you have changed over the years because you were here when they needed you. And you were here when your city needed to hear your voice and your values—our UU values.” By their embrace of me 40 years ago, that community shaped my future without knowing it. Even I didn’t realize it until much later.

By participating here at USS, you are part of an embracing community that goes back to 1868. In fact, yesterday was the anniversary of our founding. On March 29, 1868, 17 families in Sacramento gathered together and named themselves the First Unitarian Church. That was 157 years ago. The book of the history of this congregation’s first 120 years has many stories and glimpses and characters. For example, it says that in its early years, the church had an “efficient choir” –two men and five unmarried ladies. [Looking at the choir:] Where’s our choir? Which of you were here back then? The history also says: “Miss Gertie Gerrish presided at the piano.”

SLIDE. Here’s a picture of Gertrude Gerrish. She’s buried in the Sacramento city cemetery downtown. The story doesn’t say if she conducted the choir of 7 while playing the piano, or if someone else conducted.

The founders of this congregation didn’t know all of the forms and shapes their church would embody, or all of the accomplishments and setbacks to come. They couldn’t know how it would get through two world wars and the Great Depression, or how it would respond to the Civil Rights movement and other movements for justice and fairness. They didn’t know it would build its first building in Midtown in 1915 and then build one here in Arden Arcade in 1960 and then expand this building in 2015. Those early members couldn’t predict how it would minister to generations of people or how their active presence would shape the future of the local community. But they believed that the congregation was worthy of their efforts and their support. And looking out at all of you, I’d say their faith in the future has been validated, and it is something to be celebrated.

This year’s pledge theme is Embracing Community: Shaping the Future. This is a challenging time to talk about shaping the future because the future looks bleak. Our present challenges in this country are horrific. The unconstitutional atrocities committed by the government, its betrayal of international alliances, and the cruelty inflicted on so many people—all of it feels like an awful dream from which I want to wake up. When I do dream about this, it wakes me up with disbelief and sadness. I am aware, of course, that what feels unreal and shocking to me has been an all-too-familiar experience for groups of people who have been pushed to the margins for many years.

Recently the Rev. Dr. Dorsey Blake passed away. He was an African American minister in the Bay Area and a seminary professor whom both Rev. Lucy and I count as a mentor. Another one of his former students reminded us of these words by Dr. Blake: "We sit on the precipice of chaos. War, climate change, political uprisings. But what we face is neither unique nor original to our times."

A minister friend pointed out to me that those of us who feel scared in these times can learn something from the generations of people that lived through systemic oppression, wars, and other periods of human-caused hardship. When they have endured poverty or persecution, they have sustained themselves with acts of mutual care. They embraced community for support and sustenance. They shared the strength that they needed to stay in the struggle.

They did this by simple acts of providing help, sharing meals, singing songs together, and extending respect and kindness. They sustained their spirits by staying together. The road to despair, on the other hand, is paved with isolation and separation. To confront the daunting threats of these times, we must begin with community. And we act in community to shape a future where all may survive and flourish.

One of our new members is Peter Bishop, a professor and leader in the field of studying history as a way to anticipate the future. He and his wife Lue have led our monthly sermon reflections, and he has led a forum here on the topic of anticipating change and working for the future we long for. Of course, change is inevitable, in people, organizations, countries, and the world. While forecasters and visionaries use data, trend analysis and imagination to predict likely changes in the world, it remains the case that nobody can guarantee any particular outcome. The future is uncertain. That causes anxiety, so we human beings tend to jump to conclusions about it. We may buy easy answers, become blissfully optimistic, or surrender to feelings of despair.

But scholars of change in the field of future studies invite us to consider the future with a more open mind. They establish different categories of thinking about the future. They ask the question: *what if*. "What if it's not going to be like that?" The words, *what if*, open up creativity rather than closing it off. "What if we gave this a try?" Whether looking at a personal issue or a family situation, or considering the future of a community organization, when we look at current conditions or trends, we can sketch out a variety of scenarios for how things might go. To be sure, we can identify one of the scenarios which we think is the most likely. Peter calls this the *expected future*.

Yet an expected future is still not a guaranteed one. So, it will be crucial for us to think of other paths, other outcomes, other futures. Some scenarios could seem even worse, some could be more promising. And from among the possible futures, we can describe and choose our preferred one. A *preferred future* would be one which embodies our values and hopes. It is one we are committed to working toward. In Unitarian Universalism, we call this building the world we dream about.

We direct our efforts toward giving that world a chance. As an example, Peter told me that every song we sing in this congregation is about that preferred future. Our hymns envision a better world, they celebrate human achievements, they praise the gifts of nature, and they give thanks for the blessings of our present life. In song we literally give a voice to our hopes.

Directing our efforts toward our preferred future may be a daunting task. Sure it is. And it has always been: the practice of peace, the promise of pluralism, respect for human dignity, the achievement of justice and equity—all of these aims are hard to pursue, yet we know that giving up on them would wound our very souls.

Doing this as a solitary project, however, is unlikely to succeed. It is more likely to leave you frustrated and worn out. The best chance we have to shape the future is through embracing community. The 20<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian minister, seminary professor, and social activist James Luther Adams said that when people who long for a world of safety and flourishing can come together, they can summon the strength, as he put it, “to make history rather than just be pushed around by it.”

Here at USS, our Board and Stewardship Committee have two key goals for this year’s pledge drive and the budget it will fund. One goal is to improve the wages and salaries of our staff and ministers. We have nine staff members here, full and part-time. We want to compensate them fairly and keep them. This is why we ask you to increase your pledge this year—or to make a generous pledge if it’s your first one.

The other goal is to welcome a seminarian as a ministerial intern here at USS. And I have a bit of news to tell you, but it’s only for you who are here today, whether you’re in the room or on Zoom. (And those who are watching this on YouTube in the future. But that’s all!)

Rev. Lucy and I have been approached by a talented and energetic young seminarian about coming here to start an internship this coming fall. This intern is highly recommended by their home church minister and is eager to be here. This student’s UU seminary requires a half-time internship, which means they would be serving with us for two church years, not just one, so the payment of the stipend would be stretched over two budget years. If you’ve been here for more than a year, you might remember that an intern brings new ideas and energy to us. Then after their time with us, they go forward in order to enrich our larger movement through their ministry. USS is known as an excellent internship congregation, and this is a big way that we are shaping the future.

To be sure, the future is not guaranteed. That’s why we put our values, time, resources, and power into shaping the future that can embody our values and longings. If you make a pledge, it is your decision, your choice. Every pledge is valued and appreciated. It makes a difference. We invite you to make a pledge that reflects your capacity and ability to give. And we hope your pledge will remind you that you are a part of what we embody, what we care about, and what we aspire to. Thank you for your intentions and your care.

You know, we have two primary purposes for holding a pledge drive every year. One is practical, the other is more spiritual. We invite everyone to make a financial commitment in order to establish a budget that is accurate so we can pay our bills, compensate our staff, support our denomination, and maintain our buildings and grounds.

The spiritual purpose of the pledge drive, on the other hand, is to remember that all of us are counting on one another. We want to remember this truth and celebrate it. Everybody has a role to play in shaping the future. By coming together, we make a difference in the lives of people we know, those we have yet to meet, and those we may never know. Thank you for being here. Thank you for embracing community. Amen.

Personal Reflection by Andy, Worship Associate (delivered before the sermon)

I am Andy Cramer. This morning, you are getting a two-for-one deal. I am both your Worship Associate, and I am the co-chair of the Stewardship Committee. The committee started preparing for this year's pledge drive early last fall. One of our first tasks was to identify a theme. This year, our theme is Embracing Community: Shaping the Future. I asked some members "When have you felt embraced by the community at USS?" I was moved by their responses.

- Patty said that "Being part of Soup Sunday has deepened my sense of belonging, reminding me that USS is a vibrant, caring community that truly looks out for one another."
- Susan mentioned all the people that stepped up to tutor Afghan refugees and provide other services.
- Jim told about feeling down about the political and social turmoil that was coming, and then his dread melting away as he walked the labyrinth on New Years morning.

I think that I know what many of you were looking for this morning when you came to church or logged on: community. It is the same thing that I was looking for 3 years ago this month when I first showed up for a Sunday service. I've been a UU for 20 years, but I drifted about during the pandemic both physically and emotionally. I moved away from my home congregation before the pandemic as I prepared for retirement. Emotionally, the pandemic and its lockdowns shook me, leaving me more isolated than ever, confined by the walls of my home and a computer screen.

Three years ago, sitting in this room for the first time, I was out of practice being around other people and it felt very uncomfortable. But now, you are my people, you are my community! I see you building community in Soul Matters groups, over a bowl of soup or a cup of coffee after the service, or while greeting each other at the beginning of a committee meeting. As a father who proudly brought up two daughters in a UU community, I'm inspired by the families participating here. I see the ways that this community strives for justice and to be an advocate for the vulnerable, and I want to join you. I want to shape a future that reflects our shared values. This morning, when we lit the candle of Compassion and Resistance, we affirmed that "fear is outworked by hope, and that hatred is no match for the power of love."

I want to be on the side of hope and love. Today I will be submitting my pledge to this congregation, my community, and I'll be increasing my pledge amount by 10 percent.

Although I feel a lot of anxiety about what's happening in our country, this congregation, all of you, are the antidote to that. My pledge is an act of hope and love. I ask that you also submit your pledge, if not today, very soon. I call to you to embrace community and shape the future with hope and love. Blessed be and amen.