

May 14, 2006

“Stumbling Toward Camelot”

Rev. Dr. Arvid Straube

Well we've had a good Mother's Day celebration. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but this sermon is not about Mother's Day. It's a different sort of sermon than you are used to hearing from me. It isn't obviously theological. It isn't obviously spiritual.

I've been privileged to have been your Lead Minister for almost two years, two good years. What this sermon is about is kind of a State of the Church report, where we are today, where we could go tomorrow, and what our mission is in a world that really needs us. So really it is kind of a theological sermon because our theology is that we come together to covenant to seek the truth in love. It's a theological sermon after all. It is a spiritual sermon because it is impossible to grow spiritually as isolated individuals. We need each other. Nobody makes it through this world alone. Mostly what I have to say is really good news. I'm excited about where First Church is today. I'm excited about where we are going, it's a great adventure.

Let me get this part out of the way first, because it's not so good. A couple of months ago, I wrote a newsletter article talking about how just a few folks, but enough to make a real impact on the morale of our staff, were treating our staff with disrespect, angry voices, sarcasm, and occasionally even bad language. I thought that all I had to do was say that this was happening and call us to our best selves. I'm sorry to say that it hasn't stopped and it's getting to the point where we are in danger of losing some key staff if it doesn't change. That would really slow down our forward momentum. We can't afford for that to happen and also, it's not who we are. This is puzzling me. I have a lot of theories about that. Maybe it's that so many UUs are in positions of great responsibility and power and are used to being able to just tell people what to do, kind of brusquely. One member of the staff was talking to me and she said that she was proud to work for an organization with our mission, she felt like she was making a difference in the world, but she said, "You know, Arvid, in that bad old corporate world, I was never treated so mean." Then a light bulb went off for me and I said, "You know, our church is really more of a family than an organization." We're really more of a family than an organization and people feel comfortable in their families and they are able to be who they are in their families, they aren't always careful in their families. Let's not be a dysfunctional family folks.

The Board of Trustees is absolutely behind me on this, to change this situation. They are now the point people on it. If somebody ill treats the staff you are going to hear about it from one of your elected peers on the Board of Trustees. Just so we're all clear on what is the right behavior and what isn't, the Board will be working with the whole congregation in the coming months to come up with a covenant of how we treat each other. I think that is a great idea. I'm looking forward to that. In the meantime, please don't use the staff to vent your frustrations. I know that there are frustrations aplenty because this church has been going through so many changes in the past few years; there are new faces in the office, there are changing job descriptions, we're going

through a reorganization. It's going to be great, but we're in process and people don't know where they stand or where they fit sometimes. So, it's understandable that there be frustrations but please don't vent them to the staff. Please, see the staff as partners in solving problems as opposed to the problem. Please treat the staff as well as you would your friends here at the church.

Now the good news... We live in a time of unparalleled danger and upheaval in our culture. That is not the good news, but the good news is that we are in a position to heal our world as a church community. The good news is that each of us has something to contribute to that effort. My good friend Patrick O'Neill, who was in this pulpit about a month ago, had a wonderful sermon at General Assembly last year. He talked about how for a while Unitarian Universalists tended to concentrate on their own self-realization. He talked about how that was after all part of our history; Henry David Thoreau went off to Walden into the woods to find himself. Unitarian Universalists have been preoccupied with finding ourselves. But Patrick said, (and I'll never forget the electricity that when through the room when he did,) "the woods are on fire."

We can't stay in our little cabins anymore. We all have work to do. Each of us has something to contribute. The world needs you. The leadership of this church needs you. I need you. I need every one of you to help fulfill the mission of this church. We have a great adventure in helping to serve those less fortunate in direct service. We have a great adventure in joining others who have a vision of a just society, an equal society, a free society, where the dignity of every human being is recognized. There is wonderful, important work to do. There is a great adventure. Will you join us in this adventure? Our children and youth need to be equipped to offer the world an understanding of tolerance and equality and wisdom. We need to help this generation of children and youth and generations of children of youth to come to grow up wise and whole. We need your help.

Human life is precious. It's terrible to waste it in a meaningless, materialistic life when everyone has something important to contribute that the world desperately needs. There is work to do helping people discover and use their gifts. Will you help? People need spiritual growth and religious insight to free their minds and souls and hearts to be who they were created to be. There is work to do in helping to birth that religious growth and spiritual insight. Will you help? Somebody needs to show the world that there can be a community of exuberant diversity, where people of diverse opinions, different sexual orientations, of different races and ethnic backgrounds can come together to support each other in their spiritual growth and to help heal the world. We can be that community. We can create that community. Will you help? Nobody can make it through this world alone. All of us need to be cared for by others in our time of need. No human life is without its tragedy and crisis and we need each other in our time of need. There is work to be done. Will you help? We have a mission in this congregation and it's beautifully said every Sunday morning. Will you join me in reciting our church aspirations? "Love is the spirit of this church, the quest for truth is its sacrament and service is its prayer. To dwell together in peace, to seek knowledge and freedom, and to help one another in fellowship, this is our aspiration."

Our staff wants to be a partner in this and we have a particular role to play. Under our new Empowered Organizational structure it is a different kind of role than this church has been used to. It is an oversimplification to say that we need to let the staff run the church so that the members can do ministry, but not too much of an oversimplification. We are trying to get away from a time when the staff spends all its time almost making decisions, then educating committees about why that decision is important, and selling that decision. Our empowered organization plan allows for a nimble and accountable structure where our staff is free to do its work and our ministry team is free to do its work under a series of policies, limitations policies, and careful oversight by our Board of Trustees. Right now, we are in the middle of this change, but I promise you as we go further along the process of our empowered organization, it will become clearer and it will mean that people who have gifts to give, ideas to offer, for ways to fulfill our mission in this world, they will have an easier time harnessing their gifts and their contributions to the mission of this church. If you are not familiar with the empowered organization, I refer you to our website.

Those of you who are new here should know that First Unitarian Universalist Church was founded in 1873. We grew up with this city. Through our history we have stood for freedom, reason, and tolerance. Long before most other organizations and institutions in our city and in our country, we stood for racial justice, we stood for free speech. During the 24 year ministry of Tom and Carolyn Owen-Towle, beloved colleagues and people I'm proud to follow, we grew to be the largest church in California and one of the largest in the United States, not because this church sought to grow but because this church did the right thing and offered people opportunities for spiritual growth and stood for something in the culture. We, before the culture as a whole, stood for equality of women, not only in the outside world but in the power structure of this congregation. We, before our whole society caught up with it, stood up for the rights of gays, lesbians, and transsexual people and for their full acceptance. We were involved in so many organizations and the founding of so many organizations in San Diego to that have helped meet the needs of those less fortunate.

I was impressed by two things when I came here to follow on that illustrious ministry. One is how much the members care for each other. This is truly extraordinary and unique. I know a lot of churches and we are among the best. We know how to do that here. It's because, long before covenant groups became popular and this wisdom was known that small groups are needed in long churches, you had men's groups, women's groups, neighborhood groups, hozas, and many opportunities for people to share deeply from their hearts and souls. That has created despite the size of our congregation bonds of friendship and intimacy. I also got an entrée in all the social justice and social change groups in San Diego that I visited. We have a reputation of standing for the right things in this community and I'm proud of that and I'm proud of us for being a part of that. I am very proud and happy to be your minister. Let me make that very clear. In fact as the popular song says, "our future is so bright that we need to wear shades."

I'm especially excited about some of the things that are happening in our immediate future. With the Rev. Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley you will have a team of ministers who are experienced, passionately dedicated to our crafts, and have complimentary gifts to offer this congregation and this community. I'm proud to say that it really does look like on September 15 we'll have a full time staff person to serve the needs of those who are 18 to 35 year-olds both on this campus and on university campuses. That is an exciting event. Our Board is about to release, after talking to many of you in open forums, a series of visions for our future. Your staff and your ministry teams will be developing those into a strategic plan. Here's what I hope will happen. I think we need a staff person to help with our program for middle school and high school youth. There is so much that can be done to serve that population. I think we need more ministry to the frail elderly among us, those who can't get around like they used to, but still love this church. I would love for them to know that they are cared about and a part of this church. Our intern next year, Victoria Ingram, will make that her special project, to expand our ministry to that population. Another thing I'd like to see is, finally, the fulfillment of a long-held dream of this congregation. I think in the next year or two, (let's not wait to long,) we should start a satellite congregation in the South Bay, one of the fastest growing areas in San Diego, the most diverse area in San Diego. There are so many potential Unitarian Universalists there whose lives could be changed for the better there. I think we could do that. I'm very excited about that possibility. In fifteen years, I see that everybody in San Diego will know who we are, what we stand for, and that Unitarian Universalism is a force for good in this world and that tens of thousands of people will have found a home here, in our congregation, in our partner congregations, and in the new congregations that will start in that time, people whose lives will be enriched, saved from meaninglessness, materialism, and loneliness by a sense of their unique gifts and our beloved community, people of all backgrounds, all sexual orientations, all racial and ethnic backgrounds. We will model the kind of world that humanity needs, here, for everyone to see so that there can be no doubt that we are about nothing less than saving the world. We need you. There is plenty to do. Will you join me?