

"THE EVOLUTION OF THE FELLOWSHIP: A SERMON IN FIVE ACTS"

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Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

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Act 1: "And Then Everything Changed"

Roger

Bill and Mary Jane Dunwiddie called the initial gathering of the Fellowship in 1955 at the Neenah Rec Building. After that meeting, the Fellowship next gathered in the home of Donna and Len Weis. It was cozy and comfortable. But the group decided that meeting in homes was a sure ticket to remaining forever cozy and comfortable--and small. They had a larger vision for the Fellowship than that. So they soon decided to meet in public places like the YMCA. With that decision, everything changed.

The first gathering or two were only for adults. There was no children's programming. Given that there was only a handful of people, did they really have the energy to pull off a religious education program? We better have the energy, they concluded, or the Fellowship won't be around for very long. With the leadership of Margaret Ferris and Donna Weis, and soon of Mary Jane Dunwiddie, they started an RE program. And then everything changed. The Fellowship would not be just for adults, but for children, too.

Twenty years later, the Fellowship had strayed a bit. It had become insulated and, consciously or unconsciously, exclusive. Its existence was a well-kept secret. Even Unitarian Universalists who moved to the Fox Valley had to work hard to find it. Not surprisingly, the numbers and energy began to dwindle. For a few years we were lucky to have more than ten people at a service! Then the congregation decided to open its doors and get the word out. And then everything changed.

During its first twenty-five years, the Fellowship rented space in various public buildings like the YMCA and the Girl Scout Headquarters. In 1981, the Girl Scouts decided they needed their space on Sunday mornings. It was time for the Fellowship to find somewhere else to rent on Sunday mornings. The congregation decided to buy the gigantic Moose Lodge for the gargantuan price of \$50,000. For the first time, the congregation had 24/7 space. And then everything changed.

At about the same time, people began asking whether it was time to get a minister to share in the leadership. The congregation decided to stick its toe in the water and hired a minister to come for a weekend once a month. And then everything changed.

Even though the doors had been opened in the 1970s, folks were still pretty reluctant to embrace growth. After all, they liked the Fellowship just the way it was. But in 1989, this

congregation of about a hundred souls made an intentional decision to grow. And then everything changed.

Prior to 1990, the Fellowship appeared to be exclusively composed of straight people. No doubt this apparent truth was a lie, but the fact is there wasn't a single member who had come out as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. Then a man named Chester relocated to the Fox Valley, joined the Fellowship, and chose not to hide he's gay. And then everything changed.

More people started coming and joining. The old Moose Lodge began to get crowded. What to do? How about add a service? But then we won't know everybody! Yep, that's true. But it's also true that there will be space for newcomers. We won't have a metaphorical sign at the front door saying "Sorry, full." So the Fellowship voted to add a service. And then everything changed.

Even with two services, though, the Moose Lodge soon got crowded again. Not only that, but the congregation realized that having treacherous steps that prevented folks using a wheelchair or walker from getting in the door just wasn't acceptable. At great cost, we built this enormous and much nicer and more functional building on Appleton's southeast side. And then everything changed.

Soon we added another service. But things began to get crowded again. At even greater cost, we built a mammoth sanctuary and the Legacy Room. And then everything changed.

Does this space feel the same as our cozier Fellowship Hall? No, just like meeting at the YMCA didn't feel the same as meeting in Len's and Donna's living room. The YMCA wasn't as intimate and cozy. That's a fact. This space isn't as intimate and cozy as our Fellowship Hall (let alone Len's and Donna's living room). That's a fact, too.

Again and again, from day one, the Fellowship has chosen to evolve. To adapt. To grow. To change everything--in spite of many of us loving the Fellowship exactly as it is at the moment.

Act 2: "Except What Didn't"

So over and over, everything changed. Except what didn't. Listen to the purpose of the Fellowship, written into the membership book when the new Fellowship chartered in 1957: "The purpose of this organization shall be to join its members into a religious and educational fellowship to develop human character and personal responsibility, to further individual freedom of belief and to advance liberal religion through study, service, and spiritual consecration." Our purpose today is remarkably in synch with this. A few days ago, I looked at the packet the Fellowship prepared for prospective ministers back when I was looking for a congregation in 1989-90. Search Committee chair Dave Gerlach described the Fellowship as exuding "a warmth, a zest, a vitality that is compelling." How much has it really changed since then? For twenty-three years, I've heard newcomers use

the exact same words to describe what the Fellowship feels like to them--even though it's seven times larger and in a very different space today than it was in 1990.

What is the core that abides? What hasn't changed as everything changed? These are words I'd use to describe the core that abides: warm, vital, vibrant, alive, ever adaptable, thriving, committed, engaged, transformative. What are your words for the core that abides?

Act 3: "So What's Next?"

Creating this new space has taken a lot of time, money and energy. So I say it's time to sit back and rest on our laurels for awhile. We deserve it. We've worked hard. Let's just pause for a year or two and catch our breath.

Tempting, isn't it? There's just one problem with this. If we're not moving forward, we're moving backward. It's impossible to maintain the status quo in a congregation. And the needs--our needs, the needs of our wider community, the needs of the world--keep on coming. The Fox Valley keeps crying out for a thriving Unitarian Universalist congregation. We cannot afford to take a timeout.

Leah

What moves us forward isn't random momentum; it's our vision. And the thing about a solid, clear mission (which we have) is that it is both a blessing and (if not a curse) than certainly a challenge. It is a blessing to be able to say to newcomers that we know who we are and that "we want to welcome everyone, grow in mind and spirit and lead in social justice." It's a perfect introduction to life at the Fellowship and it can also remind us who we're called to be when we face decisions or opportunities. That's the easy part.

The challenge is that when we commit to welcoming everyone, it means that rather than just being friendly to people we already know are like us, we reach out of our comfort zones to figure out how to welcome those who we might perceive as different. When we want to grow in mind and spirit, instead of only relying on spiritual truths we've already uncovered, we are willing to change in order that we might grow even more. Leading in social justice calls us to not only perfect our positions on the issues we've always cared about but to think strategically about how to lead our communities forward in embracing causes that we ourselves are still learning about how to champion.

So here is the awkward part. It's a little presumptuous of me to talk about the Fellowship's mission and future because I don't know how much longer I will be your minister. I was hired as your assistant minister with the agreement that if it seemed like a good fit for all parties then I would be called as your associate minister. A Call Committee has been formed to invite reflection on if my ministry is a good fit and then all members will vote on this question at the congregational meeting in May.

It's not really my style to play hard to get so I hope what I have to say will not come as a great surprise. I feel so honored to be your minister.

I couldn't imagine a better senior minister to learn from and work with or a better group of people to serve; you all inspire and educate me in ways I can't express. I hope I get to stay here. I can see myself in the Fellowship's future because it's a place committed to evolution and to living out a vibrant, affirming and challenging mission.

I'm not the only one who wants to be a part of such a community; it's why people hear about the Fellowship, why they visit and it's what keeps them returning again and again for decades. As we consider how the Fellowship has evolved and where it might go in the future, Roger has some ideas:

Roger

Looking into my crystal ball, I see some obvious things--like operating in this expanded space is going to require more money. I see some things I hope for: pulling our weight in our Unitarian Universalist Association by paying our fair share of dues; a Music Director working the hours one would expect in a congregation of 700 and not a congregation of 150; a professional on our staff who does publications, another who does development work, and another who is a community organizer. I see weekly services and religious education classes in Oshkosh as well as on this site. And I see the possibility of fusing with nearby congregations--in Green Bay and/or Fond du Lac, for example. Think of the impact on Northeast Wisconsin of a congregation of 850 or a thousand or fifteen hundred Unitarian Universalists meeting in sites stretching from Fond du Lac to Green Bay. Can you imagine it?

There's too much to do and be. We can't rest on our laurels for a year or two!

Act 4: "A Democratic Approach to Giving"

Leah

It's hard to talk about giving. For some people, I think it's because they don't want to communicate the idea that anyone is unworthy if their check has too few zeros. But for me, that's not why it's hard. Don't get me wrong; The Fellowship's commitment to care for and about everyone is not contingent on pledge amount. You don't even have to pledge to give me or Roger a call and say "Hey, I want to talk."

But you know what does feel tricky for me? If I suggest that someone give money, I want it to be fair. One of the UU principles that gets less play than it should is the 5th one, about the use of the democratic process. It gets overlooked because we associate 'democracy' with this country's political system of direct democratic vote. I mean, what does that really have to do with the Fellowship, except that members vote for a congregational president like citizens do for a national one?

To me, democratic process is about fairness in a broader sense. If everyone is welcome to participate, it means that needs to happen fairly, with each person offering and receiving according to their capacities, desires and needs.

We all have capacities, desires and needs in the world and also when it comes to being part of the Fellowship. The exact same amount of volunteer time or money pledged or

services attended isn't going to be possible or even desirable for each person. And it can take experimenting to find the right balance.

When I was in my mid 20s I decided to try good old-fashioned tithing. I calculated 10% of what I earned and gave it each month to my congregation. I was genuinely excited about all the cool stuff happening at the First Unitarian Church of Oakland, CA but, also, part of me was curious. I generally tried to be generous but I'd never carefully added it all up and sent it regularly to one place. How would that feel? More or less generous? More or less sustainable?

This experiment was big stretch for me, and I was proud enough to tell a friend. She was very impressed so I had to remind her that I was in graduate school, working only half time and living in large part because of student loans and the fact that my aunt let me grocery shop out of her fridge. I wasn't making the big bucks.

An observer of the church's financial records would not see my pledge as very mighty. If everyone there gave only the modest amount I did, there probably could be electricity at only one service.

But my friend said something really meaningful to me: "You may not be the top giver but you're doing your part. Isn't that what makes it fair? Each person gives what makes sense in their life."

My partner and I arrange our giving a little differently now. We still give away at least 10% of our income, although we divide that between our UU homebases and other organizations doing good work in the world, as well as some people in our extended family. But for me, regardless of how much I give, it feels like democracy in action to think about my giving as part of a whole. The whole picture of the world is that people can give in different ways. The whole picture of my family's income considers all the needs and blessings of our life situation.

Your Stewardship Committee has been helping me evolve in my thinking about this spirit of fairness. This year they've added to the pledge cards a little optional question about whether you consider percentage when you pledge. It's their way of acknowledging that each of us has different resources. It's wouldn't be a democratic process if they said, "Each pledge unit should give x number of dollars." Our lives aren't the same and neither are our incomes and assets, our obligations and commitments. And that's more than ok; it's part of the beauty of this place. But we hold in common the idea that it is only fair that we each should get the opportunity to contribute in the way that makes the most sense to us.

Act 5: "A Personal Testimonial (Offering)"

Rev. Dottie Mathews

Thanks to Roger and to Leah and for giving me a brief chance to share a bit about what this Fellowship means to me and to my family and how we have *evolved*, being part of this community and, particularly, because of this community.

What I have learned over my several years with this Fellowship is that there is a certain magic in this place. Wherever I have been on my journey – whatever I was able to bring of my heart, my time, and my contributions – being a part of this place has always made the joys of my life more enjoyable, and the sorrows more bearable. Love does that -- and over and over again, this place has proven itself to be a community of love.

I entered these doors in late 1998 being a recent Los Angeles transplant who had long ago given up searching for anything approaching a religion. I wasn't cynical about religion; I just didn't feel a need for anything like that in my life.

But being new to the Midwest, what I *did* need and want was to meet and hang with COOL people -- and a coworker told me that cool people were to be found at the Fellowship. So I checked it out, and it was certainly a "eureka" moment for me. The faith that I found here made sense in such a deep and profound way. It was really easy for me to very quickly raise my hand and say, "Count me IN!"

Not long after arriving here, I met Rosie Geiser, who shortly thereafter became my wife. (Rosie "welcomed" me at the Newcomer Picnic).

This congregation supported us through two arduous bouts of cancer for my youngest son, Tim. And later this sacred home said to me, "You Go Girl!" when I announced that at the age of 50 I had decided to leave behind my business career, enter seminary, and become a minister. After graduation, you allowed me come and serve as your second minister for five beautiful and extremely rewarding years.

And, then, three years ago, when my oldest child's mental health needs became the most prominent focus for our family, you even supported us as we said, "Goodbye for a while" as we got Philip back on track and I embraced my new role as a Community Minister serving as the Chaplain for Goodwill.

This month's theme has been *evolution*. And (like you, I'm sure) my family and I have busily evolved - just as the Fellowship has – over these years.

Leah just described how she and Amy mindfully discern how to allocate the "giving back" they do financially, and Rosie and I do the same. The dollar amount that the 10% translates into has fluctuated a great deal with our changing circumstances. We have a long list of projects and causes about which we are passionate. And the Fellowship is always at the top of the list (including being named in our will) because we see the direct and measurable difference the Fellowship has made in our own lives, in the lives of our children, and in our Community.

This weekend as Rosie and I worked on our taxes, we were extremely happy to realize that our capital campaign pledge is one payment away from being finished. And, because of that, we are able to significantly increase our operation pledge this year. That makes us both very happy because we completely believe that there is indeed a certain magic in this

place -- and we want very much to do our part to help sustain and grow that magic for years and years and years to come.

And so may it be.