

**"WHAT I WOULD SAY IF I WAS LEAVING"**

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Reading:

“When Giving Is All We Have” by Alberto Rios

*One river gives*

*Its journey to the next.*

We give because someone gave to us.  
We give because nobody gave to us.

We give because giving has changed us.  
We give because giving could have changed us.

We have been better for it,  
We have been wounded by it—

Giving has many faces: It is loud and quiet,  
Big, though small, diamond in wood-nails.

Its story is old, the plot worn and the pages too,  
But we read this book, anyway, over and again:

Giving is, first and every time, hand to hand,  
Mine to yours, yours to mine.

You gave me blue and I gave you yellow.  
Together we are simple green. You gave me

What you did not have, and I gave you  
What I had to give—together, we made

Something greater from the difference.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/when-giving-all-we-have>.

## Sermon

Did you know I actually announced my departure from the Fellowship in late February of 2005—almost exactly ten years ago? I just didn't know back then exactly when I'd be leaving. I said I didn't know whether it would be in a year or ten years or in 2030 when I'm 67. What I did know with one hundred percent certainty was that one of three things would sooner or later end my ministry here: I'd decide to leave (by resigning or retiring); you'd decide it was time for me to leave and fire me; or I'd die. I'm cautiously optimistic that I will get to my departure four months hence without being fired or dying. I will count this as among my proudest accomplishments.

I announced my departure back in 2005 so I'd finally have the opportunity to do a leave-taking sermon. I was frankly jealous of colleagues who get to cut loose after they announced their resignation or retirement and totally tell it like it is. Now that I've supplied an end date to my departure, I'm going to take the opportunity again to do a leave-taking sermon.

Let me preface what I would to say if I was leaving (which I am) with this: I am very glad to have stayed these ten years since my first departure sermon. They have been good years. A few days ago I received some statistics from the Unitarian Universalist Association for congregations that currently have more than 400 members. The statistics showed that in the last ten years, our Fellowship grew by more than seventy-seven percent. Only one congregation on the list grew more in terms of percentage than the Fellowship (All Souls in Washington, D.C.). Seventy-seven percent is just a number, but behind it are the names of everyone who joined in the last decade. I am so grateful that I was here to greet and get to know each individual who makes up that seventy-seven percent increase. And what a joy it has been to see them impact the Fellowship, and the Fellowship impact them.

So what would I say if I was leaving? Even though I have four more months of active work remaining, I'm going to take the weird and uncomfortable step today of talking about "you" rather than about "us."

The first thing I'd say is the same thing I said in 2005. It's a hard thing to say. But it needs to be said. Collectively you, the members and friends of the Fellowship, don't give enough money to fund your beautiful, compelling vision. What I said back in 2005 is still true today: the money is there. Based on demographic studies we've done over the years, the money is there—in your wallets and purses and bank accounts. Not in each of your wallets and purses and bank accounts—some of you can't afford to give much if anything, or any more than you're giving now. But collectively, the money to fund your vision is there. It just hasn't completely materialized here.

When I said this in 2005, the Fellowship responded beautifully. The extra giving enabled us within a year to add a membership professional (Marie Blohowiak) and a second minister (Dottie Mathews). That's when things really started to take off.

The Fellowship has grown amazingly in spite of never being staffed for growth. You have done this because of your extraordinary volunteerism (a great thing) and on the backs of your underpaid staff (not such a great thing).

For the first time ever, today I get to ask you to be generous in the annual stewardship drive without the awkward knowledge that if you respond, I'll get a bigger paycheck. This is the real joy of this second "What I'd Say if I Was Leaving" sermon: this time, my salary is not part of the equation. So it's just the facts, ma'am, and the Fellowship's mission.

So here's the lowdown: it's embarrassing to have such a dedicated, excellent staff and pay them closer to the minimum than the midpoint of the Unitarian Universalist Association guidelines for a congregation of our size. These guidelines are indexed to reflect the local economy, so the lower cost of living in the Fox Valley is not an excuse.

I feel badly that I didn't realize until a couple months ago that accredited interim ministers need to be paid at the midpoint of the UU Association guidelines. This means that if you want an accredited interim minister, you will have to pay the interim senior minister who starts in August about \$10,000 more a year than I'm being paid. "Accredited" means a minister who specializes in transition ministry and has been trained and credentialed in interim work. That my position is behind where it should be isn't a shock: I was near the bottom in a compensation survey of the senior ministers in the largest forty-five UU congregations a few years ago.

I'm not bitter about this, and mostly I blame myself for not pushing more. But I don't feel good about leaving you in a vulnerable spot regarding something as crucial to your future as the caliber of interim minister you can attract. I believe you will have to find this money in the next budget or you will seriously compromise the interim period (and therefore your future) by not being able to attract an accredited interim.

Meeting this year's annual stewardship drive goal and creating a budget of \$720,000 will enable you to pay for an accredited interim minister. Meeting the goal will also get all the rest of your staff halfway from where they are now to the midpoint of the guidelines. The plan then will be to get them the rest of the way to mid-point in the next two years. Paying your superlative, hard-working staff at least the midpoint of the guidelines would be wonderful, and is long overdue.

More generosity in pledging will also allow you to move toward paying your fair share to the Unitarian Universalist Association. By chronically not paying our fair share, we have not been in right relationship with our fellow Unitarian Universalists across the country. I remember so vividly when a minister friend of mine whose congregation has always paid its fair share visited the Fellowship. He said something like this to our leadership: "Your Fellowship has a membership professional, which is great. My congregation doesn't because instead we're paying our fair share to the UU Association. I've had to work a lot of extra hours doing some of the work of a membership professional. This sacrifice on my part is carrying you. That's not right." I agree: it's not right. Or fair. So meeting the \$720,000 goal for next year's budget will enable you to get half way to fair share from where you are next year, and then the plan is to get the rest of the way in the two following years.

Switching gears from money, the second thing I want to say today is that fulfilling the Fellowship's mission to be a leader in social justice is probably going to get harder. For twenty

years, the Fellowship has been a leader locally in the struggle for marriage equality. We could arguably say "the" leader. I believe, for example, that the INCLUDE campaign and the "It Gets Better" events this week would simply not have happened without the inclusive seeds the Fellowship sowed over the years.

By 2006 when the anti-marriage equality constitutional amendment won in Wisconsin, our stand for marriage equality was a winner for the Fellowship (if not the state). It translated to more members and more generosity—not just from LGBTQ folks but from straight folks, too. Of course growing in numbers and increasing our income wasn't why we stood for marriage equality, but the truth is that in many ways this was not a particularly courageous stand. It's been gold for us.

I think the next social justice frontier for the Fellowship will be the continuing struggle for rights and full inclusion for people of color—especially black Americans—and people who identify as transgender. To stand with blacks and other people of color, those of you who are white are going to need to do a hard, painful examination of your privilege. (I'll be doing that same work in St. Louis.) To stand with trans folks, those of you who are not trans are going to have to look at your assumptions about gender and sexuality, and your privilege compared to trans people. This also is not going to be easy work. And unlike standing for marriage equality, you're not likely as a result to get points in the community and people flocking to join you. Your social justice witness is going to need to get edgier.

The third thing I'd say if I was leaving is really important, especially in the face of the heavy things I've said thus far. Maybe the best thing this Fellowship has going for it (out of many great things) is its spirit of hospitality and exuberant joy. Both were present when I arrived in 1990. They've shone through as we've grown seven-fold, as we've added services and built a new building and then a new sanctuary. So many newcomers comment on how palpable the hospitality and joy feels when they walk in. So it has always been, at least as long as I've been here. What an amazing and rare treasure! Even as you continue to explore tough subjects and the many challenges of the human journey, hold onto your hospitality and joy!

In May, I'll come back to the fourth thing I want to say to you today when "tradition" is our worship and learning theme. For now, I'll say that a line from our "Principles for a Healthy Congregation" statement—the Fellowship's expression of how we aspire to interact with each other—caught my eye: "We strive to respect tradition and also embrace change as the needs of our community change." Living up to this aspiration is going to be particularly important during the interim period and in the first years after you call a new senior minister. You have been amazingly skilled at change. There's no way you would have grown so much without you're being remarkably adaptable. Stay open to new ideas, approaches and practices! Stay adaptable! This is a must for a good transition!

I have the sense that the Fellowship is ready to burst into a new flowering and period of increased growth. This may not happen during the interim period—it typically doesn't—but I am confident it will happen in the following years if not during the interim. Can the Fellowship grow another seventy-seven percent in the next decade? It wouldn't surprise me a bit. I know there's another 536 people in the Fox Valley who would find their lives transformed if they

discovered this place and felt welcomed when they visit! I would like to think this bursting forth would have happened if I stayed another decade. I hope it will happen without me. No one will be more joyous than I if the Fellowship bursts forth into something even more amazing in the coming years. So don't feel like things going astonishingly well here in the years ahead will make me feel bad. Don't feel like you're disloyal to my legacy if you revel in what happens in the coming years. I'll be reveling from afar, too.

I will close with one last charge: cherish this Fellowship. Treat it with love and respect and care. Part of how you do this is financial. Be as generous as you can: it's good for the Fellowship, good for your ideals, good for the Fox Valley community, and good for you. This is why this year I'm giving \$450 a month (\$5400 a year) to the Fellowship. This gift is a tangible expression of my cherishing the Fellowship. It is also an expression of my values. My wife Amy gives the same amount to her church. Giving money to our congregations is a source of great meaning and joy for us. In giving, we are tangibly part of the alchemy that takes our blue and another's yellow and makes a new, simple, beautiful green.

I have to tell you that my gift to the Fellowship is going away when I go away. I will be joining a new congregation and will need to be generous there. We're losing a few other larger pledges due to people moving away. So the truth with this stewardship drive is that there's a hole to be filled just to get us back to where we are now.

Before we even started the stewardship drive this weekend, a family (which wishes to remain anonymous) came forward and told me they viewed the senior minister transition period as incredibly important for the Fellowship's future. They have decided to give \$10,000 on top of their already generous pledge for the next year to help the Fellowship make the most of the interim period. The money will help you meet the priorities I've described for the first year of the interim period, especially the salary increase necessary to get an accredited interim minister.

One member of the household giving the extra \$10,000 put it beautifully:

We know that this (interim) period is critical to the long-term success of our faith community. In challenging times, communities need to rally for the common good. This isn't a challenging time in the sense that something dire has happened, but it feels somewhat uncertain—even with faith that it will all be fine. Our collective commitment creates stability as we move into the next chapter of the Fellowship's life. It levels the ground for us to build upon.

Wow! Talk about putting your money where your mouth is!

I know most of you can't give \$10,000 extra for a year or two! But I hope you will feel moved by this family's act of faith and devotion to think about what you can do. The Fellowship needs you. (And, I'd hazard to guess, you need a healthy, vital Fellowship.) This \$10,000 won't on its own get you to the goal of \$720,000. It simply makes it more likely that together, you can get there.

I said last fall that nothing would make me happier or honor me more than a successful annual stewardship drive as well as a successful Greater Good campaign (which we had). If you feel moved to honor me, I hope you'll do so by doing your part to make this the most effortless, the most successful, the most jaw-dropping-I-can't-believe-we-gave-so-much stewardship drive ever! I don't know if I deserve that kind of a tribute, but you deserve it! The Fellowship deserves it! This green we have created together from our yellows and blues has been so good and so life-giving for so many of us and for our community. If you are able, now is a really good time to give financial expression to your gratitude.

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