

Together We Rise

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

March 24, 2024

Reflection on the Annual Pledge Campaign by Donna Aase

Good morning everyone. I'm Donna Aase and I'm a member of the pledge campaign team this year. Together with Rev. Kathryn, I have the privilege of talking about the pledge campaign during worship this morning. I'm sure Kathryn will have more philosophical things to say, and you know I will include at least a few nuts and bolts by the time I'm finished, but I want to start with a short reflection on the theme and logo for this year's campaign.

The words came first, *Together we Rise*, selected by your Board of Trustees to represent their vision and hope for the congregation in the coming years. The idea of a balloon came next, as the campaign team brainstormed things that rise.

And since we're rising together, what's more perfect than a hot air balloon, which carries a basket of passengers like this? [photo of Donna and friends in a hot air balloon]

This is my first time in a hot air balloon, last year for Merv's birthday, and it was truly a dazzling display at the break of day. When the pilot wasn't heating the air with a giant blowtorch, the quiet of floating above the earth, seeing cars and fields and trees from a thousand feet high, was an experience I'll carry with me. The rough landing, now that I'll try to forget.. But for the pledge campaign, we're focusing on the rising part, cooperating together to meet the needs of this community that we call church.

One way that we're asking you to be together for the pledge campaign is this special service this morning. We're glad you're here with us, in person and online. And if you're here in person, has anyone mentioned that cake will be served after service?

Another major way that we're asking you to be together for the pledge campaign is to welcome a Pledge Connector for a conversation about how our values are supported by the congregation and how we can support the congregation in return. These Pledge Connectors will visit small groups and working teams during the campaign, and members and friends who aren't currently in such groups will be contacted in a few weeks for a one-on-one meeting. Whether you meet your Pledge Connector in a group or team or one-on-one, I hope it's an engaging and fruitful conversation.

We also hope you'll come together for worship in the coming weeks of the pledge campaign. Next week is a special Easter presentation, and the weeks after that will feature members speaking from the pulpit about their connection with UUCV.

Finally, we want you to be together as you RISE and RESPOND, and for that I need to tell you a little bit about these containers and what they're for. In previous campaigns, we've used shapes on the wall to represent pledges as they come in. This year, we're using a different medium: puff balls! Why you might ask? Besides the fact that they're small, soft, fun and can be used for craft projects in RE later? Because we want to represent everyone together in one place, and at the same time we want to use different colors to show different types of responses.

New pledges, first time pledges, such as the one from new members Sarah and Jeff Coleman-Payne/Braden and Kelly Kanyid, will be represented by the color YELLOW. Responses that represent an

increased pledge, such as my own, will be GREEN. Responses that represent a pledge that's the same or less than last year's, such as Rev. Kathryn's, will be PURPLE. And finally, we know that some of you will not be making a financial pledge for the coming year, like employees, such as Ransom, our AV Coordinator. Please respond and let us know that, and your response will be ORANGE.

I'd like to end by saying thank you, in English. Thank you to everyone who stepped forward to help with the campaign, especially my fellow team members and all the Pledge Connectors, but also the anthem singers, cake servers, and everyone else. Thank you to everyone who is here this morning in person or online to hear the good news of the pledge campaign. Thank you in advance to everyone who responds to our call, with whatever pledge makes sense for you today. Thank you for being part of this congregation, where together, we rise.

***Together We Rise©* by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert**

Thank you, choir. That was beautiful and inspirational. [they had just sung *Rise!* by Mark Hayes] Only it occurs to me that we are singing about a resurrection a week before Easter. Welcome to Palm Sunday in a UU church.

It is a sacred time in many places around the world. Last week was the vernal equinox and Persian New Year – a holiday I first celebrated two springs ago with my colleague the Rev. Mitra Rahnema who you may have met because she's preached here before. We made wishes and jumped over fire. We are currently in the midst of Ramadan, a time of spiritual discipline for Muslims, a time of increased charity and generosity and a deep contemplation of one's relationship with God. Tomorrow marks one of Hinduism's well known holy days, called Holi, celebrating the arrival of spring and new life. Passover also begins tomorrow, commemorating the Jewish people's escape from slavery in ancient Egypt, a very important Jewish holiday. Today in church Christians remember Christ's return to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover – at the beginning of what they call Semana Santa, or Holy Week, which will lead to a remembrance of the crucifixion of Jesus on Good Friday, and his resurrection on Easter morning:

*Rise, and feel your power,
Rise, this is your hour,
Rise, just spread your wings and start to soar.
Rise, explore your dream,
Rise, above everything,
Rise, you've always known there's something more.*

Resurrection stories are powerful metaphors – reaching back to Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt, ancient India in Buddhism and Norse mythology, ancient Mesoamerica – Quetzalcóatl. Many of them tied to the seasons and the resurrecting life we see in the spring – important because of our dependence on and interdependence with the natural world. We'll explore a resurrection metaphor next week for Easter in the story of the Velveteen Rabbit, written a few short years after the so-called Spanish Flu pandemic or the Great Influenza. Within months, that flu had killed more people than any other illness in recorded history, so death was our collective mind a hundred years ago, as was resurrection as the world recovered and began to rise out of that awful pandemic.

And of course, this morning, the metaphor is apt for our church. Together we rise, is the theme for this pledge campaign because we, too endured a pandemic, shut our doors and suffered losses. The recent, revitalizing energy around this place, has resulted in a resurrection of spirits if not yet coffers. New families have found us and made us their home here and joined the church, as 10 people did this morning. We welcomed 8 new members in December, and there are many new people around who have not officially joined in membership, but are with us in community, and we value your presence as well.

People have joined us because the world is hurting and we need each other. Why? Why? We ask of a world whose glue has come unstuck. These hands, your hands are the same hands that give the world its most needful thing. And these hands, when joined with other hands, can do more together than each can do alone.

I've become clearer in the last several years about the work of church and the importance of that work. We are about healing and repair. We do that work by deepening our spiritual practice, building the beloved community and acting on our values in the wider world. But the work is healing and repair. I have heard resistance to the idea that we need to heal from Unitarian Universalists over the years – especially those who were told in other faith traditions that they were broken. They came here because, to quote the bumper sticker, they were born right the first time. But here's where I need to inject a little theology. Original sin is this notion that we descended from Adam and Eve and because of their sin we were born sinful and wicked and need Christ to redeem us through the church. That's why the Easter resurrection is so important to Christians because he "died for our sins."

There's a difference between that state of original sin and the state I'm speaking of that which requires, in my opinion, much healing. I personally don't believe you were born sinful. I actually don't believe you were born "good" either. I think we are born, and that the biological state we are in is value neutral until we put meaning on it. But regardless, as a UU, you can believe we are born good, we are born sinful, we are born neutral – because what binds us together is not a single system of belief. What binds us in community is how we treat each other with those different beliefs. And the healing we need to do isn't about our original state as babies. We need to heal from the inevitable trauma of a mismatch between our needs and the world's care. It can happen early from our caretakers, or later in the institutions that shape us – but in a culture that is sick, people are going to become sick. "*When the world is sick, can't no one be well, but I dreamt we was all beautiful and strong.*" Lyrics from God Bless our dead Marines by A Silver Mt. Zion. That snippet of lyric has been turned into a popular song of itself that we've featured here on a Sunday before.

Talking about this sick culture reminds me of the Windigo, the legendary monster of the Anishinaabe people that Robin Wall Kimmerer tells us about in *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Our sickness comes from a culture of supremacy thinking and over-consumption.

"The beast has been called an evil spirit that devours mankind... Writer Steve Pitt states that 'a Windigo was a human whose selfishness has overpowered their self-control to the point that satisfaction is no longer possible.' No matter what they call it, Johnston and many other scholars point to the current epidemic of self-destructive practices – addiction to alcohol, gambling, technology, and more – as a sign that Windigo is alive and well. In Ojibwe ethics, Pitt says, "any overindulgent habit is self-destructive and self-destruction is Windigo.' And just as Windigo's bite is infectious, we all know too well that self-

destruction drags along many more victims – in our human families as well as in the more-than-human world.”

When the world be sick, can't no one be well, but I dreamt we was all beautiful and strong. Another line from the long original song is “the world’s a mess and so are we.” We respond to that mess by coming together and working on our spiritual practices, deepening our understandings. We come together to work on our relationships here and building the beloved community both here and out there. And we take our values out into the world to help heal the sick culture and world we are in.

As Abbey Tennis reminds us, this is not easy work. Happily ever after doesn’t every really arrive – because as soon as we find it, we hit a roadblock. As Tennis says “sooner or later, every powerful new commitment hits a roadblock: a fight with a lover. A limit of our body or our skill. Simple exhaustion. Casual boredom. Complicated betrayal. Sooner or later, we wonder whether it’s worth remaining devoted to that which used to light us on fire and now leaves us tepid- including our devotion to our religious community.” End quote.

I hope that the people who have joined our church this morning aren’t feeling tepid about this religious community, but I do always remind folks who are joining the church that you will reach a roadblock with this community, just as you will in any community. It will break your heart. And it is often the case that it is after that first heartbreak, after overcoming that first roadblock that true membership, true devotion results. “It is only when we choose each other again and again that we can cut through the shallowness of our culture that starves our souls,” says Abbey Tennis, “Choosing each other, and choosing once more, is the only way we can become fully known and fully loved.”

UUCV and many congregations have encountered a similar roadblock – as we rise up out of the ashes from a complete shut-down, losing and gaining members in a great shuffle, it’s been hard and heartbreaking to recover from the loss of income when we weren’t meeting in person. Just as many families suffered financial heartbreaks in this time. The Board of Trustees held a congregational meeting last Sunday to tell you about it. They had on their goals for the year to do more education with the congregation about our finances and that meeting was one piece of a plan. As Budget Director, Mellie Hock, wrote in her bulletin article on Friday, it did not go as they had imagined. She wasn’t prepared for some of the questions, so she wrote a bulletin article this week, which I hope you all read, to answer that which she couldn’t last week.

So, I’m about to talk about money, and I know many of you turn off your local public radio station during the pledge drive – I know because my husband does – but I ask you to not tune me out now.

The main questions were, what are we asking for this year? And what was our budget last year? The budget you adopted last year at the congregational meeting was for \$339,191 and the amount the Board has asked you to pledge this year is \$416,859. She provided lots of information in that Friday article so please do find that and read it. And ask your questions of Board members – you’ll notice that each week there is a Board Member on call – and that is someone you can find for a conversation about the budget and how we do church.

It is important that we raise the money the Board has asked for this year, but as your spiritual leader, I want to let you know that it is just as important to us that we do it in a just, loving, and caring way. We have set a goal of hearing from everybody during this campaign – regardless of how much you are able

or not able to give. So, Donna explained how the puff balls will work. We want to keep track and highlight for you all the people who respond – like the new members today who are making a pledge for the first time, and those members like Donna herself who are able to increase their pledge, and people like me who are pledging the same amount. I'm doing that only because my income itself is tied to the pledge drive and I don't know what will be in my paycheck next. I figured it was better to raise my pledge in June when you give me a raise rather than pledge that raise now and have to take away my promise if you're unable to pay me a cost of living increase. Others will have their particular reasons for not being able to raise their current pledge or even having to reduce their pledge. And finally, there are those every year who are unable to make a pledge. We want to hear from you, also. Not to put you on the spot, but because we care. We care not only about you and your financial difficulties, but we also care about the volunteer who will be trying to follow up with you if we don't get a response. If you're a member, we can offer you a waiver, if you're unable to make a financial contribution in any particular year, but we need to know about your need to do that. Our AV Coordinator, Ransom, offered to be our example of someone who doesn't pledge to the church, for he came to us for a job, not a community. But that clear communication from him is helpful. Because sometimes, staff do make pledges to the church they serve, actually like Donna – who is now a volunteer but used to work for the church as a part time administrator. We each have a unique relationship to this church and our pledges will reflect that relationship. I should also reassure you that your pledge response is private. There are no names associated with those puff balls – except this morning, with permission of the responders, in order to explain the colors. And of course not everyone can see the visual, so we will also be reporting numbers each week.

One of the questions that was asked in last week's congregational meeting is how much do I need to increase my pledge to meet that goal? The answer is not a straightforward 20%. We seek an increase of 20% of the entire goal, but the number of pledging units is changing and the needs and financial circumstances of our people are ever changing. Yes, in an equitable, fair world, if everyone who pledged last year would pledge this year by increasing their amount by 20% we'd make that goal. But the world's a mess and so are we. Because we want the world to be more fair and equitable than it is, we know that those with the most will have to give a higher percentage of their wealth than those with the least money. If you have more, we ask that you give more, so that all continue to be included in this community.

This will come as no surprise, but the economy doesn't actually work like that out there in "real world" but we can make our values real here in this little section of the world, with your help. It really will take everyone.

A reason that the Board submitted a pledge goal that is 20% higher than last year's is that they wish you to catch up and make up the ground lost last year. If we can do this, we won't be asking for that much in subsequent years. As Penny said last Sunday, last year "the board could not come up with a budget matching promised income without our staff taking a major hit. This took the form of reducing their Cost of Living Adjustments dramatically and essentially eliminating professional expenses." Thankfully, they were able to write and get a grant from the endowment that provided professional expenses outside the budget. Penny talked about how compensating our staff fairly is the right thing to do, and also helps us keep the excellent professionals we have on staff. She pointed out that staff compensation cannot be adjusted retroactively and how it is essential that we move salaries to where they should be

so that our staff do not experience the compounding effect of multiple year inadequate adjustments to their pay.

Now, I'm going to be honest with you. I always find myself in an awkward position at pledge time because my salary is the largest and as chief of staff, I'm inclined to offer that you cut my pay first. However, the cumulative effect of that puts the congregation in a very difficult position when I leave and you discover you can't afford to replace your minister. I'm not planning to retire in the next couple of years, but I do turn 60 in June. That's no secret.

We are living in difficult times. It was suggested to me recently that I change my language about these uncertain times – when I thank people, I refer to the uncertainty or difficulty or danger of this moment in time. The suggestion was that I choose language that is more positive and forward thinking, which I get – I understand the impulse. But, on the other hand, I don't think you the congregation are under any illusion that the times we live in are particularly positive or hopeful. We are not living in a happily ever after scenario. Which does not mean that we can't be happy. We are just living in a time which requires a lot of work. We have to work at creating community in a time of polarization, we have to work at peace in a time of war, we have to work for environmental justice in a time of climate change, and equity in a time of economic disparity. This religion, this faith, is not an easy path. We do not coerce you to join or demand you give money to the church. We do not threaten you with everlasting hell. You are free to choose and we honor the choices you make. We aspire to be a faith set free from fear. We hope and trust that this community adds value to your life, helps you live with a deep assurance of the flame that burns within, and that you wish to support it financially.

We may be in uncertain times, but this is also a sacred time. Whether you celebrated the vernal equinox, the Persian new year, or Ramadan, or are about to celebrate Passover, Holi, or Semana Santa, may you be warmed by the blessings of community and may our promise find fulfillment. Together we rise.