

**“Butterflies and Zebras and Moonbeams and Fairy Tales”**  
**Rev. Greg Ward and Jacki Weber**  
**Unitarian Universalist Community Church of Santa Monica**  
**March 11, 2018**

**CALL TO WORSHIP** (Jacki Weber, Worship Associate)

Reverend Greg last year asked the members of our church board to take an Enneagram test and share the results at our fall board retreat. It turns out I am an Achiever.

As an Achiever Parent, I've worked hard to give my kids healthy independence through Attachment Parenting. Promote healthy bodies with healthful nutrition. Give my kids a voice through family meetings over home-cooked meals. And develop a family that pitches in to get things done through chore charts, a reward system, and a big sign in the living room with a Maya Angelou quote that says, “Nothing will work unless you do.”

And behold, it was very good! They have grown and thrived and they are amazing adolescents.

And then I woke up in January and everything was different.

In a knock-down-drag-out-come-to-Jesus conversation, my son clearly communicated to me that my achievement-oriented tactics were no longer effective. What he needed now is my presence.

While I'd been focused on getting out of his way so he could flourish, he told me he'd felt left to his own devices. My adolescent son needed me in a whole new way.

So there I sat. Completely flabbergasted.

And I turned to my good friend Google, who led me to a book that led me to a new spiritual path made just for me at this moment of my life.

Today, I am trying on letting achievement take a back seat to presence. It's a whole different lens.

I am starting to truly understand Margaret Meade's statement “you cannot do great things, only small things with great love.”

**CHALICE LIGHTING**

Today I light the chalice with words from Elias Amidon, courtesy of Bev Schoenberg and the meditation class she co-leads here at church.

“It's the gesture, the presence, the moment, the intention that is determinant. It is the action of showing up a thousand times to contribute. It's not about the result.”

**STORY FOR ALL AGES**                      **Greg**

Most every Sunday – and on many other occasions – the members and friends and visitors to UUCV put money in the plate to help UUCV to accomplish the good work it can to care for one another and promote Love and Justice for our – and ALL – people around the church. In all our usual offerings, the Board and the staff work to do the best they can to make the most of members generosity.

People routinely express their faith in the board and the staff and expect them to be thoughtful, creative, effective and responsible for turning the money into Love and Justice.

But, as Unitarian Universalists, we don't believe that faith flows only in one direction. Ministers, Staff, Board members and volunteers aren't the only ones with good ideas. Nor are the special agencies like foodbanks, disaster relief and agencies for minority rights the only ones capable of doing good work. Sometimes when a church extends its faith and confidence and trust in its members – especially the youngest of members who have tremendous imagination, creativity and heart – we all learn something. That's what we're going to try.

This is not the church's money. This is from Rev. Greg. There are few examples that Rev. Greg has seen people use this reverse offering to do.

Examples:

One young woman took her money and set up a small table at the neighborhood Farmer's Market and distributed fliers about OWL (Our Whole Lives) which she just graduated from. The brochure listed all it had done for her.

- Gave her accurate information from which she could make safe decisions as she became sexually curious
- Increased her ability to have hard conversations – with her partners, parents and peers
- Helped her understand the important connection between love, respect, honesty and sex.

She raised 40x the amount of money she was given and brought 6 new people to attend her congregation.

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One seven year old used his money to buy paint supplies and she painted ten pictures about the love she felt when she went to church. She wrote "When I am part of Love..." above each picture and she asked a local coffee shop if they would hang them and tell people they were for sale. All ten pictures sold, and she donated 10x the money back to the church.

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One 12 year old boy used his money to set up a table outside the supermarket to ask people coming out if they would donate a canned food item for the homeless lodging program that his congregation worked with. He ended up with 2x as much canned food then he started with (from his family) and \$80 in contributions – all of which he gave to the shelter.

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One young woman from used her money to buy flowers and set up a table in the social hall for "Love Notes and Flowers." \$1 for a daisy and \$5 for a rose. People could write a love note to someone else in the social hall and she would deliver it for them. It was a huge success and, by request, it carried over into three different Sunday services. It raised 10x the original amount.

## **REFLECTION**

As a little boy, I knew overwhelm. And fear.

Chaos and tension were the norm. Our world was usually a little upside down – always an explosion or something on fire. I tried not to let the anxiety show. But, later, I could see it in nearly every picture of me from that time. Today, my older self still wants to sit down with my younger self. I would have wished him more courage.

I had so little understanding of what was possible. I just tried to swallow my anxiety without getting indigestion. And wait for someone to come to my rescue.

Rescue was such a big theme in my fantasies and dreams. For a long time, I thought that's what I wanted. But then I learned differently. And it was my church that taught me.

As a boy, I loved going to church. At church I felt part of something. I helped my teachers. I sung in service. Sold donuts at coffee hour. Was a shepherd at Christmas. I got to be a little bit of the answer, when so much around me felt questionable. Later, as a chemist, we called it "being part of the solution rather than the precipitate." But nothing was more exciting going to church when we first learned it was going to be torn down.

I grew up across town at Neighborhood Unitarian Church in Pasadena. Our church was positioned as the runway for the start of the 210 freeway. When I was seven, the California Planning Commission informed us of plans to extend the 210 to connect with the 710 – running right through our little church. I remember church elders frightening us with stories of bulldozers racing toward our sanctuary... We envisioned our stained glass windows and organ in rubble. Picture teachers crying while taking down first grade renditions of God made out of macaroni and glitter.

Some wanted to stay and fight. Resist. Stand our ground. Hope for a reprieve.

But another group mobilized and began scouting property. The freeway divided us into two factions: the pioneers and homesteaders. My family went with the pioneers. And it made all the difference.

There were a lot of ups and downs. Countless times, the search team went out... only to return without a church. But when they found one, it was five times bigger than what we'd had. We didn't know what to do. They said it would be a huge step up. And that everyone would have to step up together. We agreed.

We knew not everyone would make it. Even though it was only a mile away, we'd lose people. And that was sad. But two things, ultimately called us to go.

First, we weren't the type to get on our knees and leave it to prayer - or leave it to the planning commission. We wanted our conviction - brains and muscle - to count for something.

And second, we just believed that there would be lot of people on the other end who needed us. Who were expecting us. And who would never find us if we didn't have the courage to go.

**SERMON** "Butterflies and Zebras and Moonbeams and Fairy Tales" Rev. Greg  
{*The following excerpt of the priests is from the movie, "The Poseidon Adventure"*}

Greg: Two priests having a conversation, like old friends. Different ages. Differing temperaments. Their callings worlds apart. But understanding... appreciation and mutual respect connected them. And that allowed them to be really honest.

JACKI: At our best, that's us. Right? Different people. Diverse in age, backgrounds, callings... but living amidst the same challenges... committed to work together across differences... Respecting one another. And trusting each other to be honest...

Greg: One of the priests breaks from the polite formality they learned in priestly basic training.

"Get down on your knees and pray for help.... And then maybe.... MAYBE, everything will work out fine? Garbage!! Not where I come from! You can wear off your knees praying to God for heat in a cold-water flat in February. Icicles will grow from your upraised palms.



JACKI: The question for us is 'why are they all here with us in church?'



- Gene Hackman (who played the priest)?
- Ernest Borgnine?
- Shelley Winters?
- Jack Albertson?

What does this service have to do with a tidal wave turning everything upside down?



This morning, it's our responsibility to inform you that the UUSS Santa Monica is currently sailing into a fiscal tidal wave. After extensively studying all the numbers, our 2018-19 budget is facing a potential \$90,000 deficit.

Greg: This is not time to run to the life boats. Whereas this may seem like a surprise to people this morning, those on the finance side have watched this wave coming. Indeed, I saw it last April – before I agreed to come here – when I saw your numbers. But I was not scared off. Because I could also see something besides all that: your potential – your power. And your purpose – which, I believe, we are all just now beginning to see. So, as we lead you through this, we want you to see the great gift amidst this challenge.

JACKI: We're going with a quote today from an unlikely source for UUs. From Chairman Mao Zedong who once said, "Everything under heaven is in utter chaos; the situation is excellent."

The first thing to remember is whether the situation is chaos, or whether it's excellent is completely up to us. It is a choice. And every choice is better when we understand the situation. And what's possible.

If you remember The Poseidon Adventure – or Towering Inferno or Airport – or any one of those classic 1970s Irwin Allen disaster movies, you'll remember that each one of them always had one character who was like an engineer. And this character just happened to be delivering the blueprints of the building (or the ship) when the pin pops out of the grenade. He's sort of a McGyver character who pulls out bailing wire, chewing gum, three packets of taco sauce and a penny to keep the plane from crashing into the volcano.

Essentially, that's the role Rev. Greg agreed to play by coming here.

Greg: We're going to need a lot more taco sauce.

The first thing to know is that you don't need to be saved. This Church – every single one of the nearly 350 people here – are not weak. There are no damsels in distress. No victims. Just people in search of a shared purpose.

Together we make up one of the more than 1040 churches in the 'Fleet of UU Congregations'. Each congregation is like a ship on a voyage. It is an independent, self contained vessel. Every single ship has complete autonomy...

JACKI: It gets to chart its own course

- Write its own bylaws
- Run its own affairs
- Elect its leaders
- Call its own ministers.

Greg: And every ship has great responsibility

JACKI: It has to

- Buy and care for its own building
- Hire and care for its own staff
- And raise all of its own money

Greg: The passengers and crew are the main assets of the ship. Between them they share responsibility to keep it afloat and headed in a good direction. UU Santa Monica has 314 passengers and approximately 15 mostly part time crew.

JACKI: It costs about \$600,00 a year to power this ship.

- 30% (\$175,000) comes from rental income, fundraisers, Sunday Collection and Gifts
- The remainder (\$377K) or 70+% comes from pledges – you and me.

Greg: That's it!! No magic. No line of credit beamed down by the mother ship.

We have 314 members who give us ~ 250 pledges with an average pledge of \$1,400. Remember this number.

JACKI: This year we ran a \$30,000 deficit budget. Meaning, we spent \$570,000 and took in \$540,000. That's not terrible (it's not good...). But the real problem is that we've been doing this – running deficit budgets – for a number of years in a row.

We decided to bring in Rev. Greg – who's experienced in making ministries relevant and sustainable – to help do just that.

But that choice comes with a price. We pay more for his experience because we need it.

We've also chosen to bring in an intern minister. Rev. Greg needs someone to address some of the routine areas of ministry in order to do some of the organizational work. Thus, we take the same \$30K deficit from last year, another \$30K for this turn around effort... And another possible \$30K from uncollected pledges, increased budget submissions, etc.

Greg: A thousand here, a thousand there... pretty soon we're talking about real money.

I never liked that quote. And I don't like it now. It feels flippant and disrespectful to the seriousness with which we undertake the task of successfully loving and supporting this church.

But being successful requires understanding the challenges. And your options.

Remember in the Poseidon Adventure, in the scene right after the tidal wave hits, Rev. Scott (who, by the way, is one of my favorite images of clergy in movies) calls people together and assesses what's in front of them.

The ship was upside down. No need denying it. They needed to mobilize. Work together. Stay above water. They needed to climb up.

The purser argues that everyone should stay where they are. Help would come. But Rev. Scott doesn't buy it. He believes they ARE the help that's needed. So he collects information, becomes clear about the challenge – and their options – and shares it with his people.

JACKI: Rev. Greg shared with the board some of his findings after studying our system and having over 120 one-on-one conversations. He discovered that this is not the first deficit budget here.

For more than 50 years when this has happened, key leaders turned to families known to have resources and asked if they'd offer a gift. Make up the balance. Often they did. But this became less of an option as folks got older, moved away or died.

In recent years, we've drawn money from bequests to balance the budget. But we have recognized this wasn't prudent or sustainable. So, a couple years ago, the members of this congregation voted to put in place policies to prevent us from dipping into reserves. We knew an inability to break this dependency would eventually sink us.

Greg: But one of the problems is that we haven't adequately shared the basic information for what it takes to run a church – the practical commitments and obligations – making sure everyone understands their shared responsibility and how to be part of shared success.

Let's talk some numbers. Remember I said that \$1400 was your average pledge. From working with congregations this size, in this kind of (high-cost) area, I know that's a little low. But there's something else that concerns me more than that.

Although your average pledge is \$1400, your median pledge (the balance point at which half the pledges are higher and half are lower) of \$700 is also low. The average is twice as high as the median because you have a few extremely large donors who are compensating for a LOT of smaller donors.

I did an experiment I learned from colleagues. Ministers in search use this trick to see if congregations their considering are financially healthy. If you take out the top few pledges what does that do to the budget. So, here, I took out the top 9 pledges – only 4% of all pledges. But the money totaled over \$90K. 26% of the budget.

JACKI: As a member of the Ministerial Search Committee last time around I can vouch for Greg. Ministers in search are very interested in this kind of information. Higher median pledges demonstrate stability. And ministers want to be part of communities who fight for justice, not fight about money or how to keep the lights on.

When the overall budget is so dramatically impacted by such a small number of pledges, it is a clear indication that the system is overly dependent on just a few people.

Greg: From my first career in science, I can say that this is well understood in the biological world. Countless species (who've survived challenges for millions of years longer than we've been around) have avoided extinction by never being overly dependent of too few sources of basic needs.

JACKI: As a professional fundraiser, I know that diversity is critical. There is tremendous risk in leaving an organization's fate in the hands of a small group of donors who can sink you if they are no longer able or willing to support you.

Greg: We all know that talking about money is uncomfortable. We try really hard to avoid those conversations.

Which is why I called this service "Butterflies and Zebras and Moonbeams and Fairytales" (a line from a Jimi Hendrix song)... because if I called it "Hitting a Financial Tidal Wave" or "The Church is Going to Ask You for Money," you would have all stayed home.

JACKI: But there's a problem that comes with NOT talking about it. Both newer members – and more than a few long time members – have said, "I'm not sure how this church works or what I'm supposed to do – how much I'm supposed to pledge."

We very much believe that people here would do the right thing if they knew what the right thing was. No one steers into a tidal wave for fun. In the words of Maya Angelou, "If we'd have known better, we'd have done better."

Greg: And this is true of people everywhere. They look around at this country – and the world – and say, "how did it get this bad? Why didn't we get involved earlier. We need to do something?"

The reality is that keeping people from being Trumped, working to become more aware, more just, less racist and violent happens through conversations just like this one. Organizing and committing to practices which bring about peace and love.

JACKI: "If we'd have known better, we'd have done better."

Greg: This is a time where we all begin to recognize what's needed is our biggest hearts, best thinking and highest commitment.

We're very much like those on the Poseidon. We don't need heroes. We need everyone to work together. To recognize the challenge in front of us. Not deny it, or shy away. And ask everyone, one by one, to take a step in the right direction.

JACKI: Over the next three years, what we're trying to do three things:  
FIRST: Invite more people into a mission that goes WAY beyond saving ourselves and is rooted in raising the level of civil discourse and involvement in saving our country and the world.  
SECOND, move toward a very modest increase in our average pledge – to about \$1,600  
THIRD, move our median pledge to \$1,000 – to decrease the financial dependence of our mission on too few people.

Greg: There's one scene in the Poseidon Adventure that stuck with me since I was 10 years old. It was with me ever since my church made the difficult decision to move.

After Rev. Scott gets all those who were going with him, he walks over to talk with Rev. John who had decided to stay and comfort the people who'd decided to stay. "I suspect we'll die. But they won't go and I can't leave them," he said.

I saw then what I saw in my church growing up. And what I see today. I'm a person who seizes the day. If there's a chance of survival and hope, that's the direction I'm headed. There are those who provide comfort to those not up to the challenges a bright future demands. I love such people. But I'm not one of them. I will always head in the direction of great possibility.

That's why I came here. Because I believed there are people who are going in that direction.

JACKI: Today, we are asking everyone here to pick up a pledge sheet after the service. With the budget challenge before us and the fact that this opens up necessary and responsible options of possibly

- Cutting staff
- Cutting programs
- Drawing from restricted reserves

...or a combination of these...

We felt you deserved the opportunity to minimize the steps that back away from our mission and take some positive steps toward our mission.

There is also a more complete financial overview which we hope all members will read and use to make the best possible choices.

Greg: When we know better, we do better.

JACKI: YOU DON'T NEED TO EXPRESS A COMMITMENT TODAY. WE HOPE THAT NEXT WEEKEND WE'LL BE ABLE TO SHARE WITH YOU EXCITING NEWS ABOUT FUNDS WE ARE TRYING TO SECURE THAT WILL MATCH ALL PLEDGE INCREASES AND ENCOURAGE US TOWARD MORE SUSTAINABLE GIVING.

Greg: Our goal is to create better understand the challenges before us. Stick together. Have everyone, one by one, take a step in the right direction. And believe that, with our best effort, there are a lot more people on the other side who see what we're doing and want to be part of it. It's time for everyone to climb up.

JACKI: To the Glory of Life.

## **GOING DEEPER**

- 4000 churches are closing every year.
- Corporations too. Only 12% of corporations that made up the Fortune 500 in 1955 were still in business in 2015.
- Success IS possible - even in this fast changing society. Those people, non-profits and communities that are successful today have a few things in common:
  - they're relevant: in touch with the needs of those around them
  - they're resilient: adaptive, resourceful, informed
  - they're bold: willing to take risks to make a difference
  - they're humble: always learning, always growing
  - they're generous: getting more by giving more

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- Where do we learn these essential skills that teach how to thrive during challenging times?
- Where can we practice and who can we practice with?
- What is it most important for us to pay attention to and learn?
- What is necessary to leave behind in order to give our best attention to what's needed?
- With whom and for what are we most generous?

## **EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE AND BENEDICTION AND MUSICAL BENEDICTION**

### **INVITATION TO FELLOWSHIP**

This service has ended... our service in the world continues. Let's begin the kinds of conversation that end oppression, violence and war.

Here's a question to get us started:

“Who taught you about generosity? What did they do?”

1-2 minute exchange... Continue the conversation over coffee in Forbes Hall