

Forward Through the Ages
A Sermon by Rev. Tim Kutzmark
March 17, 2013
Unitarian Universalist Church of Reading

Earlier this morning, we heard the echo of words, words once spoken in this sanctuary by the Rev. Robert Lawson, the minister of this church in the early 1940's. His voice, calling out from the past, reminded us that this church, our church, "is no dead pile of stones."

I was thinking about his words when I came across this Hindu story about a stone that was filled with life:

One evening an old woman was approached by a young man. He came running up to her, asking that she give him a precious stone. "What stone?" the old woman asked. The young man told her, "The great god Shiva appeared to me in a dream last night and told me that if I came to this place at dusk tonight, an old woman would give me a precious stone that would make me unbelievably rich." The old woman had a small bag hanging around her neck. She opened it and, smiling, said, "Lord Shiva probably meant this stone. It was entrusted to me many, many years ago by an old man and I have carried it close to my heart ever since. You certainly can have it." The young man gazed at the stone in wonder. It was as large as his fist and, even in the fading light, filled with luminosity. The young man took it and walked away. But that night he couldn't sleep. He was deeply troubled. Next morning at dawn he rushed back to the wise old woman and thrust the diamond back into her hands. "I don't want it," he said. "What I want is whatever you have that makes it possible for you to have held it so close to your heart and then to give it away so easily."¹

This church, this living place, is not for us to keep. We can enjoy it, we can savor its spirituality, we can cherish the warmth and friendship found within its walls. We can raise our children here, amidst the rich religious values that our Unitarian Universalist faith professes. But, in the end, this church is meant to be given away, given away to those who will come after us.

Those who came before us entrusted this church, this living place, to us. This church was passed forward through the ages by its 46 founding members who, 186 years ago, on April 2, 1827, withdrew from the conservative Third Parish Church here in Reading and formed a new church, a liberal church promoting (and I quote from our founding charter) "pure and evangelical principles of practical religion and morality." These founding mothers and fathers did not yet have our seven Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes to guide them. These founding mothers and fathers did not yet fly a rainbow flag. These founding mothers and fathers did not have a web site or electronic newsletter or chalice circles or a Senior High Youth Group. These founding mothers and fathers knew not us, knew not our way of life, yet they dreamed of a future that would include us. They dreamed of creating something, building something, sustaining something that could be passed, year after year, for 186 years, to this present moment. Over those 186

years this church had several different names, met in several different locations. Over those years, this church had ups and down, strong ministers and less skillful ones, times when finances were flush and times when money was tight. But over those years something precious was always held close to the heart, and then given away, passed forward through the ages.

This church community is no dead pile of stones. She is a diamond. This building of rock and timber, plaster and paint, this precious faith that nurtures our spirit and calls us to help heal the world, all of this, we hold in trust for those who will come after us. How truly blessed we are to have been given this moment to hold it, care for it, strengthen it...so that when the times comes, and that young man runs eagerly up to us and says, "I was told that if I came to this place, someone would give me something precious that would make me unbelievably rich," we will be able to smile and say, "We put in your hands the gift that we were once given."

This church, our church, has changed a lot over the years. Once people walked or rode horses and buggies to the Sunday morning service. Once we met in a building in the Reading town center. Then 89 years ago, caring and committed folks built this sanctuary (for us). Six years ago, we built on their vision and enlarged this sanctuary and our campus, taking on a heavy mortgage in order to make space for everyone who might want someday to find a home here for their spirit. For those who have joined us in the last six years—you *are the ones we were dreaming of!*

And always, always, through the ages—whether a church of 46 members, as it was in 1827, or a church of 320 members, as it is today—generosity is what has sustained her. For 186 years preachers had to be paid, oil lamps filled, wood stoves stoked, and Sunday school Bibles bought.

But it has always been that way here. In good times and bum times, the hundreds and hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of members through the ages have dug deep into their pockets. In good times and bum times, the hundreds and hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of members through the ages have rolled up their sleeves and volunteered to wash windows, fold orders of service, pack up the china, change light bulbs, make coffee, cook bean suppers, visit the sick, teach the children and greet the new faces coming through the door.

And now we, today, are asked to claim our place in that living legacy. We, today, are invited to hold the diamond that is this church, to polish the diamond that is our faith, so that when the time comes, we'll be able to take what we've been given, what was sustained for us, and pass it to the next generations who will sit here in these pews long after we are but a faded memory.

It now takes just over \$500,000 each year to pay our staff, fund our programs, maintain our campus, and pay our mortgage . . . and that is the bare bones budget. This budget doesn't even give a cost-of-living increase to our staff, a staff that hasn't had a cost-of-living increase for the last four years!

This year, we are asking everyone to consider bringing your pledging level up to the *average* commitment amount for this congregation, which is \$2,250. \$2,250. For some of us that isn't possible, and we understand (and we believe that everyone can give something, even a dollar or two a week). But for many of us, \$2,250 is possible, and we thank you in advance. For those of us who *already commit more, some of us much, much more, than the average giving amount*, we thank you, and this year we ask you to raise your pledge by 5%.

I don't ask anything that I won't do myself. I currently pledge 6.1% of my pre-tax income to you, to us. That means my pledge has been \$4840. This year, I will raise my pledge by 5%, by \$242, to \$5082, which is 6.4% of my pre-tax income. Yes, like many of us, I sacrifice to make that pledge, but I do so with joy.

I do so because I believe I am called, along with you, to be a steward of this place, a steward of this precious and potent Unitarian Universalist faith. Stewardship is "the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care."

We began with a voice from the past, so let us end with us voice from the past. In 1966, at the congregation's annual Loyalty Dinner (I think that's what they called Commitment Sunday back then), Ernie Schmidt, who served as the congregation's historian, told this true story:

"I recall the first [fundraising] meeting I attended here in the 1940s. The church's finances were not in as good shape as they are now. The roof leaked, the paint was peeling, and the plaster was cracked. At the call for pledges our good friend Leon Hutchins was first on his feet. 'I pledge \$5,' he called out. Just then a bit of loosened plaster fell from the ceiling and hit him on the head. A bit dazed, he called, 'I pledge \$500.' At that moment our minister, Rev. Billingham, arose and prayed, 'God, hit him again.'"

I won't pray for plaster to fall on our heads (although in a few years without a few more dollars it will do so on its own). Instead, I pray that we remember that this church is no dead pile of stones. I pray that we remember that this church is a diamond. I pray that we will hold it close to our hearts and savor its richness. I pray that when the time comes to pass it on, we will be able to do so with pride and with great, great love.

May it be so. Blessed be. Amen.

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ⁱ Adapted from <http://www.drdauidgbenner.ca/the-spirituality-of-stewardship-a-sermon/>