

“Rekindling the Flame”

By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD, March 1, 2020

I first entered a Unitarian Universalist congregation in my early twenties in Princeton, NJ. An acquaintance invited me to go to church with her and the following morning I wandered into the first church I had worshiped in since Quaker meetings as a young child. With time I learned how this faith could feed my soul. I learned about Unitarian Universalism. How Unitarian Universalists come with a wide variety of beliefs. I learned about the Seven Principles by which we covenant to live. For example, we affirm and promote the acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth. We affirm and promote the respect for the interdependent web of all existence. I found a church community of people who worshiped together connect by shared values, not shared beliefs. I loved that Unitarian Universalists espoused a wide variety of beliefs. I was fed by meaningful worship, I was fed through the spiritual connections in the small groups, through music. I was filled with gratitude and love and an overwhelming feeling of the blessings that this church offered my life. Within several months I joined. And in joining, learned more about stewardship. Time, talent, and treasure. This new sense of gratitude and love inspired me to do all three, to the best of my ability, contributing what I could to the fabric of this church community. So I dedicated time and talents and contributed what I could to the congregation, joining the choir, engaging young adults, leading worship, and providing what treasure I could - what financial contributions I was able to make. Time, talent, treasure. Holy work. I had to know that I was doing what I could to maintain this life-sustaining congregation, this church that feed my soul and inspired me to be a better person, this church that challenged me, strengthened me, stretched me. Stewardship felt sacred to me.

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Stewardship is sacred. Let us pause and refocus our attention on Channing Memorial Church.

This resilient congregation. This congregation dedicated to Unitarian Universalist values. This congregation; such a connected community. For several months now folks in this congregation have been playing with this idea of Channing Memorial Church as a campfire, which lead to the Stewardship theme of Rekindling the Flame. I remember when this metaphor began, at my start-up retreat in the fall. I sat in a circle with a group of Channing members and friends, discussing what Channing meant to each of us. One participant enthusiastically interjected – we are like a campfire! We warm ourselves and those around us, and we can bring this warmth out into the world around us. And this idea spread quickly! We are this warmth, this sustenance. These logs emitting flames reaching to the sky, flame providing this necessary warmth, this crucial illumination. Each one of us contributing our own sparks, our own logs, our own kindling, to this holy flame. And now we rekindle this with so many new sparks as we encounter new beginnings – new space, new minister. Let this light illuminate our path as we move into the future. What do we want to be? How can we get there? And one crucial part of this, of honoring our past, treasuring our present, and forming our future, one crucial piece of this is stewardship. We need each and every person to fulfill our stewardship commitment to the best of our ability, this is sacred work! Each one of us adds this kindling to replenish what feeds our souls. My soul is feed by small groups, by worship, by music. Because of these things, I stoke the flame. What feeds your soul?

Time, talent and treasure. What fuels our desire to fulfil these necessary pieces of stewardship? At a foundational level this is love. Dedication. Gratitude. Identity. Identity as Unitarian Universalists, and members and friends of Channing Memorial Church. These values

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and virtues are what spurs us to dedicate hours of our precious time, to utilize our talents and to give of our treasure. Love, dedication, gratitude, identity. Each time we contribute we can acknowledge, honor, and feed that spirituality that ignites us to act, actions driven by faith and what sustains us. This life sustaining cycle of stewardship, of souls being fed and church being replenished financially.

We just had the pleasure of hearing about the spiritual journey that led to Channing Memorial Church from two of our founding members. What a journey! What passion. What powerful spirituality. And what wisdom they have to offer! This “labor of love.” Let us continue to live the legacy of the stories we just heard by working every day to make their dream, this labor of love, a reality. Throughout the past 27 years, since the founding of this church, this love has grown and morphed and changed and yet has maintained a crucial backbone to what this church is and means, to the values and commitments of each member, friend, and newcomer. A spiritual refuge. A thriving, loving community.

A community named after William Ellery Channing, a Unitarian minister in the 1800s. William Ellery Channing was a foundational figure in early Unitarian theology, and the namesake of this congregation. Channing detailed his understanding of one God, of Jesus as fully human, arguing against the idea of a Trinity. And Channing asserted two other things: The loving, parental nature of God, and the inherent goodness of all people. In a well-known sermon, Channing wrote, with an acknowledgement of gendered language, “God, as he is essentially goodness, holiness, justice, and virtue, so he is the life, motive, and sustainer of virtue in the human soul.”

While we may not believe that God is the source of virtue in our souls, I still see this idea of human goodness. Whatever our understanding of the holy may be, I see within each one of us

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acting with this love, this inherent goodness, with this virtue in the human soul. This special community.

I spoke earlier about the love, dedication, identity, and gratitude that leads to this holy stewardship, this giving of ourselves. If we are driven by gratitude, I ask us to take a moment to think about what we are grateful for. This loving community? Our small groups? Worship? Music? Book clubs? Grappling with theology? What brings you back – what feeds your soul? What is a blessing to you? Whatever feeds you, whatever fills you with gratitude, whatever fills your soul with love, let this be a catalyst to your own personal discernment on giving. And stewardship extends beyond church giving. Stewardship is a way of life, a way of living. A gracious, thankful state of mind that permeates how we navigate the world around us. Let this state of being guide how we interact with our community as well as how we interact with our church. This stewardship, this way of living, is guided by our soul, our own internal knowing, for, as John O'Donohue writes,

“Your soul knows the geography of your destiny. Your soul alone has the map of your future; therefore you can trust this indirect, oblique side of yourself. If you do, it will take you where you need to go, but more important it will teach you a kindness of rhythm in your journey.”

Your soul guiding you each day, filled with inherent wisdom, if only we pause to listen. Trusting our inner selves and the lives we seek to create for ourselves each and every day. Souls, being fed by this congregation and Unitarian Universalism.

The idea of your soul knowing your destiny, mapping your future. What role does Channing play in this? Trust yourself and your soul and know how stewardship can play a crucial role in

this rhythm of life. In your journey. Pause. Listen to what's inside you. What is the map of your future? And what is a tangible thing you can do to make sure your soul continues to be fed? Stewardship is holy. And so is this campfire! This sacred kindling we use to feed this flame that warms our souls and illuminates our paths. Those of us who have been here for 27 years, and those of us much newer. Those of us who have dedicated hundreds of hours to stoking this flame, and those who are just now beginning to engage in coffee hour. Each one of you contributes a crucial spark! And this can be a way of life, of constantly living a life of gratitude, love, and compassion.

We heard earlier the words of Rudy Nemsler, speaking of the long-haul members

“The church—their church—will be here, steady and hale.

For a long. Long time.

It will.

For long haul people bless a church

with a very special blessing.”

We had the honor of hearing today from some of our long-haul members. What gratitude I have for each of you! And over and over again long-haul members are being formed. Long-haul folks who start out by bringing cookies to coffee hour, or start out by joining the choir, and eventually weave themselves into the very fabric of this church. I am grateful to each and every one of you. Each person is navigating their own journey, their own commitment to the murmurings of their soul, “[your soul] will teach you a kindness of rhythm in your journey.”

We need keep the dreams of the founders going; every day honoring our history and at the same time envisioning our future. What does our future look like? I know we are in a search for a new space, I know we are eager to grow, I know we want to be known in the community. I know each one of us has personal aspirations. All pieces of a collective dream of our future.

And this thread that connects our past, our present, and our future is the mission of Channing Memorial Church, our mission to:

Invite seekers into spiritual community

Connect souls in mystery and wonder, and

Ignite compassion into action

Our mission to invite, connect, and ignite. Each one of these sacred aspirations, sacred missions of this church, takes stewardship. We need that kindling to fuel this work. Kindling to invite seekers into this community so we can be spiritually fed and nourish each other. Kindling to connect our souls in relationship and spiritual companionship. Kindling to turn this to action and going out into the world, igniting into social responsibility! This church feeds our souls, our unique, individual souls!

To lift up the words of William Ellery Channing,

“Every human being is intended to have a character of his own; to be what no others are, and to do what no other can do.”

Each one of us has our own unique way to contribute to stewardship, and each way is just right.

It is the individual characters that make this church so vibrant, and sacred individuality that

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adds so much to this community, this ability for each one of us to do what no other can do, all of these unique contributions lead to this sacred, life sustaining community. In this discussion of stewardship, of dreams for the future, of this family of Channing Memorial Church, of feeding our souls, I am reminded of words of Alberto Rios, from his poem “We Are of a Tribe,” from which we will read selections

We plant seeds in the ground

And dreams in the sky,

Hoping that, someday, the roots of one

Will meet the upstretched limbs of the other.

...

Together, we are a tribe of eyes that look upward,

Even as we stand on uncertain ground.

...

Look up. Stay awhile. Let your breathing slow.

Know that you always have a home here.

Today is about those seeds – planted in the earth to grow into our greatest aspirations. To continue to feed Channing Memorial Church. To grow high and connect with those dreams hovering delicately above us, the upstretched arms meeting. Today we are a tribe intent on these dreams, no matter how uncertain we may feel.

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Let us provide that kindling; that seed. Let us stoke the flames and water those plants so the dreams of our founders can continue and the dreams of each one of us in this room can come to fruition. How much treasure are you able to contribute? Meditate on this. Think of what feeds you and the calling of your soul. And keep with you this metaphor of a flame, a spark, a campfire. That warmth, illumination and beloved companionship that comes with it.

Look up. Stay a while. Let your breathing slow. Know that you always have a home here.

May it be so, and Amen.