

**Growing Our Spirit**  
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Today is Association Sunday. This is the second in a five-year series of events in congregations across the Unitarian Universalist Association devoted to the theme of “Growing Our Faith.” Last year we focused on growing our numbers, and I’ll say a little more about that later. The next three years will focus on growth in diversity, growth in witness, and growth in leadership. But this year we are concentrating on “growing our spirit.”

If we as individuals, as congregations, and as an association can grow in spiritual depth and health, we will be a stronger and healthier religious faith. And so, as we explore this topic today, I would like to consider what it might mean to grow our spirit at each of those three levels: individual, congregational, and associational.

“We . . . covenant to affirm and promote: Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.” Acceptance of one another means that who each of us is, is okay. We are embraced and affirmed for exactly who we are. We don’t need to pretend we are something else. But do we want to become complacent and stagnant in our being? Or do we want to continue to grow and evolve intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually? I think most of us do. You are accepted for who you are, and for where you are on your spiritual path. But you are also encouraged to continue on that path, to become even more of who and what you are or want to be.

But what exactly is spiritual growth, and how do we encourage it? There have been many attempts to describe or define spirituality and spiritual growth, usually using one of a number of metaphors. I’ve shared with you before some of those enumerated by Roger Walsh in his book, *Essential Spirituality*: awakening, enlightenment, metamorphosis, unfolding, wholeness, and journey, to mention a few.

This morning, to add to my usual litany about spirituality as the totality of connections, both visible and invisible, that we experience in our lives, I’d like to draw from an insightful chapter in the book *Heretics’ Faith* by my friend and colleague Fred Muir, who serves our congregation in Annapolis, Maryland.

According to Fred, “Spirituality refers to the inner dimension, a depth dimension, of every person.” He goes on to say that:

When newcomers describe their decision to come (back) to church . . . it’s not uncommon to hear many say that it was the “something missing in their lives” that drove them to it. After a few more sentences, some will call this “something” spirituality – it was spirituality that was missing, though I’ve heard it called other names as well. Common to these sorts of descriptions has been a sense or feeling of emptiness, meaninglessness, a lack of direction, a desire for greater depth, connectedness, grounding, or rootedness.

Admitting discomfort with terms like spirit and soul because of their lack of precision and clarity, Fred Muir suggests the metaphor of roots and wings to aid in their understanding. He writes:

The soul is your roots: roots stabilize, they feed, roots provide for thirst; without roots a tree is dead. . . Roots can run long, deep, and wide.

So it can be with one's soul. Soul is the core of your being, the inner light that makes you who you are; soul is your essence and identity. . .

And what of the spirit? Without soul, there could be no spirit. . . Spirit is wings: your spirit soars, dips, often takes you places you didn't even want to visit. The strength of one's wings, the stamina and courage of spirit are always connected to your roots, your soul. . .

Spirituality is the word used to describe the interdependent workings of both spirit and soul. Spirituality is about this inner dimension . . .

Muir then goes on to talk about spiritual practice or discipline: those intentional activities whose purpose is to promote spiritual growth. And an important point here is that there is not *a* spiritual practice in which we are to engage. There are countless forms such practice might take: meditation, prayer, dance, chant, yoga, exercise, walking, devoted service to others, etc. etc. The key is to adopt a practice that nourishes your soul, that adds depth to the experience of your living.

And most spiritual teachers would agree that depth is more important than breadth. This is often a challenge for us Unitarian Universalists. We love variety, and want to try everything (or nearly everything). But, as religion scholar Huston Smith writes:

The problem with cafeteria-style spirituality is that Saint Ego is often the one making the choices at the salad bar. What tastes good is not always the same as what you need, and an undeveloped ego can make unwise choices. I believe that it is most helpful for people to choose one main meal, to commit and focus on that tradition, and then to add to it if the need arises. . .

“So where does all this lead?” concludes Fred Muir.

Where could it lead? While spirituality is a turning inward, an inward reading of the self through the lens of the soul and spirit, it doesn't get stuck or stay too long inside because this can result in an incredible imbalance and dishonesty. A spirituality that serves the self is narcissism. But a spirituality that serves both self and others nurtures the soul and strengthens the spirit.

May that be the kind of spiritual growth to which we aspire ourselves, and that we support and encourage in our congregation.

So how do we encourage spiritual growth? As a local religious community, one thing that we certainly can and do provide is a regular weekly religious service. Some services may seem more spiritual and conducive to growth than others, but I hope that every service will contain elements of encouragement for individual and communal exploration of our intimate connections with ourselves, with each other, and with the world around us.

Such exploration also occurs in smaller, more intimate settings. Let me mention some current opportunities. One is an ongoing meditation group that meets at 7:00 on the first and

third Wednesdays of the month in Room 6. Please talk with Marka Bednar or Betsy Berry if you are interested. Another opportunity is Small Group Ministry, which encompasses several ongoing groups of six to twelve people each, that meet once a month to reflect and share on a variety of topics designed to encourage spiritual growth and close, trusting relationships. If you think you may be interested, there will be a special Small Group Ministry TGIF here on Friday, Nov. 7 at 5:30 pm, introducing the program, and even providing a sample session to give an idea of what it's like. There are also sample sessions during the Lifespan Learning Hour on the fourth Sunday of each month. That's at 11:30 in Room 6.

Those are some things that we as a congregation do to encourage spiritual growth. If you have other ideas, please let me know. All it takes to start something new here is an idea and a little energy and planning. I would like to offer one more specific opportunity. Sarah Diaz gave us a "Snapshot on her Journey" this morning. I invite you to offer your own snapshot in a future service. The idea is to share something about the current state of your religious or spiritual life: an important belief or conviction, an issue you're struggling with, or simply a reflection on some aspect of your life. If you're interested, speak with me, and we will arrange a time for you to do that. I think such sharings could encourage all of us to revisit our own beliefs and spiritual state of health.

We are one congregation. But only one of many. And we are better together. We are better off for having over a thousand Unitarian Universalist congregations across the country. The spirit of connection among and between those congregations can enhance our lives in many ways. Ask those who have attended the annual General Assembly what it feels like to be in a room full of thousands of Unitarian Universalists sharing common purpose and common celebration. It's inspiring and motivating. If you want a small taste of that experience, please join me here at 11:30 this morning. We'll look at a video of a Sunday worship service from 2005's General Assembly.

Our numbers also give us strength to be of service in situations of disaster and calamity, and to be a voice in the public square for social justice and progressive values.

Within our Joseph Priestley District, we celebrate and use the collective power of our congregations for each other's benefit through the Chalice Lighters Program, in which individual contributions are pooled together to create grants for those congregations who can best make use of them to take that next step forward toward growth, health and vitality. Connections with clergy of other Unitarian Universalist congregations are an important part of my professional development as a minister, as well as providing me a vital support network.

At the national level, we have the opportunity on this Association Sunday to support the UUA's "Now is the Time" Campaign to Grow Our Faith. Special collections are being taken this morning in congregations across the country in support of this five-year comprehensive campaign. Before I talk about where this year's funds will go, let me say a little bit about last year's funds. As I mentioned, the particular focus of last year's campaign was on numbers. A total of 626 congregations, representing over 128,000 Unitarian Universalists, participated and generously contributed over 1.4 million dollars.

Half of that was used to help increase awareness of Unitarian Universalism through a national awareness campaign that included several ads in Time magazine. About one quarter of last year's funds are being used to support the Diversity of Ministry Initiative. And the final quarter was sent back to districts for regional projects to help our congregation and others share our liberal religion with those who seek it.

This year, there was a long and involved process of surveying Unitarian Universalist leaders to determine where this year's funds would go. I was very impressed by the surveying process. I had several opportunities myself to provide input: through an on-line survey, through a conversation in my UU Ministers' Association chapter, and I was even treated to lunch and a one-on-one conversation with Stephan Papa, the UUA's primary point person for the whole campaign, who came to State College to get my input in person.

As a result of that process, two major priorities were selected. First, 50% of the funds raised this year will support Lay Theological Education programs. Congregations, districts, and seminaries will have the opportunity to apply for grants to create programs which focus on spiritual and theological deepening.

Preference will be given to programs that have a strong lay theological education component, that have built on an idea that has a proven track record of success, and that involves more than one UU congregation or entity.

Programs are expected to be designed such that they can be replicated in other congregations. Recipients of the grants will be asked to create resources and a case study that could be shared with others.

The other 50% of funds raised will be divided equally among three programs aimed at enhancing Excellence in Ministry:

- The Unitarian Universalist Ministers' Association's new initiatives for continuing education programs for ordained leaders.
- Scholarships for promising students preparing for our ministry.
- The Diversity of Ministry Team's initiative to support our ministers of color.

It is programs like these that can help to strengthen the bonds of common purpose among congregations. By combining our resources we make Unitarian Universalism a stronger voice of liberal religious values in the world. Now is the time for our congregations to grow stronger and more effective together, because our religious values are needed to help heal our wounded world.

To a large extent, we are each responsible for our own individual spiritual growth. But if we join with others - in small groups, in our congregation, and in our Association - we multiply, through shared encouragement and resources, the ability to grow our spirits and the spirit of Unitarian Universalism. And that growth is not only a blessing to us, but it also contributes to our ability to be a blessing to the world. Let us choose to bless the world.

I leave you once again, this morning, with the words of African-American scholar and activist W.E.B. DuBois:

Now is the accepted time, not tomorrow, not some more convenient season. It is today that our best work can be done and not some future day or future year. It is today that we fit ourselves for the greater usefulness of tomorrow. Today is the seed time, now are the hours of work, and tomorrow comes the harvest and the play-time.

May it be so. May we make it so.