

The Fire of Commitment

by Anna Olsen

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I first walked into a Unitarian Fellowship about 33 years ago. A friend in the school district where I was a speech therapist had been encouraging me to go to a service. I was an active member of a small Episcopal church but a new, more fundamentalist minister was giving me a headache on Sundays. I kept wanting to interrupt him and ask "Do you really believe what you just said?"

And so I cautiously went to the Unitarian service. Every word spoken or sung that day were the words of Henry David Thoreau, and the minister was even dressed like Thoreau. It resonated with my soul. I felt that I had walked into a room full of people gathering energy from a beautiful, blazing hearth. A place where the mind was opened rather than told to shut down, not question just recite doctrine and follow the "true teachings." I was an instant convert, I had found my spiritual home.

There were so many committees to join and activities to come to, a faith retreat, sexuality workshop, worship services committee, religious education opportunities, a modern dance group, a craft show for fund-raising. I joined it all. Diving in and swimming with a delicious freedom of spirit, challenging thoughts, feet in action, walking the talk, alive, aware, and engaged.

Three years later, I married the minister of that UU Fellowship and our family joke is that I thought I was marrying Thoreau. There are some similarities in the two men. I am so blessed to live with a holy man.

It is an honor to be in this position of service as your trustee to the Unitarian Universalist Association and I will be glad to talk after the service about what this volunteer position asks of me. I am in the mode of a learner and I'm counting on you to keep me rooted and help our spirits to take flight.

Today I stand committed, with a fire in my spirit, to see that we are strengthened and grow as a faith movement. What would it take for us to be widely-recognized in every community as leader of justice and compassion, where everyone knows this is a place where people feel

their spirit nourished and people are active in helping to heal the world. This idea has a challenge. It would take **a lot of fire!**

Today I have a challenge and a request to make.

Let's light a fire together. This world needs us now. This community, this region, this state, this nation, this world needs you and me to witness, to walk, to speak, to give, to love, to open our arms and embrace people who long for a spiritual home.

Words from Jack Kornfield, in *Roots of Buddhist Psychology*. "We all have, without exception, a very deep longing to give--to give to the earth, to give to others, to give to the society, to work, to love, to care for this earth. That's true for every human being..... And there is a tremendous sorrow for a human being who doesn't find a way to give. One of the worst of human sufferings is not to find a way to love, or a place to work and give of your heart and your being."

Our life, our time to give our gifts of love. Are we really using our gifts fully? Can we as individuals inspire others? Awaken their spirit? Perhaps in the message of the song "This little light of mine, I'm goin'a let it shine." Jesus said, **"You are the light of the world."** What does this mean to be the light of the world? I think it means that we are the workers who bring hope and heal the world.

In the same manner the Buddha, in his parting words of comfort and advice to his disciples, insisted: "Be ye lamps unto yourselves; be your own confidence. Hold to the truth within yourselves as the only truth."
We are, he said, all Buddhas, filled with divine nature.

I know that many of you are involved in social justice work outside of the work that this congregations is doing. This makes you a light in this world. How could we be even brighter?

If we come together , we are no longer just individuals working to make the world better, but we are a congregation, a community with a bigger voice to be heard further and to make a larger difference. As individuals we evolve into an interdependent group.

Dorothy Day wrote, "We are communities in time and in a place, I know, but we are communities in faith as well -- and sometimes time can stop

shadowing us. Our lives are touched by those who lived centuries ago, and we hope that our lives will mean something to people who won't be alive until centuries from now. It's a great 'chain of being,' someone once told me, and I think our job is to do the best we can to hold up our small segment of the chain. -- doing your utmost to keep that chain connected, unbroken.”

In holding up the chain, a community of ten of us went to New Orleans last summer on the two-year anniversary of the Katrina destruction. My husband and I led a group from Asheville over Easter week and another group went in March as well.

As I preached in congregations last month we prayed for the Knoxville congregations and for hate to end. I used the words of Rev. Lynn Thomas Strauss as she wrote about the events taking place there. Of the Knoxville community coming together, walls of differences in doctrine and theology coming down. Walls that in her words were “sturdy; high and well-maintained”.

“But,” she continues, “those walls came tumbling down. Last week, the walls of religious separation came tumbling down. It was a kind of miracle. A miracle of grace and the human spirit. For one week, we were one grieving family, one in our sorrow, and one in our resolve to witness to peace.”

Now we, UU's want to work to bring down walls in all of our cities. Join together with other people of faith and touch that deep well spring of love that we all know is what nourishes our roots.

I congratulate you on the social justice projects that you are involved in like: Interfaith work and housing.

Thank you for being an awesome congregation with the work that you are doing. Thank you for all the time and energy you have put into creating this beautiful space for you home. With this work almost complete maybe now is the time to look at doing more outside with the community.

We UUs want to put our faith into action, give meaning to our lives, and it should be most convenient to do in our congregation communities. When we are here on Sunday and nourish our spirits then we need to go to work and help heal the world. What if one of our key measures in our congregation was not in the number of members or in the size of our budget? **What difference would it make if we measure instead the impact we are having on this community.** Let's think: what ever we are doing for social justice, we would do more and we would take on other projects as well. We could chart the work, write about it for the newspaper. Celebrate our good works. I think membership and giving would increase, if this is what we measured instead. "Nurture your Spirit. Help heal our world." Have high quality programming and do more social justice work!

If we had a lot of congregations all working to make the world better, maybe we should associate together. We could make a covenant to support each other and together to change the world, our piece of the chain of time, better for those who follow because we are the privileged of those who came before. Much of what was done before was wrong and we need to change, restore, replace, give restitution for the wrongs. However because much of what was done is good, we are reaping the benefits.

So what if we made an association? Oh, but you know all about our association. You have helped form its work by the presidents that have come from this congregation. Well, do you know the work being done by your brother and sister UU's in our district, in our nation today?

We need each other to be strong. I hope you're involved! I encourage you to be informed and to actively support the work. Here is the annual report for 2008 for our national association of UU congregations.

In this report you can see what our trustees and staff have been working on. Let me select a few examples:

#1. The UUA finance group has invested in shares of WalMart. Wait, that doesn't sound right. We show movies about the ills of big-box stores, lack of employee benefits or other mistreatments of employees - taking away income from small businesses. Some UU's boycott or picket WalMart, and now you say we own stock in this company? Yes, we do because then we can go to and speak at stockholder meetings.

We -- all of us, through the UUA -- own stock in many companies so we can advocate at the highest levels of the company. We identify companies that you should not invest in and then we invest in them so we have a seat at the share holders table.

#2. The UU Service Committee works to advance environmental justice, promote economic justice, to defend civil liberties, to protect rights in humanitarian crises like New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf. One example is the efforts of the UUSC to pressure Congress to increase US Funding for African Union peacekeeping efforts in Darfur to \$173 Million. I could not have made that happen, this congregation could not have done that work, but when we are an association of almost 1100 congregations, then we can have an office in Washington DC that can lobby our elected officials.

#3. The UUA Trustees are deconstructing governance to take on a form of policy governance that will allow for more time to focus on the larger questions of vision and to better serve congregations. This is difficult, time-consuming and dedicated work but the payoff will be great. In October we will write our first draft of the UUA goals (end statements in governance language). We will be doing this with the executive committee of the ministers association, representatives of the district presidents association and congregations in the northeast. I will send you the draft statements and ask for your input then in April we will write the final goals to then begin in June with a new president to use policy governance. You can read lots of information at the UUA web site.

I am so proud for us of the work we collectively do. In India, Transylvania, Darfur, Kenya all over the U.S. in so many communities. And among ourselves, to improve the effectiveness of our association There is a copy of this report in your church office and it is on line. Read it and be proud. The more you know and connect, then you will want to help us all evolve in our faith traditions together.

You have your individual commitment and fire, you have your congregation of members, a Thomas Jefferson District of 63 congregations and an association of over 1000 congregations. We are in covenant together.

There is a fire burning in each of us. Is it God, is it love, is it spirit? The answer is up to you. For me the fire is hotter, brighter and so much more satisfying when lit with commitment to things greater than me.

Like: "I do not want to come to end of my life and find that I have not lived." To live is to give. The fire is burning in all of us.

May it be so forever.

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