

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock
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Digging In, Reaching Out Revisited

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In 2007, Sara Mackey spoke at our groundbreaking ceremony. Sara returns to that message and reflects on it in light of the progress UU Fellowship of the Rappahannock has made so far. Join us for reminiscing and envisioning the future.

In June of 2007, I joined you on this very spot when there was nothing here but cleared land and that magnificent tree stump out behind us. It was pouring rain, and you had set up a tarp under which the service could take place relatively protected from the elements. It kept filling up and needing to be dumped out, and predictably, innocent bystanders occasionally got splashed. Someone mentioned to me that they were glad I made it here because the bridge gets closed when the wind gets fierce enough, and I remember being relieved that I didn't know that until I was already parked on this side of the bridge. My heart is still warmed by the joy of that day, and I still have the little bit of earth that we collected in tiny vials and gave out to commemorate the celebration. It sits on my mantel beside the bit of earth from the ground breaking of UU Community Church in Glen Allen, and those two specks of dirt serve to remind me that we are building fires to warm future generations, just as we are warmed (says the quote in the back of our hymn book) by fires we did not build; just as we drink from wells we did not dig. The act of breaking ground as a religious organization serves, among other things, as a declaration that we are committed to a community beyond our own; we are committed to digging wells whose purpose is to relieve the thirst of others.

On that day of groundbreaking, I told you a story about pulling into the parking lot one morning at Union Presbyterian Seminary where I work and seeing a hawk on top of a car nearby. I got out of the car carefully so I wouldn't scare him off, because he was pretty close and I wanted to look at him for a while. I need not have bothered, since the hawk wasn't interested in the cluster of humans that had by that time gathered to look at him and speculate about where he might have come from. I told you back then on groundbreaking day about how, as we watched and wondered, a mockingbird flew up

and began to harass the hawk, pecking its head and squawking. We humans expected mayhem, and at the very least a severely injured mockingbird, but that's not what happened. The hawk didn't retaliate; instead, he lifted his vast wings, flew across the street, and found a higher perch on a telephone pole. The mockingbird did not relent; she actually followed the hawk across the street and continued the aggressive display for a moment before she flew away. We concluded that the mockingbird must have had a nest nearby, and she must have been defending it out of deep courage, or more realistically, deep instinct. One human observer said, "There's a sermon in there somewhere," and another said, "Oh, yes, that'll preach!" As you see, they were right.

On that day of groundbreaking, this is what I told you after I told the story of the hawk and the mockingbird:

"It is an act of courage to build the first Unitarian Universalist church in the Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula...the first one in six counties. It would be so much easier to stay at the Women's Club, and club is a good word for what you could be there. It would be so much easier to get together with friends, good conversation, good food, some ritual on Sunday morning, let your strongest reason for coming together be to take care of each other. Yet you chose—when you had other choices—you chose to have the conversations, the disagreements, the searching for just the right site, the raising of funds, all the meetings, meetings, meetings, and that's to say nothing of the physical labor...so you could arrive at this day [the day of groundbreaking]. So you could begin the process of becoming a physical presence in the Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula. Not just a home of your own, but a lighthouse for others in this area, shining out an invitation and a declaration.

You have recognized that you are people of privilege in this area, and that privilege requires you to speak out to established systems...speak out for justice, equity, and compassion in the lives of others. Building a church is taking a stand, and that stand will be anti-racist and anti-oppression. You will stand on the side of love for

everybody, and that means bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender people as well as heterosexuals.

Starting today, you are establishing a place from which, decades into the future, you will defend your territory, these six counties, from larger and more powerful forces of prejudice and economic injustice and oppression. You will not care how large they are, and you may take stands that look foolish to people who don't know you very well. But this is your place, and Unitarian Universalism is your faith. If, years from now, you remember the story about the hawk and the mockingbird, please be sure to remember this: the hawk left when the mockingbird challenged him. He didn't fight, he didn't do damage...he flew away. In the face of a threat that was larger and more powerful, the mockingbird's courage paid off.

Stand for justice in this church that you are about to build [that you have built]. Love those that will become you neighbors. You will make a difference here."

Now, almost six years later, I read about your responses to a survey of what sort of social justice effort you want to support. I see that your interest appears to be primarily in challenges facing children and youth: people who, for years to come, can be warmed by fires you've built and who can drink from wells you've dug. You are studying the issues and envisioning how to best focus and engage your resources in this community, so that you aren't just making gestures or skipping around on the surface of things. It looks to me as if your hope lies in the possibility of transformation, and I believe you understand how difficult, and how life-giving, that will be. Life-giving not only to the people you serve, but life-giving to you. In some contexts, particularly in the Christian context that UUs tend to shy away from, that's called salvation.

As I reflected back to the day of your groundbreaking, a couple of things drew my attention. First of all, when I revisited the story of the hawk and the mockingbird, it occurred to me that the metaphor there could have been read in a way that was not what I intended. I don't want to create the impression that I think you have enemies to

fight here, or that you are under attack. Consider, for one example, the oppression of bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender people. That oppression is an enemy to everybody, and we have to stand against that oppression wherever we encounter it, even when we encounter it among friends. That's what it means to be a Welcoming Congregation. But people are not our enemies, and attack does not need to be our method. We are people of faith, and our method is bearing witness. For some, that phrase may have a little more religious connotation than is entirely comfortable, but I urge you to rest in your discomfort and consider the fact that bearing witness means saying this is who we are, this is what we stand for, and then standing for that, no matter where you are and no matter who might be trying to stand against you.

Another impression I want to clarify in the story of the hawk and the mockingbird is this: the mockingbird may have felt threatened by the presence of the hawk near her nest, but in fact the hawk wasn't doing anything but sitting there. It was the mockingbird who was the aggressor. I don't want you to think that I endorse your being aggressors in this community, nor do I see any need for that. I believe that you are warmly welcomed and valued here, and you can correct me if I'm wrong. What you can watch for, and resist when you see it, is whatever system might perpetuate generational poverty, or economic injustice of any kind that gives some people advantage and power over others. And I reiterate, it's not people who are our enemies. People, whoever they are, whatever they believe, are entitled to our affirmation of inherent worth and dignity.

As you do your research, make your plans, and look ahead to how you might most effectively bear witness in the Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula, I expect you will find it useful and encouraging to use Unitarian Universalism as the lens through which you view, at every point, the program you create. In your decision making, you can be heartened by asking yourselves always, "What's Unitarian Universalist about this plan? What decision will demonstrate our UU identity most clearly? What can we do at this point in the process that will reflect most accurately who UUs are and what UUs stand for?" Using such questions to guide you, you will never lose sight of the ethical and theological implications of what you're doing.

You broke ground for this building in June of 2007. In the years since then, much of your energy has been focused inward, toward ways to maintain your building, your worship, and your UUFR community. That's what you need to do in transition time, and transition to a new building is a profound shift. I sense that you're at the point of another shift now, a developmental stage in a way, where you're defining how to best share your resources outside of your four walls. You're looking at how the beam of this lighthouse can shine most brightly into places that don't have to be as dark as they are now. As you know, you will face frustrations and disappointments and astonishing joy along the path that you've set out on. I cannot wait to see what happens next. This is a sacred endeavor, and the Universe, which knows what it's doing, sees you on your journey.

And so may it be.