

## **“What has money got to do with Spirit?” a sermon by Rev. Kimi Riegel**

*delivered October 12, 2008 at Northwest Unitarian Universalist church.*

*(copy for our teachers and Sunday volunteers with Gratitude)*

**Reading** *William F. Schulz*

When I was in high school, I ran track for a season or two to meet my athletic obligation. I did not do this because I liked running. Even in high school I was greatly enamored of Queen Victoria's famous advice to "never stand when you can sit; never run when you can walk; and never pass up a chance to go to the bathroom." No, I ran track because it required less skill than basketball and less ferocity than wrestling.

Frankly, I remember virtually nothing about my track career and neither does anyone else. But I do recall what I liked best about the sport. Whereas the coach and all the stars of the team would wax poetic about the "thrill of the run," what I liked best about running was that, once you were finished, you had to take at least ten minutes to catch your breath. It was during those ten minutes that life seemed most worth living that I was most swept up in gratitude: "Thank God I've got a ten-minute break from all this running!"

I cite all this in an essay about spirituality because spirituality is not unlike catching one's breath and being grateful for it. Indeed, in Hebrew the word "spirit" originally meant "breath" or "wind." In recent years many Unitarian Universalists have expressed a renewed interest in something called "spirituality." It is as if we as a religious movement had been running, running, and are finally taking a break from the dash.

For much of our history we have busied ourselves with distinguishing right beliefs from wrong. We have debated questions like, "Was Jesus God or human?"; "Is the Bible fact or myth?"; "Is prayer useful or illusory?" Our favorite self-description has been "seekers after truth." We have, in other words, been caught up in the thrill of the run.

Obviously, a claim's truth or falsity is critical. But religion is not solely a matter of true or false beliefs. Religion is also a matter of practice and praise, feelings and faith. It is, that is to say, not just about the running itself; it is also about the catching of breath and the feel of the wind.

I want to admit quickly, however, that this notion of "spirituality" is a frustrating one. What does it mean anyway? Just like the wind, the Spirit resists being caught; it defies definition; it winces at words. And that means that it can be misappropriated, misused, corrupted, much of what passes for spirituality is, in my judgment, a sham. Nonetheless, just like our breath, we can try to ignore the Spirit but we can't do without it. It yearns to be felt and it begs to be lived, his is the supreme paradox of spirituality: it can almost never be captured but can almost always be seen. It can be seen in any person whose presence offers healing. It can be seen in any incident which calls forth a blessing on Creation. It can be seen in any place which evokes a terrible enchantment.

Is there any one of us who has not at one time or another been caught short by the grandeur of existence? Is there any one of us who has never known a touch of love or shed a simple tear beyond that which can be entirely explained? Is there any one of us so dulled to the mystery which is Being, so immune to the measures of the heart, that we find life little more than calculation?

If there be such a person, then she or he—I quite agree—is without a spiritual sensibility. But I have rarely, if ever, met such a one, though I know many, beginning with myself, who when confronted with the Spirit's call, are tempted to flee. I live every day in intimate acquaintance with my own fragility and with the fragility of those whose lives touch mine and with the fragility of the very earth itself. I want that which I love to live forever and so I am forever tempted to be a runner from life's uncertainties, to bury my head in the distractions of the everyday.

But occasionally I stop my running and catch my breath. Or perhaps it is my breath which catches me.

Occasionally, the splendor of the world—someone, something—intrudes into my life in such a way that I cannot help but notice. Occasionally, the glory of the stars explodes before me so that I simply cannot turn away. And when that happens, tears will stain my face in simple gratitude for the fact that I and all I love are given one more day.

The proper response to an appearance of the Spirit is not a retreat from the world but an ever heartier engagement. Spirituality is the inspiration for all politics which redeems; for once I have looked on the abundance of Creation, I cannot rest while others, caught up in its flaws, are deprived of the view.

Whatever discloses that abundance, whatever reminds us of the best we can be, whatever summons us to transform the world into ever wider channels of justice and of love—this is spirituality.

But finally and always it remains a puzzle. The best way to experience spirituality is not to chase it—and surely not to run as if we're being chased. The best way, I suspect, is to pause and ponder in silence. In silence we can feel our breath return. And occasionally, if we are very, very quiet, even the wind itself may speak.

### **Sermon:**

One of our newer members hasn't been around much lately. She happened to be at an event the other night so I did the minister thing, "Hey I have missed you in church." Never mind that I never imagined myself in the role of guilt producing pastor. She said well church really wasn't speaking to her lately. I can't fault her for her honesty but I was taken aback. What this beautiful new space, what this fantastic group of people with lives of depth and care, what the incredible music, and then tentatively what my insightful sermons; none of that touches you? She tactfully said "the sermon topics just don't interest me. What does raising money for the UUA have to do with my spirituality?" Ah yes. That is the rub. Ministers face it

now at least twice a year – how do we make opening your pocketbook relate to the spirit or heart of our lives.

In these times (I even hate saying that) it becomes even harder. How do I help you see how important it is to give to the UUA? How do I help you understand that money raised this Sunday and the hearts and minds of every Unitarian Universalist are intimately connected?

Last year we raised 1.4 million dollars. 623 churches with 128,400 individuals gave 1.4 million dollars to support the initiatives of the UUA. Do you realize that is about \$11 a person? Now obviously some folks gave significantly more than that – I know I asked each of you for \$50. Our church was in the top ten givers for this district. We gave 1562.00 which is about \$17 per person; higher than the national average! Yeah Northwest.

How do I help you to see how important it is that we do just as well or better this year? I know I feel a sense of pride when I hear that we were in the top ten for the district. I know that the projects we supported last year are essential for the health of UUism. We spent 700,000 on the national campaign that included the Time magazine religion pages and our ads in Time. The last two ads offered a free DVD about Unitarian Universalism that has been requested by 25,000 people who saw it in Time. It was posted on YouTube where 45,000 people have viewed it. We are using sophisticated targeted online advertising with Google and Time.com and we have had great success with that. During the online campaign we had over 10,000 click-throughs to the UUA Website– people who, when seeing our ad, clicked on it to learn more. If you add all that together you get about 80,000 people who have been exposed to our message and were interested enough to want to learn more. Now how many more were exposed to it just in the reading – we may never know. We do know that each click-through cost us about .81. So your \$50 last year got us about 60 click-throughs; OK maybe that's an exaggeration but you get my point. Our liberal message is out there now in a way it hasn't been for 50 years! Thanks. Think of all the people who now know they have a religious home!

The two other parts of the money about \$350,000 each went to supporting our ministers of color and back to the districts. Our district, the Heartland district, chose to use the money to support our smaller churches without ministers but offering them a minister for the weekend to talk about growth and ministry. Some districts used the money to add district staff in the area of young adult ministry or other growth initiatives. The ministers of color now have a fully funded yearly retreat, consultants to help when churches have issues of race that negatively impact their ministry, more scholarships for individuals, and an on line study and support group and our churches that settle ministers of color for the first time receive special grants and consultation services.

Spirit, breath and heart are clearly present in all of these. Remember what it was like finding the church – imagine how many people now feel that full breath that comes with knowing you have a religious home. Remember feeling like an outsider in a group of insiders – imagine how our ministers of color feel knowing there is a safety net; they too can take a breath that is the kind you take when you know that finally everything will be OK. Imagine small congregations here in the Midwest wondering what their next step is and taking a

collective deep sigh knowing that they will have help and they will survive. Your \$50 brought breath. Your \$50 brought spirit and heart to many Unitarian Universalists. Last year's collection was a great example of how a little done by a lot of people goes a long way.

I am a minister so this stuff is just a part of my cellular being but I feel the connectedness when I think of my \$50 heading out to the UU churches and ministers all over the country. Connectedness is one of the big themes of my life – I seek it and I seek to create it. I love that my lowly little dollars, worthless really, just pieces of paper, bringing someone's life a full breath of air.

So here we are again, another Association Sunday. This year once again I need to help you see how vital your money is to our faith. I need to help you see that for \$50 you get a stronger, more vibrant, more heart-filled world. This year again we need to have a little done by a lot of people go a long way.

Our goals for this year's association Sunday are near and dear to my heart. 50% of the funds will go for new programs that facilitate spiritual and theological learning and deepening and 50% will go for increased programming for excellence in ministry.

What is spiritual and theological learning? Its curricula like Building Your Own Theology or our Anti-Racism Curricula – Building the World We Dream Of, its meditation manuals and books written by Unitarian Universalists like the most recent one by Forester Church about his journey with cancer, its UU University a mini-seminary education for lay people that is a part of General Assembly every year and it's a hundred other ideas that we haven't thought of yet. Unitarian Universalists are very good at surveying the land and sampling from here and there. Oh I like this Buddhist idea, and I love this Native ritual and Oh this humanistic idea suits me too. We go wide but we aren't so good at going deep. This money will be for grants to help us go deep. Where is our ground of being? What gets you out of bed in the morning? What practices of our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors still speak to us? What thread connects us all is it divine or scientific or some combination? And the questions go on. This 50% will be for that amorphous thing we call our faith. This 50% will be to explore in a deeper way than we could ever afford before; explore those questions of liberal religion that no one else is asking. This 50% will strengthen us at deep and individual level.

The other 50% of what you give today will go for something very near and dear to my heart – strengthening our ministry. Let me tell you a story. There once was this first year minister who came to a church in a Midwest town. He was unmarried and pretty young. He was brand new to the area and brand new to ministry. It wasn't long before the usual hassles of ministry began to weigh on him as they do us all. He attended the local ministers' group and made superficial contacts with his colleagues but nothing that really sustained him. Soon he was not being refreshed by his days off and losing interest in anything but the church which was becoming more demanding by the month. He didn't always return calls, his sermons were becoming long and rambling and he didn't always say the right thing at the right time. Now this church had had substantial struggles in the past getting along with its

ministers and paying its bills. You can see where this is going – in short order all the troubles at the church were blamed on the minister and by the time help was called in all they could do was negotiate a resignation. Tired and hurt the minister packed up to head to another church – that settlement lasted 3 years and he left the ministry for good. The church struggled along for a year with an interim minister but never really dealt with the hurt of the failed ministry.

In my first year of ministry I attended the UUMA annual meeting at GA. Several of my seminary buddies sat with me. One longer term minister looked at the row of us and asked how long we had been in the ministry. We were all fresh faced and anxiously awaiting our first placements. She said something cynical like, “We’ll see how those smiles fade by this time next year.”

While in Massachusetts I served our association as a Good Officer. I was one of the ones called in to help my colleagues in trouble. Most of the time they or the church had called us too late to unravel the mess and the best we could offer was to negotiate a settlement to cut everyone’s losses. Sometimes we could offer a resource such as a course in preaching or a good therapist that eased the situation. 50% of the funds from this Association Sunday will go to support continuing education and support for our ministers; those already in ministry, ministers of color, new ministers and students. Some of the money will become badly needed scholarships for our students. Most other denominations have seminaries that are so well supported there ministry students pay nothing. Most of our students leave seminary with a \$100,000 debt. The financial burden of becoming a minister keeps many qualified people out of ministry and increases the tension between beginning ministers and their churches as they need higher salaries than our churches can supply.

Included in that 50% is a big chunk of money for CENTER – the national committee that I co-chair. Our job is to plan and execute continuing education for ministers. The problem we face is that 40% of our ministers have no continuing education budget. We are now supporting our beginning ministers better than ever before with retreats and mentors. That beginning minister I talked about would now have weekly contact with a small group on line, monthly contact with a mentor, and bi-annual retreats for the first three years. The attrition there has decreased from where it was when I started. But now we are seeing a dramatic drop out of our ministers with more than 10 years of experience in the ministry. They are tired. They don’t see the point any more. They need a shot in the spiritual arm. They need a chance to take a breath. I came back from sabbatical rested and reenergized to be with you. I was beginning to be a bit bedraggled before I went. I know you noticed because you commented on it. I looked tired before and rested after. Some of my colleagues never take that break – and given our work we need a regular short term recharge. We need colleagues to talk to. We need relationships with those colleagues that support us in times of trouble. It would take about \$100,000 each year for about three years to start an annual minister retreat and continuing education conference – I know because we have planned it. We have the place, the presenters and the program all planned. We want to give ministers seminars on preaching and church leadership, time to reflect and connect, new ideas and fun! All we need is your \$50. A little from a few can do a

lot. We hope to launch this project in early winter of 2011. We have surveyed the ministers, tentatively booked the place and begun to take applications from presenters. We have a trial smaller project in Ottawa in fall of 2009. All we need is your \$50. A little from a few can do a lot.

So what does giving to the UUA have to do with your heart, your spirit, your connectedness to the greater whole? Imagine your \$50 going out and helping a ministry student buy books. Imagine your \$50 giving a congregation some help with conflict. Imagine your \$50 creating curricula that gives our youth an even stronger sense of belonging. Imagine your \$50 reaching out to a struggling family as they learn about our values and support. Imagine your \$50 providing a rocking chair and a listening ear for that minister who has had one too many tragedies in the church this year. What we do day to day is how we show our spirit and heart. What we do reminds us what is important. Giving to the Association Sunday collection at the end of this service is just such a chance; a chance to be part of a large group of people, each doing as much as they can, to accomplish a whole lot of good. Take a nice deep breath. Now give a nice deep breath to our faith.

Namaste