

“The Shade We Inherit, the Seeds We Plant”

A Homily by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon

Delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbia, MO

Sunday, February 24, 2013

Part I – “The Shade We Inherit”

The first thing they did was plant trees.

Our founders, who scrimped and saved and finally in 1965 took a leap of faith to buy the land where we now stand.

They didn’t have the money yet to build. So they planted trees.

The neighborhood was not yet developed. Really didn’t exist. The school wasn’t here, nor most of the houses you now see. The street leading to this plot was narrow gravel road. There were no utilities out this far yet– no electricity hookups or water pipes.

Our founders brought water from home in buckets and gallon jugs to nourish the trees they planted.

For five years they raised money from garage sales and their own bank accounts. They drew up plans.

And all the while they hauled out water in buckets and jugs, and cared for the trees that would grow tall and strong around the site of this, our church home.

You can see the trees at either end of our parking lot, gracing our land – pines and cedars mostly, sharing beauty and oxygen and shade from the sun.

I can think of no better testimony to our founders’ stewardship of this place than to tell you how they carried water and planted trees, before there was anything here.

It was an expression of their faith and the can-do spirit that has marked our congregation from it’s very beginning.

In 1951, when Columbia was still a culturally conservative Jim Crow town and the religious options were less than diverse, our founders decided it was time to create a home for liberal religion in central Missouri. From our very founding this church has been a place of connection amid a sometimes isolating culture.

A congregational history written in 1981 tells it like this. “Having searched in vain several years for a liberal religious affiliation in Columbia, Philip Stone and the Addison Gullicks decided [...] that they would undertake the formation of a Unitarian Church. [As transplants from New England,] they missed having a group

where liberal religious ideas could be discussed and practiced [together].”

Out of a deep longing for kindred souls came the first meeting of the Unitarian Fellowship of Columbia.

When Stone and Gulicks sent out that first newspaper advertisement in January of 1951, hoping to assess interest in their Unitarian project, 19 religious liberals came – seeking kinship and conversation. Nineteen people came together to find at last, that they were not alone as free thinkers; not alone as religious explorers; not alone as people of ever-questioning faith.

In 1965, after meeting together for 14 years in Lowry Hall on campus at the University, our founders bought the land where we stand and started planting trees. In 1970 the building was complete. In 1980 they hired their first minister, our minister emerita, Gertrude Lindener-Stawski. Over the years they grew, called another minister, built more programs, built more rooms.

And all the while that initial longing fueled their hearts and inspired their support—the longing for kinship and conversation, and fellow-travelers for the journey.

Think about the spirit of this place: its beauty and its warmth. Think of the relationships nurtured here. This is the shade we inherit.

Our founders planted trees, and this place of connection and compassion and hope grew up around them.

They made this place for us. The physical structure, the community inside. The landscape full of trees. They built it. Our home.

This is the shade we inherit.

Song- “Home” by *Drew Pearson and Greg Holden*

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HoRkntoHkIE>)

Hold on to me as we go,
As we roll down this unfamiliar road.
And though this wave is stringing us along,
Just know you’re not alone.
‘Cause I’m going to make this place your home.

Settle down, it’ll all be clear.
Don’t pay no heed to the demons, they’ll fill you with fear.
Trouble it might drag you down.
If you get lost you can always be found.
Just know you’re not alone.

'Cause I'm going to make this place your home.

Oooooooooooooooooooh ooooooooooooooh oooooooooooooooooooh
Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

(Repeat)

Part II – “The Seeds We Plant”

Our founders planted trees, and this place of connection and compassion and hope grew up around them.

And now we are called to plant trees of our own. Though many may be metaphorical. (and I do love a metaphor.)

Now we become stewards of the dream that we inherit and co-create.

And what is that dream?

Well, there has been some magic at work for me recently, as I've been learning more about our congregation's history and it's birth out of the longing for liberal religious kinship.

Because at the same time, I've begun to hear anecdotal reports back from our ongoing Listening Campaign, and the same word keeps rising to the top.

Connection.

For so many of you, for me, what we have found here is the rich and certain knowledge that we are not alone. Not alone as free thinkers; not alone as religious explorers; not alone as people of ever-questioning faith.

I believe our dream, our life-saving message, and our mission are all wrapped up right there.

“Trouble it might drag you down.
If you get lost you can always be found.
Just know you're not alone.”

That is the heart of the dream we share. It is the love we have found. It is our call to make a home for every wandering, thirsty soul.

Know you're not alone. It sounds so simple. But it may just be a radical theological claim for our time. Unitarian Universalist Association president Peter Morales has written convincingly that existential loneliness may be the largest spiritual ill facing us today.

He writes “Americans today are the most isolated people in human history. According to one study, almost half of all Americans now have either no one or only one person with whom they can discuss important matters. This number has almost doubled in twenty years. These are not dull, abstract numbers. They are a cry of isolation, of pain, of loneliness. Americans are far lonelier than they were a generation ago. Loneliness is among us like a silent epidemic.”

Yet here we are -- Love’s people -- hungering together for deeper connection with each other and with the mystery that surrounds us. Holding on together as we journey into the spiritual life, creating a community of warmth and compassion.

Imagine carrying this message of warmth and inclusion out into our community like water in a bucket.

Imagine carrying connection in a gallon jug to every landscape where isolation reigns.

This is no small dream.

“Know you’re not alone.” This is our message to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning youth longing for an authentic religion that celebrates their identity. We love you. Welcome home.

“Know you’re not alone.” This is our message to the theist, atheist, agnostic, naturalist, or questioning soul longing for true companions on the human journey. We love you. Welcome home.

“Know you’re not alone.” This is our message to people of every age, ability, and status, to every person who has been fed the lie that their worth depends on anything other than their presence together on this good green earth. We love you, worthy souls. Welcome home.

That’s what we’re building now.

Just as our forebears planted trees and raised money and built us a physical home.

Now we are building a culture of spiritual home, which stretches even beyond our walls, a home where every human soul can find inclusion, kinship, and love.

That is what we’re building now.

And just as our founders turned to garage sales and their own bank accounts to build our church home, so must we now turn to our own generosity to build a spiritual home for all who seek it.

Because this thing we're building matters.

Today we kick off our annual budget drive, as we do each year, when we, the people of this congregation, come together fund our mission— When we all chip in to buy the buckets that will carry our message...

Buckets like more social justice outreach projects,

Buckets like the technology to help us connect more widely online through podcasts and video live-streaming,

Buckets like increased staff hours and more programs to facilitate our deepening connections.

Buckets cost money. But if we don't fund our mission, our life-saving message will simply seep away like water through our fingers.

So I ask you to give generously this year in every way you are able.

As you leave you'll find generosity campaign materials in the greeting area, and this week we'll be sending out letters, brochures, and pledge cards to help you learn about how you can be a steward of the dream that we inherit and co-create. We've also posted these materials online at uuchurch.net/generosity – and this year you can even make your pledge on a convenient online form.

As you sit down to discuss your contribution and to make your pledge, I invite you to think of every penny given as a statement of love to the people in this room and those outside of it who long for connection... And then I invite you to love with abandon!

I promise it will feel good, because what we're building matters.

Together, we will widen our circle of connection and love, finding nourishment for our hearts, and carrying kinship and compassion like water to all who thirst.

Together, with generosity and joy, let us make it so.