

Stewardship sermon edited and presented by Rev. Bryan Plude

By James (Jay) C Leach <http://www.uuccharlotte.org/learn-more/introduction/about-senior-minister/>

The Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) Stewardship and Development staff awarded The Reverend Jay Leach the 2012 Stewardship Sermon Award for his sermon entitled "The Infinite Enlargement of the Heart," shared with the First Unitarian Church of Columbus (Ohio) on Sunday, February 5, 2012. Jay serves as Senior Minister at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Charlotte.

Settle in. This sermon is about 5 minutes longer than you are used to hearing from me. But it is well crafted. Award winning.

"...the infinite enlargement of the heart..."

<http://www.uua.org/worship/words/sermon/198845.shtml>

Leach begins: The late playwright Arthur Miller once offered a *New York Times* commentary in which he admitted: "I no longer remember how many years it took for me to realize I was making a mistake in the Pledge of Allegiance. With high passion, I stood beside my seat in my Harlem grammar school and repeated the Pledge to the Flag, which always drooped next to the teacher's desk."

But, he got it wrong.

Offering a context for understanding his ongoing misstating, Miller continued: "Dirigibles were much in the news in the early 20's...Thus, the patriotic connection..."

With that, Miller then acknowledged that "each and every morning" he attested to "One Nation in a Dirigible, with Liberty and Justice for All." He recalled: "I could actually see in my mind's eye hordes of faces looking down at Earth through the windows of the Navy's airships. The whole United States was up there, all for one and one for all—and the whole gang in that Dirigible. One day,

maybe I could get to ride in it, too, for I was deeply patriotic, and the height of Americanism, as I then understood it, was to ride in a Dirigible."

While school kids may still stand, hand over heart, and recite the words of that pledge, Leach continues, I am fairly confident that not a one of them makes that *same* mistake. A dirigible? What in the world is a dirigible? Those floating airships are a thing of our past, bygone relics as antiquated as those wall-mounted, crank telephones in use back before we started filling our pockets with phones that can outsmart us.

This is not, however, to suggest that children aren't now confused when they encounter the word "indivisible"—quite a mouthful for an elementary-aged tyke parroting a pledge. However, the regrettable question I would raise here today, Leach says, is: for how many *adults* in this nation, whether their allegiance is pledged to our flag or not, does that word—indivisible—still have meaning?

Are we still united around a common commitment to indivisibility? Some suggest instead that our common denominator, a low one indeed, may be the collective intoning of a song with the repeated refrain "what's in it for me?" It is a monotonous chorus, skipping over the notes *do* and *re* and landing, repeatedly, on the solitary sound of that one note *mi*—*mi mi mi*.

Since as adults we're rarely asked to recite the pledge, let me remind you, says Leach, that in it allegiance is pledged not just to the flag but to the republic...for which it stands. Republic—from the Latin *res (raise) publica* which can be rendered in unadorned vernacular as "a public thing." Republic: a referent to the collective, to that which is held publicly, a synonym of another thing—the commonwealth.

Leach continues, (in 2012, remember): If you've listened to the recent retching of rancor posing as political discourse, you've not heard much about the commonwealth. Commonwealth? Really? It sounds as quaint, as dusty and fusty as

"dirigible" and maybe "indivisible." An anachronism at antinomical odds with our addiction to the query: what's in it for me?

Frank Kirkpatrick, in a commentary just this week, says Leach, admitted, by way of his title that he was "Searching for the Common Good in Political Discourse." He pointed out how three of those vying for the Republican party's nod have cited religious ideas from their traditions. But then noted: "In a political campaign among contenders...it is striking that one central Christian religious theme seems absent: the theme of the common good."

"For all of these candidates the legacy of the notion of the common good seems somewhat embarrassing." "Why?" Kirkpatrick wondered, then answered his own question: "Because [the common good] is a notion that trumps the current rhetoric of radical individualism and minimal government. It is an uncomfortable notion that does not sit easily with the call to free people from the burdens of having to care for others especially when such care may well entail a tax on one's resources."

My contention today to you, my co-religionists, says Leach, is this: the most radical, controversial, countercultural message we offer in our particular liberal religion may not be about marriage equality or economic justice or environmental activism or any other of our social stances as important as those are.

Our most radical, controversial, countercultural message just may be our affirmation that each of us, every single, individual one of us is a part of an interdependent web of all existence. To make such an affirmation with full integrity suggests that "what's in it for *me*?" is directly, inextricably, completely entwined in "what's in it for...*us*?"

Continues Leach: If the web of existence of which we are each parts truly is interdependent, then there is really *only* the common good.

This radical notion is not a new one among those of our religious ilk. Our nineteenth-century religious forebear Ralph Waldo Emerson is, I think, (and I've

spent not a little time thinking about this one, says Leach) [Emerson] is mischaracterized as a vigorous individualist. In his central essay "The Over-Soul" Emerson attests to "the common heart," to "this unity of thought, in which every heart beats," to "a larger imbibing of the common heart." He dares assert that "the heart in you is the heart of all." He actually believes in what he refers to as "the infinite enlargement of the heart."

"The infinite enlargement of the heart." It suggests, health is always public health. Well-being is never private, is never an isolated, individual sort of thing. It points us back to the *res (raise) publica*—the public thing.

Maybe Arthur Miller was, unknowingly and metaphorically on to something, says Leach, in his misstating of the pledge. Maybe his image is an apt one. We are all in this together, as if suspended in a dirigible. There's no other ship, in the air, on the sea, on this earth where we reside together.

So Jane Hirschfield proposes: "the only sin is distance, refusal." It is all, as she says in "Salt Heart" it is all "swept in" together.

Now this ideological, idealistic message gets quite a bit harder when we realize that, if our radical claim about interdependence is going to have real integrity, we will have to model it in our congregations. We can't call for a commonwealth, we can't invoke the common good outside these walls, if we don't live as a commonwealth, if we don't act for the common good within them.

Leach continues: On Friday, I met with the stunned, shocked widow of one of our most active members who suddenly, unexpectedly died on Wednesday afternoon. She doesn't need the freedom to find her own path right now. She wasn't coming to assert her personal position on some issue. She wasn't asking for the right to be a religious individualist. She desperately, desperately needs a community, a group of people whose interests are larger than self-interests, a congregation that can embody some belief that her well-being and our well-being are inextricably tied together, as if in some expansive web.

Last Sunday it was our coming-of-age youth, recounts Leach, beginning to craft their ways of expressing that to which they are giving their hearts, which is our way of talking about a credo. Each of them [is] paired with an adult mentor, some woman, some man who believes in some way that that kid's well-being is inextricably tied to her or his own, as if in some expansive web.

Earlier that afternoon, says Leach, quite a few of our contingent went to celebrate the opening of a beautiful new housing complex for our homeless neighbors. One of the apartments in that amazing place bears the name of our congregation because we wrote a sizeable check to aid in its construction, says Leach. You see, we as a congregation are actively involved in work on issues of homelessness and affordable housing (as is UUFC) because we believe that the well-being of our neighbors is inextricably tied up in our own, as if in some expansive web.

Here's something else we do because of that belief, says Leach: we go to each of our members every year and we ask her or him to consider a financial contribution of 5% of his or her gross household income. Some ignore that message, some scoff at it, some get a bit miffed by it. But, increasingly there are those embracing it, because they believe that we can't be the kind of congregation we need and want to be, we can't embody the amazingly good news of our liberal religion without adequate financial resources to make that possible.

Part of what is making our members open to that message, says Leach, is the fact that we make a commitment to one another: we are going to pledge as generously as we possibly can on an annual basis to a unified annual budget. Any other funds we raise, all other funds we raise go to causes outside of our congregation. We do it this way because we believe, we truly believe that our well-being is tied up with one another, as if, as if, in an expansive web.

Now, I know you're wondering: why *just* 5%, says Leach? For this reason: people attracted to our liberal religion have many, many things about which they

care deeply. So, we only ask for 5% and urge our members to commit another 5% to the larger community, to...the common good.

Leach continues: My partner and I made that commitment to our congregation on the day I was called there. We will give at least 5% our gross household income to the church and at least another 5% to the larger community. It is an act of spiritual discipline for us. But, it is more than that. It is the source of one of our deepest joys. (An aside: For the second year I have pledged 5% of my income to UUFC. As I settle into this new work, I am increasing my giving to other organizations, which includes the Torres Shelter).

Says Leach, On our refrigerator for the past couple of years we've had a picture of a dear friend of my documentary film-making partner who was given an outrageous federal prison sentence for a first time, non-violent drug offense. Her film about this woman got a great deal of attention and made her case one of national prominence.

A few years back this woman informed us that she had discovered a way to get a paralegal degree while in prison. We gladly, enthusiastically responded that we'd pay her tuition out of the 5% we give to the larger community.

So, beside her picture on our refrigerator hangs her paralegal school diploma, a little testimony to the deep joy of generosity.

Tomorrow morning, my beloved partner will board a plane. On Tuesday morning, she will be the one standing at the gate when, after over 18 years, this woman is at last freed. They'll share in their first embrace outside of the walls of a prison. My partner will drive her to a nearby airport, put a plane ticket in her hand, a plane ticket we've gotten her with the help of one of our members, watch her walk away to board a plane bound for her three daughters in the city where they live.

Let me tell you, says Leach, without any equivocation: there is absolutely no way we could have spent or invested our money that would more profoundly

enhance[d]...our well-being. Our—mine, my partner's, this woman's, may I be so audacious to suggest—the world's.

When we consider what happens to what we give, gladly, to our congregation, we feel that same way. Kids are taught with our money. Grieving families are cared for. Old prejudices are broken down. New self-images are built up. Beautiful music is offered with our money. Meals are delivered. Great fun is had. Minds are stirred, disturbed, changed. Hearts are lifted, bolstered, filled. Deep needs in and outside our walls are addressed. With our contribution of several thousand dollars, says Leach, alongside many, many others similar sorts of contributions, we do two things: we change lives and we change the world. And because I believe so deeply in our professed affirmation that we truly do live as a part of an interdependent web of all existence, I know: the common good is my good as well.

So, believing your good is tied up with mine, Leach invites you, I invite you: join us. Join many others in our congregation. Join with many others already deeply engaged here in this congregation. Join us in generous participation and generous contributions. We're all in this together.

We need one another, says Leach. We need the good news of this liberal religion. This community, our nation and our world need our radical, controversial, countercultural message that there are questions far, far more important than "what's in it for me?"

It starts, says Marge Piercy "it starts when *you* care to *act*..."

"it starts when you say *We* and know who you mean, and each day you mean one more."

And one more...and one more...and one more...and...