

Those of you who read the newsletter may remember that my message today was actually to be a presentation of a message written by our denomination president, Susan Frederick-Gray. The title? "Cultivating Humility." About one week ago, however, it dawned on me that we were in the middle of our annual stewardship drive and that I hadn't planned to preach on stewardship. Oops! I made some quick calls to Dave, Megan and Merrily, our stewardship chairs, and we all agreed that a stewardship message was highly appropriate. Back to the drawing board.

How to think about humility as it relates to stewardship and giving?

First, what is humility, and what is it not? Definitions I found online included "having a modest or low estimate of one's own importance" and "not proud or haughty: not arrogant or assertive."<sup>i</sup>

Conversely, arrogant was defined as "having or revealing an exaggerated sense of one's own importance or abilities."<sup>ii</sup>

I don't really like the definitions I found for humility. They reflect the low esteem in which humility is held in our modern culture. The definition for arrogance, however, seems to fit pretty well.

In her book *Humility, Humus, Hubris & Humor*, Rev. Susanne Meyer has this to say: "It is the courageous person, one who has a strong sense of his or her own self-worth, who can admit his own limitations and say, 'I don't have all the answers. I don't know. I'm not perfect. I need your help. Teach me. Help me grow.'"<sup>iii</sup> I like this. Strong and courageous, but knowing one's limitations.

My preliminary thinking about the topic lead me to the title you see at the top of the OOS: "Does Humility Mean Silencing Our Voice?" But my thinking tends to evolve as I get into the nitty-gritty of writing. That is the case for this sermon. The unstated assumption in my published title is that Unitarian Universalists are humble. As I said in my service description, "We are humble in recognizing that ours is not the only voice, the only way, and that the path forward requires compromise." This assumption is built into our seven principles. And yes, it is true, sometimes. But as I said two weeks ago in my message about ideology, we UU's are not immune from thinking that our way (ranging from theology to

politics) is the only correct way. We can be remarkably inflexible, shrill and self-righteous. This falls under the category of arrogance. So as I thought about what I would say today, I thought of another title; "Are We Humble or Are We Arrogant?"

I'll return to this, but let me back up a minute to our mission and our vision.

We have a lengthy mission statement, written in 2003. It is far too long for me to remember, so I have distilled it into something I can remember. Here is the distilled version: "Our mission is to support our community (both internal and external) through living our UU values." What do we mean by support our community? Here is how those words were fleshed out during meetings we had last fall, here in this sanctuary. We envision a vibrant, growing Religious Exploration program for children, youth and adults. We engage in small group ministry and we have fun together. Our worship is dynamic, thought provoking and renews us. We are making a difference in the Chico community; we are known as a congregation that shows up for social justice.

How do we continue to become this church, for we are making great progress. Generous stewardship is a critical component. Surprise.

About a year ago, with some of our board, I watched a webinar on stewardship, presented by Rev. Vail Weller, Director of Congregational Living with the Unitarian Universalist Association. She presented some information on what various denominations give and how they stack up relative to one another.

Let's start with this question: Which state is most generous in their giving? Utah, because of the near universal tithing of members of the Mormon church. Tithing means giving ten percent of one's income. Among Mormons, it means giving ten percent of one's gross income, not adjusted income. I've been told that church leaders actually sit down with families, review their personal finances with them, and help them figure out how to tithe. Ouch.

Here's another question for you. What region of the country gives the most? The Southeast. The historical Deep South. Why is this? Because belonging to a church is still an expected thing in the deep south and because a large percentage

of those churches understand the Bible literally and, according to the Bible, tithing is expected.

Two final questions. What area of the country gives the least and what denomination gives the least? The answer to the first question is New England. The penny pinching, tight fisted New Englander is almost a caricature. The answer to the second question, who gives the least, is Unitarian Universalists. Yup. Us. The least giving denomination. Does this have something to do with our deep roots in New England? Probably. And...And! On average, UU's have the highest per capita income of any denomination. I'm not saying that is true here at UUFC. I'm saying it is true nationwide.

So we are a relatively small denomination, only 1,000 congregations nationwide, comprising 200,000 members. Contrast that with 16 million Southern Baptists. On average, we give less than any other denomination. What does this say about us and about our effectiveness?

Would anyone here argue that UU's have been as effective in delivering our message as have the conservative and evangelical churches in delivering theirs? Why do you suppose that is? Sheer numbers is one of the reasons. But one cannot discount the role of money.

First of all, generous giving provides for more robust programming, better outreach. We can better enact our vision, live our mission, when there is more money in the till. We serve our members better. We have more impact in the community. In turn, this likely leads to greater numbers of UU's. It feeds on itself.

Does anyone here remember the large influence that the Mormon church had on the 2008 vote on Proposition 8, having to do with marriage equality here in California? Large numbers of Mormons all over the country were manning phone banks, calling folks here in California, to influence that vote. Which, by-the-way, was legal. Churches are allowed to speak out on policy, but not on particular candidates (although that may have changed recently under Trump). They were successful. As a result of Prop 8, California law defined marriage as between a man and a woman, until it was struck down in the courts.

The Mormon church was able to do this for two reasons: 1) the dedication of a large number of people, and 2) they had the money to finance this effort.

If it seems like I have singled out the Mormon church, I have, but only as an example of what the religious right has been able to accomplish in influencing our national politics.

Can anyone here argue that UU's specifically, and socially progressive churches generally, have been as effective? Anywhere near as effective?

Yes, we have made inroads. One such inroad has to do with marriage equality and with acceptance of LGBTQ persons. But what about gun control? What about the fact that Trump was elected? What about the huge majority Republicans hold in the US House of Representatives. What about the 26 states controlled by Republicans from top to bottom and the 32 states where both houses are Republican?<sup>iv</sup> (By the way, as recently as 2010, Republicans controlled as few as 14 state legislatures.<sup>v</sup>) I'm not saying that Democrats have all the right answers. We don't. I think California would be better served by a more balanced legislature. But the Democratic Party voice has been silenced in large areas of the country and in Washington. This is not democracy, which we uphold in our 5th principle (you can find all of the principles in the front of your hymnal).

Generally speaking it is the greater number of committed folks with the greater financial resources to back them up that win the battles of public policy.

UU's are smart people, thinking people. We question and think critically. Why is it, then, that we seem to think that generous giving to the church, giving on par with what is given by conservative churches, is not a good idea? Is it our New England roots? Probably, in part. Is it rejection of all that is Biblical, in this case tithing? I suspect this plays a greater role.

But back to that original question. Are we humble or are we arrogant? Maybe arrogance plays a role in our reluctance to give. We tend to have a very high opinion of ourselves and the fact that we are non-creedal, we don't tell people what to believe. It seems self-evident that our acceptance of many individual theologies under one roof is a good thing. We provide a religious home for those who don't fit anywhere else, and that religious home includes both Republicans and

Democrats. Our seven principles provide a framework for how we conduct our lives. First among these is the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Number seven speaks of the interrelatedness of all being. Living and acting on these two principles alone can save lives. They do save lives, both within our walls and in the larger community.

So how are we arrogant? Maybe because we think so highly of what we have to offer, we feel that we don't have to do what large and successful churches do and have done to rewrite the political landscape of our country. Yes, maybe we don't have to give. Really? This seems like magical thinking. For a denomination that prides itself on reason in the search for truth, another of our principles, this feels odd.

We can't do it alone. We will never be as large or deeply funded as the socially conservative denominations. We need to partner with socially liberal faiths and with those outside the religious sphere. However, we bring a unique perspective. It is important that our voice be at the table.

Those who are humble do not under estimate themselves, nor do they overestimate. They know that each of us has a role to play. They know how to ask for help. That is what we do during stewardship. We ask for help from each of you.

I'm not trying to guilt or shame you into giving more. I am asking you to critically evaluate, using reason, what it takes for UUFC to better live our mission of serving our community.

So, circling back to where I started: Does Humility Mean Silencing Our Voice? Maybe instead, humility about our limits and discernment about what it takes to expand those limits will mean giving us a more influential voice.

May it be so.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/humble>

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>iii</sup> 2004

<sup>iv</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_United\\_States\\_state\\_legislatures](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_United_States_state_legislatures)

<sup>v</sup> <http://reason.com/blog/2016/11/14/the-2016-election-turned-more-state-legi>