

MAKE NO LITTLE PLANS

A stewardship sermon by F. Jay Deacon
Preached at Unity Church of North Easton
March 30, 2008

Four years ago at the New Year's holiday I went back and for the first time visited my former congregation in Oak Park, just outside Chicago. On a sunny Thursday I went with a friend to see Millennium Park, part of Grant Park in downtown Chicago stretching northward and eastward from the Art Institute. It was only a dream when I lived there only a half dozen years ago. But here it was: Frank Geary's spectacular bandshell and bridge, lots of amazing urban art, and the opening up of a huge area that had until now been pretty much wasted, but which now connects the Loop with the North Michigan Avenue area. The younger Mayor Daley has achieved something more than the mere preservation of what Daniel Burnham first conceived. He's improved on it, carried it forward in a way its original designer would have loved. You had to marvel at what it's possible to do with a few disused acres of land.

The real reason for the trip was to conduct a couple of weddings for old friends at their famous building, Unity Temple, designed by a young member of the congregation named Frank Lloyd Wright — who was then little known. He would lead the next generation of great architects. While Burnham stuck to classical styles of architecture, Wright broke dramatically with them. He sometimes considered Unity Temple his best work.

The Temple has never looked as good as it does now after the latest million-dollar restoration. Its design was breathtaking and brilliant. But engineering has advanced, and now there's poured concrete that holds together and doesn't crumble, and now the cantilevered roof overhangs stay up and don't sag, and the 14 roofs don't leak. I saw a newly-unearthed photograph of the building when it was only 14 years old — and I couldn't believe how bad it already looked. Like the Millennium Park project, the latest restorations were an advance on an original brilliant design.

THE READINGS

Sharon Salzberg:

We can never know how our actions will ripple out and affect others. We may, through force of habit, disparage ourselves, considering an action to be inadequate, or resign ourselves to its certain mediocrity, but we can't possibly know the ultimate result of anything we do.

— Sharon Salzberg. *Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience*. Ny: Riverhead, 2002. P. 141.

*From the Gospel of
Thomas, chapter 20.*

The disciples said to Jesus, "Tell us what the kingdom of God is like."

He said to them, "It's like a mustard seed. It's the smallest of all seeds, but when it falls on prepared soil, it produces a large plant and becomes a shelter for birds of the sky."

Olympia Brown, 1920

[We talk of reforms. We have hoped to make the world safe for democracy; to establish a league of peace; but the very first necessity in reform work is the recognition of Divine capabilities in man. . . .

We are not alone. There is always an unseen power working for righteousness. The Infinite is behind us

And] that is the message which I bring you today. Stand by this great faith which the world needs and which you are called to pro . . . Dear friends, stand by this faith. Work for it and sacrifice for it. There is nothing in all the world so important as to be loyal to this faith which has placed before us the loftiest ideals, which has comforted us in sorrow, strengthened us for noble duty and made the world beautiful. Do not demand immediate results but rejoice that we are

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Daniel Burnham was the architect and city planner behind the spectacular design of Chicago's lakefront that set the standard for urban design. He unveiled it in 1909, a year after Unity Temple was opened — in fact in the same year that Unity Temple was *re-opened* after Wright's innovative heating system failed to heat the building and conventional radiators were installed. Not everything we try will work the first time.

Burnham had been the chief of construction for the World's Colombian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, and his plan for Chicago grew out of that. Boulevards, gardens, classical-facade buildings rings of park and woodlands — it became the inspiration for American cities. He went on to pioneer the skyscraper with his Flatiron Building in New York.



Maybe you remember what Daniel Burnham famously said.

Make no little plans,
they have no magic to stir [the] blood
and probably themselves will not be realized.
Make big plans,
aim high in hope and work,
remembering that a noble, logical diagram
once recorded will never die,
but long after we are gone be a living thing,
asserting itself with ever-growing insistence.



As a tiny minority — one-third of one percent of the population in America — compared with, say, *Catholics* who represent about 25 percent and Baptists, at 16 percent — our Unitarian Universalist one-third of one percent is a small community grown accustomed to obscurity. Here we are at the epicenter of the movement and even here we're obscure! Maybe the obscurity is comforting because it's familiar.

But then, familiarity can limit us. A street-person living in a refrigerator carton might just want to stay there rather than venture change if it's become familiar and reliable. I think it was a therapist who told me that one day when I was thinking inside a very small box!

Make small safe plans. They won't ask much of you and you'll have the comfort of knowing not much is going to change or require much adaptation.



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worthy to be entrusted with this great message, that you are strong enough to work for a great true principle without counting the cost. Go on finding ever new applications of these truths and new enjoyments in their contemplation, always trusting in life and in love.

William James, 1907

from Pragmatism

Suppose that the world's author put the case to you before creation, saying: "I am going to make a world not certain to be saved, a world the perfection of which shall be conditional merely, the condition being that each several agent does its own 'level best.' I offer you the chance to take part in such a world. It is a real adventure, with real danger, yet it may win through. Will you trust yourself and trust the other agents sufficiently to face the risk?" [Or would you say] that, rather than be part and parcel of so fundamentally irrational a universe, you preferred to relapse into the slumber of nonentity?

From the architect

Daniel Hudson

Burnham, 1909:

Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir [the] blood and probably themselves will not be realized. Make big plans; aim high in hope and work, remembering that a noble, logical diagram once recorded will never die, but long after we are gone will be a living thing, asserting itself with ever-growing insistency. Remember that our sons and grandsons are going to do things that would stagger us. Let your watchword be *order*, and your beacon, *beauty*. Think big."

—*Vision of the City Beautiful* (Plan for Chicago), 1909

Since Daniel Burnham's Chicago design, since our forebears built Unity Temple and, right here, built Unity Church — different perils never before imagined threaten the human community and even life on earth. Since then, there are new possibilities for human attainment. We've advanced, extended, our Gospel.

It's for us to live and extend this Unitarian Universalist spiritual tradition, as stewards of its future, to write its next chapter.



When I can I love to visit with British Unitarian friends. In the 19th century, Unitarians were a real power in Britain and at the forefront of so many reforms. But on one of my recent trips I visited their General Secretary, Jeffrey Teagle, in his *new* offices — in the *basement* of our own historic Essex Hall headquarters, the basement where they have had to move their offices so they can lease out the upper floors. They've shrunk precipitously for the last century until hardly anybody even knows they're there. When I first visited there in 2000, there had just appeared, in a newspaper religion column, an enquiry by a man who wanted a spiritual home but just couldn't accept the tenets of the Anglican church. He wanted to know where he could turn. And the Anglican Bishop of Oxford had written in response to say that, well, there used to be *Unitarians*, but they're gone now!

Jeff Teagle immediately issued a response to the effect that rumours of their death were exaggerated. But what had happened?

One of the things I learned that most surprised me was that British Unitarians don't pledge! — have no concept of pledging. The *Anglican* Church is state-supported, and the Unitarians have copied way too much from the Anglicans — except that they get no checks from London. So pledging just never became part of their culture. It should have. There are now only somewhere between 4,000 and 6,000 Unitarians in all of England, Scot-

land, Wales, and Ireland. They've learned somehow to think very, very small.

What became of the noble vision of Britain's great Unitarians? what became of the noble tradition of Joseph Priestley, James Martineau, Gilbert Wakefield — who thundered against capital punishment and slavery and compromised clergy in the 1700s, William Hazlitt — prophet of imagination, Florence Nightingale? What became of the movement that founded the *Guardian* newspaper?

You probably never heard of the nineteenth century London Unitarian minister, Rev. Richard Price, but he was probably the most influential theoretician of the American Revolution with his famous writings on civil liberty and American independence, published all over the world and widely read on both sides of the Atlantic. Well — Richard Price *gave fully twenty percent of his income*. But today the practice of pledging doesn't even exist there.

Yet — the real record of our commitments, the truest register of our aspirations and convictions — are our calendars and our bank statements and our credit card statements.



We pledge. Yes, we do. We pledge just enough so that we manage to pay our basic expenses. And our best dreams never quite get funded.

What if — now I'm not asking you to match Richard Price and pledge 20% of your income — but *what if* each of us simply raised *our present pledge by 20%*?

Every year your Executive Committee faces what you might think of as an annual root-canal. They decide what gets cut from our dream budget.

There's a difference between "sad" money, which pays the *inescapable bills*, and "happy" money, which, once those bills are paid, goes on to *express* and *realize* our *best dreams*.

Today we launch our annual Stewardship campaign, at the end of which we're all asked to commit, to the best of our ability to foresee the year ahead, to a pledge.

Three hundred fifty years ago, our pledge would have come in the form of a tax bill from the town. No choice about that. You might have been supporting a hell-and-brimstone Calvinist church whose message you deplored. Now it comes to us as choice. You don't have to do it *at all*. If you *do*, it's up to you *what it is you give your money to*. Now it comes as an invitation to loose the grip of our attachments and our materialism and unfold into more fully evolved beings.

There is good news. UUs on this side of the Atlantic have begun to take this decision really seriously. All across North America, Unitarian Universalists are learning to commit seriously to our vision, our message, our work in this world. We are fast moving away from our status held all during the last decade or more as the very worst per capital givers on the American religious scene, just behind the Christian Scientists. That's changing fast. We're now surpassed them. Now we're only the second-stingiest.

And here at Unity Church during the last half dozen years, you've seen some tremendously gratifying growth in your members' commitment.

A few years ago, when a member of my last congregation who might well wonder sometimes how they're going to pay their rent — told me they were pledging five percent of their income, it galvanized my own resolve to pledge at the same percentage rate. I'm doing so again this year. It may not be twenty percent like Richard Price, but I do pledge five percent to Unity Church.



It's **how we say** that *our being here* as a Unitarian Universalist spiritual community and a Unitarian Universalist prophetic witness — *matters*, and not only matters: *matters supremely*.



You know, there are religious forces out there in our society, radical right religious

forces, that aren't making *little* plans. They own six cable television networks and 2,000 radio stations and they're building enormous and influential churches. For awhile it seemed they were running the government, too.

Do you think their message has nothing to do with the kind of world we're making, the future that's being created right now?

Do you think it has nothing to do with the tragic failure of our nation to respond to the climate crisis, to the increasingly desperate pleas of the world's scientists that we have less than a decade to completely change our relationship with oil and energy and profit and greed — if it isn't already too late? Do you think it has nothing to do with the bigotry out there? with the conflation of God and country that leads to disastrous wars?



And doesn't the world — don't we — need an evolutionary spiritual vision — one that recognizes the miraculous advance of human consciousness, one that recognizes that that advance cannot stop here, must not stop here — frozen in place by bondage to ancient dogma and the limitations of ancient scriptures and habits? — Doesn't the world — don't we — one that draws wisdom from those deep wells and sees far, far beyond them, as that hymn says, *For a Spirit then shall move them we but vaguely apprehend*; filling their vision with *aims magnificent and holy, never known in days of old, never dreamed by ancient sages, howsoever free and bold*.

Always this spiritual movement has been driven by such a vision. It was that vision that has inspired an unending procession of pioneers, and unending procession of magnificent lives.

It's that vision that that looks at people and asks not, *does he, does she, fulfill our specifications for the approved sexual orientation, or gender identity, or race, or class, or point of view, or whatever* — but asks, instead, *what splendors lie inside this heart and mind, waiting to be discov-*

ered, waiting to be set free?



From its beginning this faith has “placed before us the loftiest ideals,” to borrow Olympia Brown’s phrase.

Unitarians and Universalists have always demanded that their religion make sense to them and make sense *of* them, proclaimed the dignity of all.

It was our movement that ordained a growing sisterhood of women ministers until just over half our clergy today are women.

It was our movement that, among historic religious bodies, first ordained *out* and proud gay and lesbian and transgender ministers and has fought for our rights and dignity for decades. It’s done that because it’s an *evolutionary* spiritual vision that looks not back, but to the possible future.

The death of one of our ministers this very month in 1965 in Selma, Alabama, brought the attention of the nation to civil rights. Our UUA Board of Trustees adjourned their meeting in Boston to march in Selma in solidarity with Dr. King, with the slain Jim Reeb, and with the multitude of people who had for long borne the bitter yoke of oppression in the American South.

From its beginning this faith has “placed before us the loftiest ideals,” and that noble faith, that loftier expectation, lifted many lives out of pedestrian mediocrity into dimensions of meaning and significance they would not have dreamed without its noble influence.



Those who went before us: — Like us, they needed the strength of community gathered around this faith. But they knew that they were not in the world so that the world could remain the same. We know that from this faith, sustained by it, they rose to their destiny — asked how are we to live fully in this world of life and death; asked how might we fulfill that transcendently higher and greater possibility of human existence?

They gathered not just for the sake of how they, personally, could survive and thrive. They gathered not just for a way to live with their heartbreaks and hopes.

They gathered for the sake of how we *must* be here — to ask, for what are we responsible; what calling, what imperative, meets us in this place and this time where we live our lives? They gathered for the purpose of faithfully carrying out their stewardship of life, of the lives they were given.



And they committed, drawn by this faith, by its high ideals and far-reaching vision. *whatever lay within their power to commit*. Because our stewardship means we are responsible for what we do with that which has been entrusted to us. **Stewardship** comes from the earthy sense of the English *sty*, property, and *ward*, the keeper of the property. It’s an old English word that actually translates a Greek one, *oikonomos*, which means, literally, the keeper of a house.



I know you’ve heard plenty about the things that imperil our world from me already and I guess you know you’ll hear more. But the question is,

Is it possible to turn the tide? Is it *possible*? Is it possible to raise at least some small, but potentially influential part of the next generation of Americans, these young people who pass through our community of growth and worship and learning, to see themselves and the world and their relationship to this world of life *differently than our generations did*?

What is possible here, at 9-13 Main Street in North Easton? What might be happening here, on an ever-larger scale, for the sake of the growth of the human spirit? Where we can feel the great tide of love that embraces our whole selves reaching farther, more deeply, into this world?

Is it possible that Unity Church can begin to operate on something approaching the scale

and seriousness with which those huge right-wing religious establishments do, and begin really, seriously, to counter their influence?

Is it possible that we can do things on the scale of our dreams? can we fulfill our dreams?

Even when we have our doubts about whether the tide really can be turned, whether the conditions on this Earth that nurture and support life can be saved from the ravages of greed and folly — whether a more human world and more fulfilled lives — are possible —

We must live and act as though they are.
We must make no little plans,
because they have no magic to stir the
blood
and probably themselves will not be
realized.

We must make big plans,
aim high in hope and work,
remembering that a noble and just dream
must never die.

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