

Welcome to our spiritual home. I say our spiritual home because many of us have chosen this place and committed to having this Fellowship be our spiritual home. For those of you who don't think of this place as your spiritual home or have not yet chosen to have it be your spiritual home, we hope you find something of sustaining value here.

As a Unitarian Universalist congregation, no doubt, there are some of you who come to Sunday services on a regular basis but do not think of it as being a "spiritual" experience, or think of this place, that is important to you, as a spiritual home. From you, I ask forgiveness as I proceed. I will use language that you may not find comfortable or language you may not use yourself. Yet, it is my hope that you will recognize this place in my words and descriptions. To do so, you may need to do some translation of terms, mine into ones you are comfortable with, but without significantly changing the meaning of this place for either of us.

A spiritual home is a valuable place. A place that is truly a spiritual home feeds us. It may inspire us or hold us, during the times when life does not hold much meaning or make much sense. A spiritual home is a place we can count on to challenge us to think, to rethink, to consider another way of seeing or experiencing life. It's a place that encourages us to grow, to go deeper and discover. It's a place that accepts us, as we are. A spiritual home is a place that knows us, a place where we are known and recognized.

This is a spiritual home for many of us because it's a place that supports and encourages us to find our way on our individual spiritual path. A place that encourages us to explore that part of our lives that is deeply meaningful, maybe even profound, sacred or holy. It encourages us to dig deeper into the meaning of life, the purpose of life, into issues of morality, right relation and well-being.

A spiritual home is a place that helps us to look deeper into our own inner workings, our thinking, our inner being. It's a place that helps us to look out at our relationships with others and the world. It's a place that helps us make meaning out of the Spirit of Life, that which connects us to others, to the web of life, to that connective tissue that is non-self, that is bigger than self.

The word home has a particular meaning and has a unique feeling tone. Home has a different and special reference point. One may feel "at home" in any number of places, but it is not the same as home. Only home is home.

Home is, as the old saying goes, "the place where they have to take you in." Home is where one lives, which makes it life sustaining. Home implies a particular set of relationships with others who share your home. It's a place where you are known, a place of shared intimacy. A spiritual home is a place that feeds our essential being.

A home, a spiritual home, is not just a place. If this place were to burn to the ground or blow away in a storm, we would still be a spiritual home for each other. Our spiritual home is built on relationship. Our spiritual home is based on shared beliefs, shared values, a shared world view. The details of what we share may differ widely, but we share something of profound importance. At least if we choose to.

A number of weeks ago, there was a meeting of the visiting stewards, those people who plan to come visit with you during our stewardship campaign. I want to share with you much of what we talked about.

One of the first questions asked was “What’s the job of a visiting steward?” The answer was, to build relationships, to build on relationships. The job of visiting stewards is all about relationships. A congregation is about community, about being a spiritual home, which implies and requires relationships.

Another question was “what’s your relationship with this Fellowship?” It seemed, if we didn’t know what our own relationship with the congregation was, we would not be able to have a real conversation with anyone else about it. So we spent quite some time listening to each other talk about our relationship to the Fellowship. It was an interesting conversation, and a meaningful one.

We all came away with a better understanding of how we relate to this Fellowship, to our spiritual home. We better understood the importance of each of us thinking about and talking about our relationship with the congregation. This conversation laid the groundwork for us to better understand how to have such a conversation with others, especially the people we may visit with.

The visiting stewards came to understand that their primary job was to have conversations with people about the Fellowship and how we each experience this congregation. In other words, they want to learn about *you* and your relationship with the Fellowship. What feeds you, what gets in the way of feeling better fed by the Fellowship? What’s important for each of us? What would we like to change? What are our hopes and aspirations for the future of the Fellowship? How can we help the Fellowship grow in the direction of our desires.

The visiting stewards came to understand that if we don’t think seriously about these things - our relationship to the Fellowship and each other, what feeds us and what our hopes and desires are - there really isn’t any good way to make a decision about how much, or how little, money to pledge in the nurture and support of this congregation.

That led to a wonderful conversation about how does one decide how much to pledge? I told them about the time I had to come face to face with myself regarding how I made the decision about how much I pledged. I was in the early stages of seminary. I was deeply entrenched in thinking about all that is church, faith, and how to understand it, how to enhance it.

My wife meanwhile, was heading up the Stewardship campaign at our church. She had done lots of research on stewardship, pledging and pledging programs. She and the committee introduced what's known as Fair Share Giving guidelines. It breaks giving guidelines into categories of Supporter, Sustainer, Visionary and Full Tithe. There are percentages of income associated with each giving category.

At some point it became time for me and Maggie to decide what our pledge would be. She asked "what do you think is the right number?" And I asked her the same question. Our answers were widely divergent! She asked, "how did you come up with that number, where does it come from,?" I said, "it feels like about the right number, it feels like a lot of money. And I would feel good about myself if I gave the church that much as a pledge."

When I asked her how she arrived at her number she said something about a percentage of income. She said it was about 5 % of our income. I said, "yeah but, that's too much money!" She reminded me the stewardship committee was asking people to decide if they felt they were a supporter, sustainer, visionary or full tither. She asked how I thought of myself in reference to my relationship with the congregation?

That's when I decided I needed a break from the conversation. I needed to think about whether I really believed in the theory of fair share giving. I needed to look at how I made a decision about supporting my church.

I had to look myself in the eye and admit, I had made the decision by pulling a number out of the sky, a number that "felt right", but I pulled it out of thin air. That number was about 2% of our income. The number I had come up with looked pretty good with a dollar sign in front of it. It looked and felt very different when seen as a percentage of our income.

When the visiting Stewards met that Saturday morning, we talked about how we go about making the decision about how much to pledge. We recognized that how we think about money, what our relationship is to money had a significant impact on our decision making process. And we acknowledged that talking about money was something we were not very comfortable doing. But we talked about money that morning.

We talked about different ways of relating to money. We talked about our different relationships and experience with money. We talked about how some of us worried about money, regardless of how much or little we actually had. Some people felt they had enough money to be comfortable and didn't know what they'd do if they hit the jackpot? Some people prefer to just not think about money, thank you very much!

We talked about how one thinks about pledging. Do we think about it as an obligation? Do we think of ourselves as supporting the Fellowship? Do we treat pledging like we treat charities we donate to? Do we feel put-upon when the pledge campaign comes around every year and we are asked to make a pledge commitment? Are we offended talking about money in a holy, sacred or spiritual place?

The way we think about money in general, and our particular, personal relationship with this Fellowship matters. I for one, do not think of the congregation as just another place that I donate money. I get more out of our Fellowship, the Fellowship means more to me than a political campaign that I might donate money to. I have a different, more important, more immediate relationship with my church than I do with the Humane Society or my favorite PBS radio station. And I think the amount of money I give to my spiritual home should reflect that fact.

Some years ago, when Maggie and I had one of our “so how much?” conversations, I decided I was more than a supporter of my church. I knew that I wanted to do more than sustain our church and its programs. I decided that if I was to be true to my beliefs about the importance of my faith and my church, my pledge needed to reflect that.

I realized my pledge was one way I lived into my principles, my faith. I committed to give 5% of our income to our spiritual home. We have given our new spiritual home that same percent of income.

As I was thinking about my pledge a number of years ago, something important occurred to me. My colleagues in seminary and others I knew talked about money, the notion of abundance and generosity differently from what I was used to. They had a belief that all gifts come from God. They often put money and giving in a spiritual or religious context. They talked about abundance and generosity as ways they live out God’s word here on earth.

I realized that Unitarian Universalist don’t tend to think money, our health and well-being are gifts from God. Which led me to wonder if that’s not why I pledged 5% instead of a full tithe amount of 10%? And I was humbled thinking about how we UUs often think of ourselves as “better than” those folks who “need” God in their lives.

So what do Unitarian Universalist use as a metric, a motivator, a reference point, when they decide to pledge, or not, to their spiritual home, or the place they hang out at on Sunday mornings? My guess is that the answers are all over the board. And since we place such a high degree of importance on individual spiritual paths, on the individual search for truth, we should expect there are multiple answers to the question, “how do we decide?”

Each of us will make our own decisions. As well it should be in our denomination. Each of us will need to find our own bearings, our own reference point, our own basis for decision making. I have only one request: Please think about *how* you decide, before you determine what the right amount of your pledge should be.

The size of your pledge will not enhance or decrease your standing in this spiritual home of ours. This is a home, you are welcomed here. And may it always be.

Amen