

“Hearing and Being Heard” * 1 June, 2008
Rev. Erika Hewitt * Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Congregation

I'm unusually excited about today's sermon, because by its nature it's an unusual sermon. What I'm about to say is my way of saying, "I heard you." In fact, I speak for much of your leadership: we hear you!

Over the course of the spring, nearly every member and friend of Live Oak was interviewed, one-on-one, as part of our "Love Will Guide Us" stewardship season. When you made your financial commitment for the fiscal year beginning on July 1st, you also gave us feedback about Live Oak: its worship, its programs, its relationships. *Thank you* for both your generous pledges, and this valuable feedback.

This sermon will be studded with "learning moments" – opportunities to explain or re-frame something. Our congregation is suspended in *change and transition* right now: the construction of our new Sanctuary is an outward symbol of less visible changes that Live Oak is undergoing internally, as we prepare to bridge from a single, overcrowded worship service into two (in September) and as we continue to make the precarious leap from a pastoral congregation to a program one.

Here, then, is **Learning Moment #1**: The feedback interview was created by, and was distributed back to, the **Council of Chairs** – a group that consists of five Chairpersons: Religious Exploration, Worship, Stewardship, the Committee on Shared Ministry, and Membership:

RE: Liz Stull * Worship: Sara Norquay * Stewardship: Ellen Hamilton
COSM: Melanie Jacobsen (David Rouzer) * Membership: Jeri Moulder

...and their job is to keep our programs running smoothly (along with your staff) so that the Board can do *its* job of creating vision, setting policy, and holding the Big Picture. To their credit, your Council of Chairs seized the opportunity to enrich our congregation by designing our stewardship interview in March. Having read every answer that you provided, those committees will be able to enrich Live Oak's programs even more. All of us agree that your feedback was both revealing and affirming.

* **Religious Education:** *What part of children's Religious Education is important to you, and what role would you like to play?*

Naturally, all of you had praise for Jan Ross, our Director of Religious Education, and the curricula that she assembles for our children and youth. Parents appreciate our monthly Friday Fun Night, but the two greatest sources of RE pride are our Secret Buddy program and the Our Whole Lives sexuality curriculum (taught at both the senior and junior high levels this year by Andy Stull and Susan Ferguson).

As for your involvement in Religious Exploration, all of you seem very clear about whether you “fit” in an RE role! Those of you who *do* teach classes mentioned how hard it is to miss out on worship, and the sermon – a problem resolved, I will smugly point out, by holding two worship services for several months.

* **Worship:** *Which elements of Sunday worship are the most meaningful to you? What, if anything, would you like to see more of in the service?*

Nearly all of you spoke of worship as a powerful time to restore your spirits and renew your connections with Self and others. You expressed a love for our music and singing – one of you said, “There can never be too much music” – and yet there was true diversity in your feedback; a couple of you wish that we’d cut down on hymns.

That diversity in your worship needs was further reflected in comments about our silent meditation. I intentionally allow for a lengthy silence, and some of you appreciate that, while others of you feel that it’s “too long” (one person explained that it sets their mind to work, and creates feelings of being a “meditation failure”).

You showed a similar breadth of opinion about joys & sorrows. Many of you appreciate hearing about your friends’ lives, and honoring their joys and sorrows in a ritual way. A significant number of you spoke with surprising neutrality, noting that this ritual feels valuable and meaningful *only* when people share authentic celebrations and tragedies concisely; several of you mentioned, for example, that birthdays aren’t a good use of this time.

What, then, would make worship even more meaningful? More interaction and responsive readings, you said (except for the person who doesn’t like responsive readings.... are you getting the “diversity” picture?). Several people need greater space for “God” language, and even more of you requested sermon discussions during coffee hour (give the Worship Committee and me a few weeks to get moving on that one, please – we’ll get there).

The next worship request is, itself, **Learning Moment #2**. “More sermons from Erika” is what you want, and I’m flattered that you’d like to hear me every Sunday. In fact, most U.U. ministers provide only 34 sermons a year – and for good reason: from soup to nuts, it takes between twelve and eighteen hours to create a single worship service – a hard pattern to sustain without significant breaks for restoration and inspiration. Because children and youth are so important at Live Oak, my covenant with you allots two of my 34 Sundays as Children’s Chapel services (the reason I didn’t preach last Sunday).

Another notable request of yours is for more lay involvement in the services, and for “more people to be asked” to participate in worship. I believe those to be separate

comments; in response to the former, I commit myself and your Worship Committee to creating more ways for you to participate in our worship services.

The second strand of that request – the message “we want to be asked” – sounds as if you feel overlooked, as if you’re sitting on the figurative sidelines as other people are invited to sing, speak, or take roles in story telling. That’s a tough feeling; I want every person to be able to share his or her gifts freely, and I try to seek those talents as transparently as possible (for example, by putting requests in the Leaf of the Week). I’m open to the spirit of volunteerism, and I know that there are untapped and unknown talents in our midst!

That being said, **Learning Moment #3** has to do with the pressure that our growth places on *you*. In a pastoral congregation, the minister knows who plays the ukelele, who’s dying to tell a story, etc., and she/he has time to solicit all of that talent. As we move towards “program” functioning, there’s a greater responsibility on you, whether it’s reading the Leaf of the Week so you know when I’m looking for story actors, or calling me with an offer of help. More and more, your leadership and I need *you* to let us know that you have gifts to share – whether those gifts are best shared during worship, or in a more concrete way....

* **Stewardship:** *What would make it more comfortable to talk about money openly at Live Oak?*

When asked what would make it easier to talk about money openly, your feedback was inevitably peppered with lottery jokes (“Ha! Ha!” recorded one canvasser dutifully). You specifically asked that we situate our stewardship talk within skits and other venues for humor (a request we’ll keep in mind next spring.)

Another popular request is for us, your Live Oak leadership, to reaffirm our gratitude for the many ways of giving – not just treasure, but also time and talent. You’d need us to remember that it can be very difficult for those on a fixed income to talk about money and giving, a sensitivity that we’re always aware of, despite any stumbles to the contrary.

I was intrigued by other stewardship feedback phenomena, including a diversity of opinion (again with the diversity!) about whether, in fact, Live Oak has a comfortable relationship with money. Declared one person: “I don’t think we have any problems talking about money”... and a handful of you told us how uncomfortable you feel when our stewardship season is mentioned during worship. About a dozen of you requested that I preach, or teach a class on, how to reflect our spiritual values in our financial lives... and several members asked me *not* to preach about that topic. As I mentioned in a column last fall, this is Live Oak’s bugbear, made all the more mystifying by your extraordinary generosity.

There is, however, resounding agreement that you want to hear all of us – from leaders to members – model “speaking openly” about stewardship, right down to the concrete details of congregational life. You expressed deep curiosity about “the numbers,” and said that you appreciate clarity about what Live Oak needs from year to year to be financially stable. That question will be addressed at length in today’s Town Hall budget meeting, as it is at all of our Stewardship meetings (which you’re welcome to attend).

(The “quick and dirty” way to formulate the cost of our congregation is to divide our annual budget by the number of members. Live Oak’s 2008-2009 annual budget will run to \$283,000, and we have 130 members; that is, the cost of Live Oak’s ministry and programs factors out to \$2,170 per member. The important thing to remember is that some can afford only a fraction of that, while others can give more – but you’re all valued equally, all loved equally, in this congregation.)

* **Committee on Shared Ministry:** *How can we foster right relationship as we move from a pastoral to program congregation?*

“What is “right relationship,” besides being kind?,” someone asked. “Isn’t it the same as “shared ministry?,” asked another. It’s true that “right relationship” is invited into a community where the spirit of kindness is alive, but to that I would add that it’s present where communication is kind, direct, and timely; where there are no “sides” because everyone’s “in;” where – in times of miscommunication or confusion – people *assume good faith* rather than jump to incriminating conclusions. It’s more than just being connected – it’s *the incarnation of trust in one another*. As one of you put it, right relationship is “each person taking responsibility for communicating; not just about the old ways of doing things, but figuring out the new together.”

One of you suggested that talk about “right relationship” implies that our relationships at Live Oak aren’t “right” already. Of course I believe that the spirit of kindness prevails among us... and yet, a number of your comments revealed a hunger for even more kindness and trust. You asked for more skits to illustrate how to talk to one another in tough situations (coming to a pulpit near you on September 21st!), and for advice about who to talk to when you have concerns and “gripes” (my quick-and-dirty answer, in the spirit of direct communication: *you go to the gripe-ee*). You crave going deeper than small talk, and don’t always know how to get there.

Your Committee on Shared Ministry – who present their mission and their projects in every issue of the *Leaflet* – has taken this charge to heart. Next year, they’ll lead the entire congregation in creating a Covenant of Right Relations at Live Oak: a roadmap, if you will, of where and how we wish our relationships with each other to unfold. The last tidbit of feedback that drew my attention was a sprinkle of discomfort with “hierarchy.” This topic deserves its own sermon, but I’ll just remind you that hierarchy

doesn't imply "power over," nor is hierarchy inherently exclusive. What I think you're feeling is that a larger congregation demands new and different leadership structures (see Learning Moment #1, the Council of Chairs); a pastoral-to-program shift also challenges its members to place greater trust in their leaders. A few of you seem nervous about the potential for leadership structures – like the Board, or the Council of Chairs – to wield "power over," rather than serving the good of all. All of us hold your trust in tender care, and hear that this growing edge is a place to tread carefully, and with great thoughtfulness.

* **Membership:** *What happens at Live Oak that supports your personal membership journey? What else would you like to see happening?*

These answers were a simple joy to read. You love your Covenant invites and the Buddhist Sangha (noted one member, "I live for that"). One of you even praised the "real cream for coffee," proving that life is made sweet by simple joys.

What you'd like to see, you reported, are more Covenant Groups, more small dinners, and regular gatherings to connect. (In fact, we hope to begin a series of monthly potlucks in the fall, just for that purpose.) The deepest hunger you spoke of is for Adult Religious Exploration. You want a "write your spiritual autobiography" course, women's retreats, and other forms of study and reflection. We're aware of this gap in our program. Here's that old Learning Moment #3 *again*: the growing edge of practicing our "free and responsible search for truth and meaning" at the congregational level.

The wonderful thing about moving into a program model is that it's *empowering*. In a growing congregation, multiple activities compete for people's time and attention – and lay people are even more invited to step into leadership roles. If you have the seed of an idea for Adult RE and would like help, or permission, to bring it to bloom...all you need to do is talk to me!

This is your congregation: yours to shape, to nurture, to grow into the Beloved Community that we seek. For all of your ideas, your suggestions, your dreams and hopes, we thank you. And we hear you.

May we continue to hear, and be heard, as Love guides our way on.
May it be so.