

**8 March, 2009 ○ “Setting the Welcome Table”
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Here we are, on the cusp of stewardship season. *Stewardship* is churchspeak for all the various ways that we, as members and friends of Live Oak, care for our institution’s health and vitality, from the most abstract level down to the concrete.

On Stewardship Sunday, it’s customary for the minister to remind the congregation about the importance of your financial gifts, which sustain our shared ministry and its programs. I have no problem doing that – nor does any of your leadership, from the Board to the Stewardship Committee, to the Council of Chairs. All of us are pretty much in agreement that Live Oak has a healthy approach to stewardship, in that we’re able to talk about money in healthy and responsible ways.

So I could do that this morning. I could also list all the things we’ve done together (hint: you’re sitting in one of them!), and all of the directions in which our shared ministry is expanding. Our dreams are growing as fast as our congregation, and there’s much to plan for.

I could also go into technical detail on this Stewardship Sunday, and explain that the full breadth of our shared ministry and programs factor out to over \$2,000 per pledge unit. I could assure you of what your leadership knows: that “fair” is not exactly and always the same thing as “equal;” in a congregation as diverse as ours, it wouldn’t be *fair* for every couple or family to pledge *equally*. I could talk about how you might make those choices, and discern a generously fair pledge for the coming fiscal year.

I’m not going to do any of those things; there’s something more important to explore. It’s a thought that’s captured in these beautiful words, by UU minister and author Robert Fulghum:

We come to this place because we need each other, we need to see each other, we need to touch each other...we need to hug each other. We need each other. So we come to this place. We come to work, to talk, to sing, to laugh, to dance. We call this a religious community... because what we do here, what we say here together, and what we are here, makes it a sacred gathering.

These words resonate, do they not? We need each other. We need to be here, because – to paraphrase Gertrude Stein – there is no “here” here, without all of us coming together. And so – hold onto your seats; I’m about to argue a very bold premise – I suspect that *this hour of worship is the most important hour of the week.*

I’m using the term “hour” loosely, to describe the morning-time of uniting in worship

and fellowship. But I take no such liberties with the claim itself: this is, for many of you... not every week but more often than not... the most important hour of your week. You've told me as much: in this hour, you get to pause and lift your heads and gaze around until awe, or something like it, is triggered. When we're together, the hurly-burly blur of the world clicks into sharper focus. "Here" is where your wells are filled, your batteries charged, your detritus sloughed off; we are renewed.

If you're not sold on my claim, let me keep explaining how this hour exerts its magic and grace on us:

○ This shouldn't be the most efficient and productive hour of your week, because efficiency is the hallmark of jobs and errand lists. In this beloved community, we come together not to forget the rest of our lives, but to *remember* (re + member) who we are, and *whose* we are; we're called into *being*, and into the process that is *relationship*, rather than *doing*. This hour invites us live more fully, and with more integrity, by giving shape and voice to the values that guide us during the other six days of the week.

○ Our time of worship isn't necessarily the hour in which you'll make the week's most important decision. You might not arrive at *any* decisions during this hour, but you *will* be invited to remember what's most important to you, to reflect on the deepest things, and to meet yourself in the inner folds of your soul, and take stock of what's there, with utmost honesty.

○ When you spend this hour with us, you won't always get to see your closest friends. What you *will* experience is something that exists almost nowhere else: many generations coming together with appreciation and caring, where the voices of children, youth, young adults, householders, and elders are all heard, and considered equally important.

○ This hour might not find you *thinking* your hardest. Instead, you're invited to drop the center of your energy below the cerebral cortex, and connect to your heart. Religion and spirituality, after all, rarely ask us to *intellectualize*; more often, they awaken our hearts and souls, daring us to name – when it all comes down – what we're willing to commit ourselves to.

○ Our hour of worship each week might not be the hour when you feel your best or happiest. Sometimes, it's true, we're carried through this hour on silk ribbons of grace, and the tears that fill our eyes are simply displaced joy. And yet, you know well that sometimes this hour tumbles us, like raw stones, knocking our sharp edges away to reveal the smooth beauty of what's beneath. Whether your tears are joyful or sorrowful, we create "here" to make room for your whole self.

Am I speaking your truth yet?

So far, these powerful gifts of our beloved community are fairly inward-focused. Coming here only to find balance and guidance for ourselves is somewhat self-serving. If only these claims were so, what would distinguish our religious community from a social club or empowerment group? The answer to that questions is contained in our congregation's mission statement:

Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Congregation is a liberal religious community welcoming all. Our generations join together to nurture spiritual growth and personal transformation, that we may be inspired to transform the world with love, hope, compassion and justice.

In that statement, the phrases that shine most brightly on my page are these: we are a people who “welcome all,” and we charge ourselves with nothing less than “transform[ing] *the world* with love, hope, compassion, and justice”...not just ourselves or one another, but *the world*.

Those two charges go together, in my mind: *welcoming + transforming*; because our congregation creates a loving “here” even as we bear witness to the “out there”: the seeking, the lost, the lonely, the forgotten, those ready to search for truth and meaning with us.

Here, we hold the space for grace and Spirit to work their magic within and among us. Out *there*, people are hungry for compassion; desperate for a theology of inclusion and reason and interdependence. *Here*, we set the table and invite people to join us. In the larger world, people are worried and sad, and unsure of how to name their longings and needs; at Live Oak, we are a gentle people guarding a campfire to light their way (which is more poetic than saying that we're a spiritual version of Motel 6, where “they leave the light on for you”).

All that we've learned and created together, from the rafters of this sanctuary to private revelations of the soul, has arisen out of our “welcome table” spirit: an openness, an extended hand, an outward-looking gaze... At Live Oak, we set the Welcome Table (and purchase dozens of new chairs, nearly ready to ship to us); in setting the Welcome Table, we assume that *every person* who enters our doors will enhance and deepen our community.

And they have. And they do. Every week, it seems, a handful of new faces arrives at the table, following the light of our campfire, or the advice of a friend, or simply that most reliable inner voice. As more and more new friends discover Live Oak, we continue to make room at the table for even more “kindred pilgrim souls,” responding to that *itch* to share the joy of our Unitarian Universalist congregation with others.

Looking forward, there's much that we have yet to do *and be* and *learn* together –

beginning, this spring, with our dedication ceremony for this sanctuary; a renewed commitment to our shared social justice ministry; and the creation of a Covenant of Good Relations. Beyond those simple milestones, there's much that awaits us: we'll share more stories and songs; more friendships will blossom; more soul-searching and heart-opening will occur; more tears will be shed.

Let us carry each other, through it all, with gentle arms, with bright campfires, with a "Welcome Table" set so that more might join us.