



# Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

“Sustaining the Tree of Life: Sheltering, Giving, Feeding”

Stewardship Campaign Kick-off Sunday

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“We each take our turn being here with the tree. We could never own it. We are here as protectors, as sustainers.”

“That’s ridiculous. This tree doesn’t need you! You could just take what you need; take what you want. The tree will continue.”

But the villager couldn’t be persuaded. “Sir, this tree isn’t like that. We don’t come here to take from it...even though we receive much. We are keepers of the tree because this is where we are nourished. This is where some of our most precious memories are, and where our people have dreamed. This is where we remember who we want to become.”

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I was so thrilled when Carol agreed to tell this story again this morning, [“Sustaining the Tree of Life”](#) by Rev. Lynn Gardner. Thank you, Carol! This story stirred the imagination of many when Carol first shared it with us on a Sunday this past November, and in fact the story and her artwork helped to inspire our stewardship campaign which we are beginning today.

Now we’ve heard from Don, our stewardship co-chair, about the importance of this campaign. And this story has a lot to tell us about how nourished and sustained we can feel when we support the resource and wellspring that is our faith community. It is our refuge and our responsibility. It is a place where,

with careful tending, we hope that the community can both give and receive, a mutual relationship of care and respect.

In our reading today from [Alberto Ríos](#), we also hear:

“Giving is, first and every time, hand to hand,  
Mine to yours, yours to mine.

You gave me blue and I gave you yellow.  
Together we are simple green. You gave me

What you did not have, and I gave you  
What I had to give—together, we made

Something greater from the difference.”

*Together, we made something greater from the difference.*

We have all experienced times of abundance and times of scarcity in our lives - and I'm not just talking about money - though I AM talking about money as well. Time, energy, commitment - we know that these wax and wane in everyone's life, and that no matter how much we want to help, to contribute, we also understand that not everyone always has as much to give as they might like.

And yet we STILL can make something greater, together.

You all may not realize or remember it, but this time of year is the “birthday” of UUCYork. Our office administrator, Jason, maintains a Facebook account he uses specifically for the congregation - some of you are already “friends” with this account, Uni Uni York, and you might have seen that Thursday, February 2 was listed as their birthday. I thought he might have picked Groundhog Day for fun, but when I asked he said it was based on the founding of the congregation. Curious, we looked it up in some of our historical documents - the first service where a Unitarian minister officially preached at what was then the Unitarian

Society of York was on January 16, 1955 and the society officially became a member of the American Unitarian Association in February of 1955. On May 12, 1961, this congregation along with all the other member congregations of both the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America became members of the newly formed Unitarian Universalist Association.

This year, this congregation turns 68! Happy birthday!

When we think about birthdays, we often think about gifts. Gifts that we give and gifts that we receive. This faith community has given, and received, so much over the years from its members and friends, its faithful sustainers and those who dared to dream big dreams for the small group of seekers who first gathered 68 years ago.

We don't usually give birthday gifts to people we don't know. Celebrations like birthdays are usually for people we are in relationship with, though sometimes we drag others along by singing "Happy birthday" loudly in restaurants!

Think about a time when someone asked you for a gift - maybe you'll think of an NPR pledge drive, or a Go Fund Me campaign for someone who had a medical emergency, or any one of hundreds of emails you might receive asking for political donations, donations for organizations of all kinds. And I wonder how you remember feeling when you heard a request you DID want to contribute to, versus times when you didn't want to contribute, or even read the email. I suspect that a lot of how you decide what to do with your resources depends on two things: your values, and your relationships.

I have a little story to share here. Let's call it, a tale of two alumni associations. Once upon a time, I was a young and disgruntled undergraduate student at the University of Maryland. Uncertain why exactly I was there - a personal question I had to answer - I also found very little in the way of guidance, support, or community - something that needed to be addressed on an

institutional level. Due to the brand-new internet industry, I was able to leave before completing my degree in the 1990s. When I felt a call to ministry many years later, I had to face the facts: this was going to be much simpler if I finished my undergraduate degree before applying to grad school. So I went back to the University of Maryland and completed my Bachelor of Arts in English Language and Literature in 2015, 25 years after I graduated from high school. I was so pleased and proud. I had finally worked out the personal issues, figured out why I needed the undergraduate degree, and did it!

And then: the calls from the alumni association started. And they made me SO ANGRY. Like seriously, blood-pressure-raisingly angry. I had the good sense not to take this out on the students making those calls, but I said to them, every time, "Please take me off this list. I have zero intention of ever contributing another dime to the University of Maryland."

Why was I so angry?! It took me a long time to get to the bottom of that.

In the meantime, I did go to seminary - Meadville Lombard Theological School, one of two UU identity seminaries in the United States. And while there, I found part of my answer: the work of Dutch Catholic priest, professor, writer, and theologian Henri Nouwen - specifically what Nouwen had to say about the ministry of fundraising. Make no mistake, it is a ministry - one of many that make up the work of any faith community! Nouwen asks for us each to examine our relationship with money. How does money play into all of our relationships, in fact - with our families, with our friends, as well as with ourselves? In our culture, money and power are intimately associated. And feeling insecure in power means, in part, that we feel insecure in our ability to make change in our lives - and that affects our ability to feel secure in our ability to change our communities or our relationships.

Two things I honestly, literally, never felt with the University of Maryland were any sense of community or true relationship. So when they called to ask me for money, I felt angry because I felt like they were presuming a relationship of care which they had done nothing to build or sustain. Sure, I'd had individual

experiences along the way which had sustained me, but overall my experience of the institution was one of uncaring and indifference.

So yes, I felt somehow vindicated in my decision not to join the alumni association of my undergraduate institution. But then I graduated from Meadville Lombard, and then - after a bit of space and grace - I got an invitation to join the alum association...including an invitation to donate.

And I said yes. I said yes because I had formed real relationships of care and support there - relationships that still sustain me. I said yes because I believe in the mission of the organization and because I believe Unitarian Universalism is a force for good in the world. I believe that Unitarian Universalist ministry is a challenging but worthy path and that I must pay it forward to help as many of my future colleagues as I can.

The reality is I'm not a big donor. I still have student loans to pay off! But that's the other thing that we grow to understand when we think about shifting and growing relationships of care and support: We acknowledge the times of scarcity and of abundance, and we know and honor that ANY gift is worthy. And that your own worthiness and dignity are NEVER in doubt no matter how much or how little you can give - time, money, energy.

They are always in a flow within us, and within our community. Just as there are droughts and deluges in the larger world, our own worlds change and shift. Sometimes we have much to give, and sometimes we need to receive. And we are here to love one another, sustain one another, and build this beloved community to be with us throughout all those changes. We are here to build this beloved community to be here for those who come after us. We are here to hold one another in worthiness, in dignity, regardless of whether we are in a position to give, or a position to receive.

As it says at the conclusion of our story:

“And the people of the village? They continued to sustain the tree of life: to care for one another and to share their gifts, with grace and gratitude. May it be so for each of us.”