

Growing a Beloved Community
by the Rev. Ann Schranz
Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation
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There's no place like home because many hands make light work. Any friend of yours is a friend of mine for a friend in need is a friend indeed. A picture is worth a thousand words, so don't throw the baby out with the bathwater. Don't put off until tomorrow what you can do today, even though it is as easy as pie because a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. Have you heard sufficient clichés for one morning? Say “uncle.” Some people with time on their hands have created a website listing over 2,000 cliches. The site even features a cliché of the day.¹

There are clichés in religion, too. For me, the phrase “beloved community” had almost become a cliché. In choosing which workshop to attend at District Assembly, I almost bypassed the workshop entitled “Growing the Beloved Community” on account of the familiarity of the phrase. However, the workshop description clinched my attendance: “It's rather easy to find the weak spots and warts in the life of our UU [congregations]. It's more difficult, yet far more rewarding, to locate, then evolve, the strengths (or what makes our chosen congregations swell with meaning and membership). Tom Owen-Towle will draw upon the struggles and successes of his 40+ years as a ministerial leader.”² Talk about a minister with credibility! One of the advantages of my entering the ministry at age 50 is that I will not have to keep track of *40 years* of struggles and successes. However, I am grateful that Tom Owen-Towle did keep track.

Josiah Royce coined the phrase Beloved Community in the book *The Problem of Christianity*. Royce, who lived from 1855 to 1916, wrote that “the office of religion is to aim towards the creation on earth of the Beloved Community”.³ Unitarian minister John Haynes Holmes and Universalist seminary dean Clarence Skinner each emphasized the theme. Skinner wrote, “The Beloved Community is not an organization of individuals seeking private and selfish security for

¹ See the clichesite.com website.

² Annual Meeting of the Pacific Southwest District of the Unitarian Universalist Association, April 25 – 27, 2008, Del Mar, California

³ *Growing a Beloved Community: Twelve Hallmarks of a Healthy Congregation*, Tom Owen-Towle, Skinner House Books, Boston, 2004, p. xi. This sermon is based on this book and on the workshop he led at District Assembly.

their souls. It is a new adventure, a spontaneous fellowship of consecrated men seeking a new world.”⁴ (Today we would say men and women seeking a new world.) There is no such thing as individual salvation, religious liberals were saying; social change is not a secular matter but a fundamentally religious. After the Montgomery bus boycott, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said this about the goal of the struggle, “The end is reconciliation; the end is redemption, the end is the creation of the Beloved Community.”⁵

How can we, the people of Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation, do our share to nurture Beloved Community? Healthy congregations have a “green thumb,” so to speak when nurturing Beloved Community, so nurturing congregational health is the place to start. The District Assembly workshop was based on Tom Owen-Towle’s book *Growing a Beloved Community: Twelve Hallmarks of a Healthy Congregation*. The first hallmark of a healthy congregation is

this: Occupy holy ground. Tom Owen-Towle writes, “A [congregation] is not a social club, a hospital wing, a political action center, or even a spiritual refuge, although all these disparate components are part of what a [congregation] is . . . Much of the secular world, other religious denominations, and we Unitarian Universalists ourselves have characterized, if not caricatured, our free faith as every kind of psycho-social-political venture except a religious one.”⁶

Here, next door to a vacant lot, a parking lot, a restaurant, a regional mall, and a mini-mall, we offer a religious alternative. Some of us are skittish about using traditional religious language, but I’ve found over the years that it gets easier with practice. Using traditional religious language challenges us to express ourselves with poetic subtlety and power. Whenever we enter these doors in body or in the mind’s eye, we are on holy ground. The first board meeting of the new church year takes place this afternoon, and it takes place on holy ground. Some board members are new, and some board members are returning. This year, each board meeting will begin with a time of intentional religious grounding. At today’s ingathering, board members will be asked to reflect on the experience of a German tourist.⁷

⁴ p. xii.

⁵ p. xi.

⁶ p. 1.

⁷ The story of the German tourist is by the Rev. Barbara Child. The story is unpublished and was used with permission.

[The story of the tourist was recounted here.]

Just as there is no individual salvation, there may be no individual reality. Board members need to bring to board tasks a shared sense of reality, defined by facts and values.⁸ This is hard work, so remember to thank your elected board members often.

If the first hallmark of a healthy congregation is “occupy holy ground,” the second is “welcome all souls.” Tom Owen-Towle advises us not to worry about offering “radical hospitality” until we have “reasonable hospitality” in place. Thank goodness perfection is not required of us, nor should we require it of others. Hospitality is not only about showing warmth and affection, though that is important. Besides affection, he says hospitality is also about control. Do veterans and newcomers alike have access to power and control? Finally, hospitality is about inclusion -- not just inclusion of people who are already here but also inclusion of those who are missing from our midst.

The third hallmark of a healthy congregation is “Care for your own.” Care giving in a congregation must be shared widely. “We are not responsible *for* people, but we are responsive *to* people. People trump principles and projects,” Owen-Towle says. In this congregation, a group of people who go by the name “Caring Connection” are alerted whenever a member is in need of caring attention – perhaps needing a call or a card or a visit or transportation or food. You are welcome to be part of the Caring Connection.

In the interest of time, I will move to a conclusion. Needless to say, growing a Beloved Community is not a matter of following a cookbook recipe. It is not a matter of mixing 12 ingredients and chilling until set or cooking until done. The relevant comparison is not between this congregation and some model set forth in a book. Nor is it a comparison between this congregation and some other one. The relevant comparison is between yesterday and today, right here. I conclude with a District Assembly highlight. At the Saturday night banquet, completely by chance, I won the centerpiece. “Look under your chair,” said the master of

⁸ This sentence is a slight variation on a sentence by the Rev. Barbara Child.

ceremonies. “One chair at each table has a piece of tape on it.” I found a piece of blue tape under my chair!

The centerpiece was a basket containing several tiny plants. Once home, I repotted the plants and tended them. A tomato appeared on the tomato plant. A *green* tomato appeared on the tomato plant. Green, green, green, green! Yes, the tomato got bigger, but it stayed green. I wondered if I would be the only person ever whose tomato never ripened. Maybe there was something more I should be doing, but what could it be? Then, one day -- you guessed it -- the tomato turned color. Today and every day, may we help each other to grow, and may we trust the process. May it be so!