

THE FUTURE AWAITS
Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship
January 22, 2005

Though Thunder Bay is, of course, right on the lakeshore, I don't actually see the water too often. But on a cold day earlier this week, I had occasion to be at the top of Red River Road, looking out toward Lake Superior, and was surprised to see open water. I guess I expected it to be completely frozen over, and covered with snow. Instead, there was an expanse of white-blanketed ice inside of the breakwater, and beyond that, open water the color of musky turquoise, a blue as icy as the temperature itself. Man, I thought, standing there in the wind, that water looks COLD!

I don't know about you, but I have many times stood at the end of a dock, in the cool air near the beginning or the end of the swimming season, daring myself to jump, bracing myself for the intemperate water. Sometimes I've had to count to three...several times...before actually mustering the courage to let go of my toe-hold and leap. I've never participated in a mass 'polar plunge' to welcome the New Year or to raise money for charity, but I have often raced into a frigid lake after a late fall sauna. Each time, I've almost forgotten the thrills experienced in previous leaps, and instead, I hear the voices that tell me I must be crazy. Each time I've questioned whether I have the gumption to go through with it, and each time I've hit the water it has been exhilarating for both skin and soul. It's a full body experience that, while difficult to relish, is one I would not want to miss.

This past Monday, a special meeting was called so that the Board of this Fellowship, along with the Committee on Ministry and the staff, could spend some time together in long range planning and visioning. We spent the evening sharing, and listening, around four major questions. What is your compelling

vision for Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship? What are the obstacles to attaining this vision? Which is the one most important thing for LUF to focus on? And, what is the very next step this Fellowship should take? Of course, we have not yet definitively answered those questions, and while I can't speak for everyone who attended, I can say that I found this session deeply thoughtful and hopeful, if guardedly so. The leadership of this community, your elected and chosen leaders, have nothing but the highest dreams, the most pragmatic ponderings, and a great measure of commitment to the future and the thriving of Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship. You are blessed to have this leadership.

Visioning is ongoing work, and it is too early to share specific details, but it's important that everyone know that this conversation is happening. It is also important that you all think about these questions for yourself. What is your compelling vision for Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship? What are the obstacles to attaining that vision? What, in your opinion, is the one most important thing that demands our energy? What is the very next step this Fellowship should take?

I'd like to share with you a few thoughts from my reflection on Monday's conversation. First, the vision for LUF is relatively articulate. The priorities may differ, but underneath the means, there are very clear ends. Everyone wants for this Fellowship to make a difference...in individual lives and in the world. Everyone hopes for a dynamic, growing, prospering community. Everyone wants for the message of Unitarianism, a message of love and acceptance and freedom, to be heard loud and clear, within and beyond these walls.

My second observation is that the perceived challenges to achieving the goals are many. In fact, I filled every bit of space on a sheet of flip chart paper with the list of obstacles, which seemed to grow and multiply as the conversation progressed.

The list included such things as fear, entrenched ways, a lack of money, fear, a lack of confidence, did I say fear?, and a lack of commitment to a common vision. The powerful thing about this exercise was to be able to name these challenges...it gave us a chance to see the enemy, and perhaps to see that, at least in many cases, the enemy is we ourselves. From that place, we began a conversation about what we need in order to overcome these obstacles, for it will indeed take an intentional strategy.

The group then proceeded to look at what one or two things deserve the focus of our energy. Here I observed a divergence of needs and interests that would seem to reflect the general lack of a commitment to a common vision. There were a dozen people at this meeting, and nearly a dozen different foci, none of which is unimportant. The good news is that we were able to hone this list, to put them in groupings, and to begin to look at which might be the most important for right now, for this place. The good news is that our leaders are willing to enter into a tough dialogue and to give up their individual agendas in support of the whole. The good news is that there exists a hopeful, heart-ful, desire to be part of creating a preferred future for LUF. There was, however, one agreed upon sentiment...that it is time to take action. Limited resources mean that we cannot do it all, certainly not all at once, but our leadership feels that it is better to do something than to do nothing.

There is an oft-quoted passage from Paul's letter to the Corinthians¹ in which he uses the body as a metaphor for the community, stating that while there are many parts of the body, it (generally) needs to act as a whole unit. For example, the foot cannot say that because it is not a hand, it is not part of the body...in fact, the foot can do nothing that doesn't somehow affect the whole. Conversely, if the whole body were an eye, how would it hear? We, as a body, are made up of

¹ I Corinthians 12:12-27

individual parts, parts with unique gifts and contributions, and linked by our common commitment to this community and this movement.

I can't say that when I anticipate an icy dive, a scary undertaking, that there is really any one part of my body that wants to do it. My feet are not begging to get in that water, my hands are not itching to make the chilly contact, and my scalp is not really looking forward to that shocking submersion. And yet some unknown force, some powerful spirit-motion, usually wins out and wills me to dive. My whole body is able to do something as a whole that no one part could face, or orchestrate, alone.

Just so, we stand at the end of a dock, preparing, pondering, persuading ourselves to take a plunge. With shivering tentativeness, we listen to the individual parts that would have us turn away, give up, do it differently, postpone it until it's warmer, or even find another lake. Certainly, this hesitancy speaks to the fact that there are many compelling needs that pull us in different directions. In making a commitment to one, it's impossible to anticipate if we will regret the decision. So, we stand on the edge of the dock, looking at the water, momentarily frozen in fear and indecision.

And unfortunately, in community decisions, the metaphor of the body breaks down. We are not actually physically attached to each other; attachment is an individual choice or commitment. The parts of this community body can choose to be autonomous and to act independently, and sometimes a hand, or a nose, chooses to secede from the whole, leaving all parts in pain. The pain traumatizes us, and makes the jump even more difficult. Here's my best advice on this... the community needs to be responsive to all of its members but ultimately must act democratically on behalf of the whole. And, the individual member is accountable to decide if a commitment to the whole community is more

important than his/her individual needs. Now, the Hopi elders would have us see that when we take ourselves too personally, when we forget our connections, our spiritual growth and journey stop, and I tend to agree with them.

The alternative, of course, is to do nothing, to turn around and walk away. I admit that there have been times when I've put my toe in the water and have recoiled at the thought of getting my whole body wet. There have been times when I've re-donned my terry cloth and turned away from the lake. Sometimes we just don't have the heart to go forward. But this is not my hope for LUF today. Though I don't know which dock, which lake, which moment you might choose, I hope you do take a plunge together. I would hate to see you retreat from the water in fear. I would hate to see you lose out on that exhilarating, scintillating, water on skin, whole body thrill of knowing that you can do it, that you can make a leap of faith.

Today we vote on this year's budget...a mundane activity, surely. But hopefully we also take a hard look at how this budget reflects our values and our priorities. Hopefully we also see what it would take to make the next right thing happen, so that we might choose to fully bless the work of this community with our gratitude, with our revolutionary love, and with our willingness to let go of the shore. Hopefully, as the Hopi elders advise, we take nothing personally, and rather "gather ourselves" in celebration of being in this body together. Everything we do now must be done in a sacred manner. We are the ones we have been waiting for. The future awaits.

Blessed be.