

The Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations

Annual Program Fund  
&  
Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association

## **1998 Sermon Award**



“Learn to Fly”

**The Rev. Amanda L. Aikman**

Evergreen Unitarian Universalist Fellowship  
Marysville, Washington

## READING

(Author unknown)

When we come to the edge of all the light we have  
And we step into the darkness, the unknown  
We will find something solid we can stand upon  
Or I believe that we will surely learn to fly.

## SERMON

Three years ago, when I was new around these parts, my friend Brian invited me to play racquetball with him at the YMCA. I hadn't played in ages, and asked him if he had an extra racquet. He said no, but I should get myself one—"They're only about \$20," he said.

Well, at that point, I was just getting on my feet financially and in every other way, plus I wasn't sure whether I'd play once or a lot. Twenty dollars sounded like a significant sum. So I went to the Thrift Store over here and poked around and by gum I got this racquet for the grand sum of 99 cents. The handle was sticky so I wrapped some masking tape around it, and it was perfectly serviceable.

It's not a very good racquet, but it was good enough for me and I was reasonably happy with it for quite some time. I played very seldom, anyway. Then I joined the Y, and this past summer, my friend Michele and I started playing pretty regularly, and then I started playing with some other people. I matured as a player, able to play strategically, to pace myself, to capitalize on my opponents' weaknesses. I began to see the shortcomings of my racquet, and started to wish for a new one.

Then Christmas came, and both of my regular opponents got new racquets, and the advantage of having a technically improved new style racquet started to reflect itself in the scores. Not that I'm a fanatic, but I do write down the scores on this little computer-generated grid I keep on the bulletin board in my kitchen.

I'm not really competitive or anything; I just like to keep track.

And I noticed that I was starting to lose more games than I was winning.

There was no doubt about it, I needed a better racquet if my scores were going to improve. But the old one really worked just fine. I found it hard to justify spending \$20 or \$30 on a racquet for myself, especially when the one I had was good enough.

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As I delve into the subject of money, I come across a great deal of anxiety inside myself. I come across a perception of lack, a feeling that there isn't enough and there never will be enough. A great desire for control comes over me. I call this my Scottish genes acting up, but really I think it's been learned. At times, I react to this anxiety by trying to clutch onto every cent I can, becoming jealous and protective of my money. Generosity eludes me.

Similarly, there are times when I feel overwhelmed by all the demands on me -- emotional, administrative, all the things I am longing to do—and unlike many of you, I don’ t even have family responsibilities, or a pet, or even, now that I’ ve killed off most of my housewarming gifts, very many plants. (Two particularly tenacious plants have now survived three months of my ministrations, and I’ m beginning to suspect they are made of some artificial material.) When I get caught up in that feeling of being overwhelmed and exhausted, it’ s difficult for me to be generous with my time or my emotional presence. I start clutching on to every moment I can, becoming jealous and protective of my time.

Overwhelmed. Exhausted. Maybe even ready to give up. That pretty much describes the way Everett Unitarian Universalist Fellowship was in the early 1980’ s. After three decades of being a flourishing lay-led fellowship, the congregation had dwindled down to 21 people. In the 1960’ s, the RE program had had an enrollment of over sixty kids, but now there were no children at all. By 1983, it had become clear that the Fellowship was threatened with terminal illness. The members had to face the fact that one of their options was to close the doors of the Fellowship permanently.

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Well, I finally went out a few weeks ago, on payday, and went shopping for a new racquet. I stood in front of a huge display at SportMart. They had racquets ranging from \$20 to \$150, and some even more expensive than that. I picked this one out. It looked pretty good and it felt pretty good. It certainly wasn’ t the top of the line, but it wasn’ t the bottom, either. I felt a certain fondness for it right away.

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In 1983, a few core members of the Everett Fellowship attended a district extension program on growth. When they returned, they decided not to let the Fellowship die. They decided not to hoard, not to clutch onto the little they had left. They decided to let go, take a risk, take a leap of faith.

They spent a weekend visioning and making plans for the future of the Fellowship. They started to get excited about the possibilities. And— this is the key—people started making financial commitments to the Fellowship.

Then they did something that might have seemed illogical.

With no kids in the religious education program, they *hired* two R.E. teachers. For several Sundays, the teachers did nothing—there were no children to teach. But then the news spread that R.E. was starting up again at the Fellowship, and the children started to arrive. And they brought their parents. The Fellowship started to grow again.

From a membership of 35 in 1985 and a budget of \$10,000, the Fellowship has grown to have a membership of 116 and a budget of over \$100,000. All because of that leap of faith on the part of those core members, that refusal to clutch on to the little they had, that willingness to step into the darkness, the unknown.

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I had the funniest sensation the other day. I went to put my briefcase in the trunk of my car, and saw my new racquet, and I felt this great desire to grasp the handle. And it wasn't just for the physical pleasure of holding it—I examined the feeling and the strangest words came to me:

“*This is how you fly.*”

Flying! With a racquetball racquet? But that's it. This racquet helps me fly.

One of the biggest spiritual lessons I'm learning—over and over again—is that when I stop hoarding and clutching and protecting myself, I can fly. When I started playing racquetball, I protected myself from any extreme effort. I missed half my shots simply because I didn't believe I could get to them. I believed I'd hurt myself if I went after them, believed I'd deplete myself if I tried too hard.

Now that I've matured in my playing, I'm much more daring; and every now and then, when I'm playing as hard as I can against a well-matched opponent, *I can do things that I couldn't believe I could do.* I reach a ball that's hit into some remote corner of the room and I literally don't know how I got there. I come to the edge of what I thought I knew about my physical capabilities, and find that my feet don't seem to even touch the floor. I am aware of nothing but the intensity of the moment.

It really does feel like flying.

In my work, when I can let go of my worries about how I'm coming across or how good a job I'm doing or how much emotional energy or time something is taking, it also feels like flying. You know that feeling—when you're one with the thing you're doing, time melts away and there's an extraordinary feeling of freedom. You get in touch with a wild generosity of spirit inside yourself. It's exhilarating.

I think those flying moments come when there is true ministry, deep listening, going on between people—during the hush at Joys and Concerns, the hubbub in a children's religious education class, during deep sharing in the men's group, a group conversation at a circle supper, a moment of hilarity during a board meeting. When we forget ourselves and enter totally into the moment, the fellowship, the conversation. That's where the holy dwells.

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People go to church for many reasons. For many of us, it's because we have come to the edge of all the light we have. We long for “something solid” to stand upon. And many churches, many healthy religious communities, offer that solid ground. There is a seemingly solid center to their belief systems that gives people something to stand upon.

Last week, I was at our District meeting in Vancouver and had the privilege of being in on some conversations with John Buehrens, the president of the Unitarian Universalist Association.

We were speculating about the future of our movement, and the question arose, what is the center of our faith? John said, ours is not a faith with a center. Ours is a faith of *radical hospitality*, a radically inclusive witness in an exclusionary world, whose core identity lies in the quality of the relationships we have with one another.

I would add to that, Unitarian Universalism doesn't offer something solid we can stand upon. No dogma, no creed, no blessed assurances, no ironclad foursquare rocks of ages.

It offers something else.

*It teaches us to fly, by giving us what we need to respond to the urgings of the Spirit:* permission, a sustaining philosophy, a faith in the goodness of the quest. And this Fellowship supports that, by giving us a launch pad, a safe and nurturing base from which to take off and to which we can return.

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I paid an entry fee when I joined the YMCA. And I now pay dues of \$35 a month. It seems well worth it for what I get.

There are no entry fee or dues at the Fellowship—when the questions of minimum pledge amounts or of charging tuition for our religious education program have come before the Board or the congregation, they have been defeated. There is no “fee for services” plan here, as there is at some megachurches. I pledge as a percentage of my salary and housing allowance. This current year, I’m pledging 2.5%, or about \$66 a month. For this coming year, I have raised that to 3%, or about \$1129 for the year.

It’s a stretch for me, quite frankly. But in balance, it seems well worth it for what I get—a sense of ownership, a sense of pulling my weight, the knowledge that I am contributing to the larger movement, the faith that nurtures me, the institution that sustains my faith.

When I went to the District meeting and picked up my registration materials, along with my name badge, I got these ribbons. This one means that I was a ministerial delegate, entitled to vote at the business meeting on behalf of this Fellowship. This one means that this Fellowship is a full share honor society in the District, and this one means that this Fellowship is a member of the UUA’s Annual Program Fund Honor Society.

The Fellowship pays its full dues to the District and the UUA, based on the number of our members, and so these ribbons really belong to all of you. This means that no matter what the other demands on your budget have been, this congregation has, time and time again, chosen to pay its fair share to the larger movement in which we have our being.

During the annual banquet on Saturday night I was engaged in a riveting conversation with my colleague Elizabeth Greene, and in the middle of it, she started snickering at me. “What’s up?” I asked. “You’re wiping your mouth on your ribbons,” she said. So there might be a little gravy on there. But it was just a momentary lapse, and doesn’t mean I wasn’t very proud to wear these ribbons, because I certainly was.

I am inspired by Unitarian Universalism. I am inspired by you, by your generosity. Of the 27 U.U. churches in the state of Washington, the per-capita giving of this congregation is among the top 7. This congregation is mature. It’s a mark of maturity to support the institutions you believe in.

That’s not a very thrilling word, “institution.” What it means to me is freedom. The freedom to not have to keep re-inventing ourselves, but to be part of something that has power, history, continuity, a sustaining beauty larger than what we can by ourselves create.

There’s a Non Sequitur cartoon that shows a man sitting at a table on a city sidewalk, with what looks like a petition on the table and an arrow saying, “sign up here.” Next to the table is a large wooden sign with a thermometer graphic on it. The poster is headed, “Join and help us reach our goal!” At the top

level of the thermometer is the goal, “Mainstream Religion.” Under that is “Sect,” “Faction,” “Cult,” and near the bottom, “Bunch of Nuts,” and at the very bottom, “Handful of Wackos.”

I'm very glad that in 1983, that core group of members decided not to be content with letting the Everett Unitarian Universalist Fellowship remain a handful of wackos, but had the faith that it could grow, and mature, and adopt a new regional identity, renaming itself the Evergreen UU Fellowship, and become what your Mission Statement describes, a “liberal religious home where people find a welcoming community, a stimulating place of learning and worship, and the challenge and support to live the Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes.”

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Before I became serious about racquetball, when my old racquet seemed good enough, I was finding it a lot of hard work, kind of boring, even. It took a considerable amount of devotion and practice and maturing to get to the stage where I was able to feel I deserved a good racquet. To the stage where I was, at last, able to fly. I found that when you play as hard as you can, who wins the point doesn't really matter too much.

What matters is the flying, the passion, the wild generosity of spirit.

Giving our all, in the moment, is what creates the delight.

*When we come to the edge of all the light we have  
And we step into the darkness, the unknown  
We will find something solid we can stand upon  
Or I believe that we will surely learn to fly.*

So may it be for all of us. Amen.