

Rev. Carol E. Strecker  
First Parish Unitarian Universalist Church  
Kennebunk, Maine  
3/1/09

## The State of Our Union

Those of you who saw the sign out front this week may be disappointed to learn that I'm not planning on talking about the state of the nation or even the state of the state. I'll leave that up to the President and the Governor. This morning I'm going to share some observations on the state of "Our Union"; how we're doing as a spiritual community - what's holding us together - what threatens to tear us apart. After I've had my say, I'm going to invite you to add your thoughts and observations.

The global financial crisis looms so large it threatens to tear apart the very fabric of our lives. We all know people who are losing their jobs, their homes and their life savings.

We're worried about paying our bills - I actually saw an ad on TV last night where a car company's offering, as part of the terms of the sale, the option of returning the car if you lose your job within the first two years.

The Credit Card companies can smell blood. They're busy informing consumers that they're changing their terms, giving them the ability to raise interest rates to 30% if we're late, just once, on a payment.

No matter how hard we've worked, how much we've saved or how responsible we are, we're all standing on pretty shaky ground these days.

It makes sense that the impact the economy is having on our personal lives is affecting our church. Unpaid pledges from last year, the inability to make our pledge goal this year and the decline in the value of our investment portfolio have made it increasingly difficult for us to pay our bills.

And here I have to say, if you have the ability to honor your pledge, please do so. If you have the ability to increase your pledge, this would be a great

time but if you're having trouble making ends meet and you feel guilty because you haven't been able to keep up with your pledge - please, please - don't let money be the reason you withdraw from this community.

My colleague Justin Osterman writes, "It's easy to feel alone, isolated, and adrift when we are at the mercy of powerful forces beyond our control...."

It has been my experience that - when crisis strikes - many people retreat into their private pain, embarrassed by their hardship, ashamed of their loss, and afraid that the people around them will callously judge them for the hardship they are experiencing. I worry that people slip away from their community, precisely when they need their community's support most."

We need each other now more than ever.

That's where I really want to begin this morning. The state of our union isn't as much about dollars and cents as it is about our relationships with one another. The Board has been charged with the daunting task of making recommendations to the congregation that will reduce our budget significantly for next year. Change is coming. One way or another, things are going to be different around here. There's not much we can do about it.

We can, however, choose how we'll weather the changes that lie ahead. We can scatter discouraged and afraid or we can band together to provide shelter and care for one another.

A couple of weeks ago I went to a talk at the library called "Thriving in the Face of Change" presented by Amy Wood. Amy is a psychologist here in town who recently found her way to First Parish. If you haven't had the chance to meet Amy yet, you're in for a treat.

In her talk, Amy explained that one of the reasons we don't like change is actually organic. Our brains are wired for efficiency. They like patterns - they like consistency - they like to know what's coming next. When something changes the brain has to adapt, working overtime to learn how to deal with new information.

So even when change is a good thing, the brain would just as soon have things stay the way they are.

We can train our brains to be more flexible by practicing for change in our daily lives. Something as simple as sitting in a different pew on Sunday mornings or trying a new breakfast cereal can help condition the brain to expect change rather than fight it.

But when we resist change we become rigid. We shut down. Our world becomes very small. We isolate ourselves. We lose perspective.

In his most recent book, *Love and Death* the Reverend Forrest Church uses the image of a stained glass window to illustrate what often happens when we encounter change.

Life is like a stained glass window, he says, one with many panes. When there's a change, one of the panes; whether it's the work pane or the relationship pane or the health pane -- one of the panes in the window goes dark.

When that happens, Church tells us that we have a tendency to "press our nose up against that one frame, desperately trying to see through it." But "when we do that" he continues, "we lose all sense of proportion. Our entire world goes black. With our nose pressed up against the one frame we can see nothing through, all our other lights go out."

In reality, there's still a lot of light coming through the window. Forrest Church is living with a diagnosis of terminal esophageal cancer. But he's still very much engaged in his work, he has an acute appreciation for the beauty in the world around him and feels held by the love of family and friends. It's a matter of perspective - of being able to let the light that's still shines through sustain us in times of darkness.

There is a lot of light coming through our stained glass window here at church. We may have fewer tangible resources to work with - that pane is pretty dark these days - but we don't have to lose sight of the fact that we can be light for each other. The size of our budget has nothing to do with our ability to love one another. It has nothing to do with our ability to

welcome the stranger - providing community for people who are struggling on their own.

When we're able to step back and take a look at the bigger picture we see we're not alone. We belong to a community. We can help each other through these difficult times.

There's a very timely article in the current issue of *UUWorld* magazine written by Chuck Collins, one of the co-founders of "United for a Fair Economy".

He begins his piece with a story;

"I recently had coffee with a single friend", he writes "who rents an apartment in my neighborhood. She was worried her job would be cut.

I said, offhandedly, 'You can come live with us.'

'I can?' she said, and started to cry.

'Of course, you will always have a place to live.'

She began to sob."

---

"She told me later", he continues, "that she burst into tears that day because she 'felt held' - not physically, but emotionally, by her friends.

In our most anxious moments we must hold one another, remind one another of what we have together."

That's what I believe we are called to do, in this time and in this place. We're called to hold one another, reminding one another not so much of what we have to lose but of what we have -- together.

What's the state of our union? I think we have a lot more going for us than we realize. We're in danger of keeping our noses pressed against the glass as we grapple with big decisions about money; at home and here at church.

But if we choose to step back we can help each other see how much light we have in our lives. In the face of so much fear and anxiety, we're going to have to be intentional in our commitment to hang in there for each other and for the people "out there" who desperately need the circle of care we can provide. Together, we can be a place where people can hold each other.

In the words of Chuck Collins, "we can move from autonomy and isolation to community and covenantal existence, from anxiety to divine abundance, from an economy of greed to one of neighborly generosity.

If we can embrace our own vulnerability and each other, the shaky ground we're standing on can become holy ground. May it be so.

Blessed Be and Amen.