

## **The Space Within – State of the Fellowship**

January 21, 2007

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First Unitarian Fellowship of Nanaimo

### **HYMNS**

Opening – #347 “Gather the Spirit”

Closing – #346 “Come, Sing a Song with Me”

### **READING**

From Stephen Mitchell’s translation of the “Tao te Ching”.

We join spokes together in a wheel,  
but it is the center hole  
that makes the wagon move.

We shape clay into a pot,  
but it is the emptiness inside  
that holds whatever we want.

We hammer wood for a house,  
but it is the inner space  
that makes it livable.

We work with being,  
but non-being is what we use.

## SERMON

This morning's reading talks about the space within. The space that is derived from design, cut from solids or shaped by form; the wagon wheel's center hole is ready for the axel, the clay's empty space is waiting to be filled, and the wooden house frame is ready to be made into a home. These possibilities will go unfulfilled until action is taken. We can move or not, we can be filled or not, we can love or not. The space within is about the being, substance and body that let's us think, feel and create. The space within is about thought, emotion and imagination. The framework allows movement, ideas and vision. But all this is possible only by being engaged. We must hook the wheel to the wagon for it to move, we must fill the space of the cup so we can drink, and we must live in the house so we can have a home. It takes not only the physical framework but also the space that is framed for something to be useful or to come to life.

Windows are also a space. Cut from the wall, they allow sunshine and birdsong to enter inside and permit the eye to see the world outside, whether it be a world of nature or a more urban setting. Windows allow connection. Placed high or low in a wall they can direct our view, obscuring or highlighting depending on perspective. By themselves, windows don't actually do anything. But they allow everything. The possibilities are endless.

When I was a kid, I remember the many times that I would wake up in the wee hours of the morning, slip quietly out of bed and sit on the floor. My favorite spot was just under the front bedroom window. The window started about knee-high from the floor and reached up almost to the ceiling. The moonlight and streetlight would filter through the tall pine trees and cast long shadows across the lawn and into my room. I would sit there in these shadows for minutes or hours, thinking, drawing or writing. The window let in a world of inspiration and possibility. It was my time away from the everyday world and a chance to engage with myself and enter into a form of spiritual communion. To this day I can easily travel back in memory to this experience. As an adult, I often find myself still waking up in the wee hours and being awed by the stillness of the night. Without getting out of bed I let the thoughts roll by and am often surprised at how creative and complete they seem to be. I am energized and am at peace.

There are other windows that play a role in my life.

I like to travel. Often I travel by airplane. And when I do, I always request a window seat. I like to be able to 'see' where I'm going. I enjoy watching the buildings go by and trees grow smaller as we race down the runway and climb into the air, then break through the clouds which are sometimes heavy with rain and other times light as cotton puffs. It always amazes me to look down and see the clouds underneath. I am filled with wonder. When the clouds become thick and I can't see the ground below, it seems as if I could walk on them. They look soft with unobstructed sunlight outlining their heights and depths, the contours like scoops of ice cream piled high or sometimes, they are as flat as a drag strip in the open desert just waiting for the next generation of daredevil drivers, Looking at the clouds from above, I want to lie down on them as if napping on an overstuffed feather bed or dance with leaps and twirls and spins, or run about unabandoned like a toddler discovering the freedom of movement.

And then the cloud cover relents and from the airplane window I can see forever. The mountains give way to vast deserts and then green plains with rivers running through. Patchwork farms surround cities and towns. It is not until we descend that I can see people again, running to and fro, busy with living.

When I travel with my partner, she always takes the isle seat. She buckles her seatbelt and listens attentively as the flight steward gives instructions on seat cushion life rafts and oxygen masks that drop from the ceiling. She also makes sure the washroom is in clear sight. Properly prepared, she then settles down into a paperback mystery novel for the duration of the flight. So very practical.

I like the big picture, seeing where we fit into the larger world. I like patterns, textures and relationship. I like to see how things fit together. I also like to think outside the box. Be creative. Experiment. All within an organic system which affirms life for all. On the other hand, some folks like the isle seat.

That's how it is with church too. We have isle seats filled with very practical and wise people. We also have some folks in the middle seats and yes; we have a few folks by the windows. You can't sit in more than one seat, but isn't it wonderful that we can sit together? Our church community, our fellowship has many seats taken. It is a big plane though so we have room for more. And that's a good thing. If you're a visitor with us this morning, welcome.

Now, the practical folks in the aisles want to make sure everything is in order. They want to make sure the bills are paid and building is used wisely. These are smart folks. They are practical and absolutely needed.

The folks by the window are the visionaries. They appreciate that everything is in place, but they look out the window to what might be. They envision, they plan and they create. They give us a sense of direction and purpose. These folks are needed as well.

And the middle seat folks get to be the interpreters that make communication possible. You are needed as well.

I know airplane seating is an overly simplified example – we all want the bills paid, we all want to be able to talk with one another, and we all want to be a part of the future. We all have to work together to go forward. A person by the window must crawl over the aisle seat on the way to the washroom, which of course is there because of practical planning. On the other hand, without direction, no one knows where the plane is headed.

Our church is like that too. The First Unitarian Fellowship of Nanaimo is entering into its annual canvass period. During the next few weeks we will need to pay attention to the basics – lights, building, water – all the while plotting our future.

What do we want the future of the First Unitarian Fellowship of Nanaimo to look like next year, in five years, for our children? We have experimented this year with having an intern in the role of professional minister. We have gone to a full service format, which means church every Sunday. We are in the process of hiring a Religious Education coordinator. We have added workshops, movie nights and brown bag lunches with the intern. This spring we have invited area ministers to preach. We are in the newspapers with articles and ads. Tomorrow the cable TV folks will be with us to film a spot about our upcoming workshop “Designing Your Own Memorial Service”. The fellowship is posting the upcoming All-Island service in April. Big things are happening. Attendance is up. The energy is high.

Where do we go from here? What do you want? Can we be both practical and visionary? Can we plan for today... and tomorrow? Can we plan so that the next generations will have a vibrant liberal religious home on central Vancouver Island?

I'd like for us to take a minute and read the mission statement of the First Unitarian Church of Nanaimo. It is printed on the back of your Order of Service. Please read it with me:

The members of the First Unitarian Fellowship of Nanaimo are committed to maintaining a welcoming and caring liberal religious community on Central Vancouver Island. We strive to value the uniqueness of each person and to foster a supportive environment that nurtures spiritual, emotional and intellectual growth. We encourage respect for diversity and individual freedom with responsibility. In reaching out to the larger community in our work for peace and justice with compassion, we acknowledge our part in the interdependent web of all existence.

Clearly it is important to be here. We are a voice of liberal religious community on central Vancouver Island. We welcome others into our growing community. We respect people and work for peace and justice. We are a part of the larger web of life.

The mission statement also has action words like: committed, strive, nurture, encourage, and reach out. These are important. How do we do this? What would it look like?

I'll share with you some of impressions and visions for the Nanaimo Unitarian fellowship. I have served as your intern for six months. Over this time I have been impressed with your hard work, dedication and steadfastness. You have endured over the years through thick and thin. You have now come to 2007 with a building and professional leadership. Over the years, you have held onto that sense of community that we all find so important. You are taking care of the children and finding ways for all to participate. Services are now held every Sunday and discussion groups are held twice a month. There is energy everywhere. You are fulfilling the goals of your 2006 Transition Report.

As I look out the window and into the future...

- I envision First Unitarian Fellowship of Nanaimo as not just a presence, but also a hub for liberal religion on central Vancouver Island.
- I envision a part-time minister and then a full-time minister for a growing congregation of a hundred members and more.
- I envision children in Religious Education classes for their age groups, complete with a teen program.
- I envision a campus and young adult program that engages people in an alternative worship format.
- I envision eager volunteers of all ages to share the work of the fellowship.
- I envision continuing a strong adult discussion group that engages ideas and contemporary issues.
- I envision an Adult Religious Education program that offers courses and workshops on many topics.
- I envision neighborhood groups and a women's spirituality group.
- I envision a strong social responsibility council working for peace and justice.
- I envision a green sanctuary program and a green burial movement.
- I envision continuation of a strong lay chaplaincy program and the establishment of a pastoral care team.
- I envision stronger networking with island congregations.
- I envision participating in programs and leadership in the Canadian Unitarian Council.

As I look through the window, I see the First Unitarian Fellowship of Nanaimo as a vital force in each of our lives. I see a loving community reaching out to us in our time of need. I see a hopeful community working together to make this world a better place. I see a strong community as a powerful presence for peace and justice. I see a vibrant community alive and active. I see an engaged community striving to live and share our Unitarian values.

But it is up to us. What do we want? Where are we going? Over the coming weeks, know that your elected leaders are continuing to take care of the practical matters. They are also looking ahead. They have vision and are leading.

We are here this morning in this wonderful space. Our leaders and members had foresight in obtaining this building, but know that it is the space within

where we find community. And it is through the doors that we join our neighbors and the web of all existence. But it is through visioning that we see and plan for the future. As we take care of the present, dare to vision and then, join us in fulfilling our dreams.

I've given you my vision, what is your vision for the fellowship? Let us know your ideas. In a few weeks we will all make a financial pledge to our collective vision as a congregation. Be a part of the process. Tell your leadership what you want. Tell us how to make our visions a reality.

Blessed be and amen.

### **BENEDICTION**

(#488 – Langston Hughes)

Hold fast to dreams  
for if dreams die  
life is a broken-winged bird  
that cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams  
for when dreams go  
life is a barren field  
frozen with snow.

*Hold fast to dreams  
For when visions vanish  
Life is a window  
With shades drawn shut.*

Help us to be the hub of liberal religious community  
for Central Vancouver Island.