

**A Horse that Would Pull  
by the Rev. Ann Schranz  
Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation  
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Talk about timing! Given the grim economic news in recent days, even those of us who do not make a habit of listening to the “Chicken Littles” of the world may wonder if the wreckage around us is, indeed, the fallen sky. It has been said that when the United States sneezes, the rest of the world catches a cold. Well, cold viruses mutate, and there is no vaccine. When the rest of the world sneezes, the United States is then able to catch yet *another* cold. We, the people of the planet earth, are likely to be “under the weather” for some time to come.

This is an anxious time for all of us, whether we are retired or nearing retirement, whether student debt is yet to be repaid or yet to be incurred, whether the mortgage is variable or fixed, whether the rent is due or overdue, whether the medical expenses are greater than the car expenses (or vice versa), whether we have a favorite Dollar Store or are an equal opportunity Dollar Store shopper – you have the picture.

This might not seem like an auspicious Sunday to raise money to help Unitarian Universalist lay people become more adept at spiritual “deepening” (also known as theological education). This might not seem like an auspicious Sunday to raise money to help Unitarian Universalist clergy improve their skills and strive for excellence in ministry. It is tempting to view this investment in the future of our movement as a frill instead of a necessity. I believe that the current economic turmoil elevates the importance of creating greater meaning in our lives, greater fairness in the world, and greater community in the congregation. We need each other more than ever, so we need to support each other more than ever.

Parker Palmer writes, “Fear is so fundamental to the human condition that all the great spiritual traditions originate in an effort to overcome its effects on our lives.”<sup>1</sup> It is up to us to do our part to make Unitarian Universalism one of the great spiritual traditions. This morning, doing our part means being generous when the offering basket reaches us. The board of trustees has said

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<sup>1</sup> *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer, p. 57.

that 25% of this morning's non-pledge contributions will be donated to the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Since money is on the minds of everyone these days, I will share with you the wisdom of investor and philanthropist Warren Buffett. Perhaps you saw the recent article in *Parade* magazine: "Ten Ways to Get Rich: Warren Buffett's Secrets That Can Work for You."<sup>2</sup> I would not call his helpful hints "secrets." There is nothing esoteric about such gems as "Watch small expenses" and "Be persistent." However, his tenth way to get rich is profound: *Know what success really means*. Success is not about money. "I know people who have a lot of money," he says, "and they get testimonial dinners and hospital wings named after them. But the truth is that nobody in the world loves them. When you get to my age, you'll measure your success in life by how many of the people you want to have love you actually do love you. That's the ultimate test of how you've lived your life."

The difficult days ahead of us present an opportunity to deepen our understanding of the meaning of success. One spiritual practice for these times might be to count neither dollars nor debts more often than we count the number of people who actually love us. The number of people we want to love us does not have to be a large number of people and probably should not be a large number of people. This tally is not about collecting "friends" on Face Book or My Space. Success can be ours if the number of people we want to love us can be counted on two hands or on one hand or counted on a single finger. In an uncertain world, we *can* be certain of who loves us. This certainty can be the first twinkle of awareness in the morning when we wake. This certainty can be the last glow we feel before we go to sleep each night.

Switching now from the matter of receiving love to the matter of loving, we can love not only people but also causes and ideals, including religious movements such as Unitarian Universalism. Many of us in this sanctuary love Unitarian Universalism, though we may love it for different reasons. I love it for its capacity, over centuries, to harness the energies and insights

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.parade.com/hot-topics/0809/10-ways-to-get-rich>.

of a very motley crew of religious liberals. We are a motley crew today, and our ancestors were a motley crew yesterday. I love our “motleyness.”

For every impulse that brings us together, there are often two or more impulses that lead us to recoil from each other. Yet we congregate, and we agitate, and we remain engaged. Whenever the present looks bleak, I find comfort and inspiration in how the Unitarians and the Universalists and the Unitarian Universalists of yesterday met the challenges of their day. I am at heart an institutionalist, so it is no surprise that my hero is that quintessential institutionalist Henry Whitney Bellows.<sup>3</sup> He was born in 1814 and died in 1882. For over 40 years, he was the minister at the congregation now called the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York City, but his long tenure is not why I admire Henry Whitney Bellows.

I admire him because he did what was necessary for liberal religious coherence in his day. Henry Whitney Bellows did what was necessary to help a motley crew of individuals and a motley crew of congregations cohere in such a way that the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations is still in existence, over 100 years after his death.

“During the Civil War he was president of the United States Sanitary Commission [the predecessor of the “Red Cross”. In the course of traveling for the Sanitary Commission he visited a great many Unitarian churches and recognized that Unitarian congregations’ traditionally informal modes of cooperation no longer met the needs of a fast-changing American society. Bellows was the Unitarian leader most responsible for the formation, in 1865, of the National Conference of Unitarian Churches, the first American Unitarian organization to have as members, not individuals but congregations committed to the growth and expansion of their movement.”<sup>4</sup> My remarks about Henry Whitney Bellows draw from the article by Mark Evens on the Unitarian Universalist Historical Society website and from a biography of Henry Whitney Bellows by Walter Donald Kring.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/henrywhitneybellows.html>.

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<sup>5</sup> *Henry Whitney Bellows* by Donald Kring,

Bellows took the middle road regarding Jesus -- whether he was fully human per Emerson, or fully divine per orthodox Christianity. Bellows saw Jesus as an exemplary model. He believed that the divine spirit could mingle with the human spirit. He was one of the so called “Broad Churchmen.” On the left were the Transcendentalists and the Free Religious Association folks. On the right were orthodox Christians. Henry Whitney Bellows envisioned a church broad enough to include left, right, and center. He liked the energy of the left wing, but not their theology. He liked the theology of the orthodox, but not their passivity. He aligned personally with liberal Christianity and did not particularly like Unitarians who were non-Christian, though he did not want them to break away.

Henry Whitney Bellows wrote this to a colleague around 1864: “The real life in our body is in the *heretical* wing. If we cut *it* off, there is nothing to move with! My theological instincts and my Christian feelings are outraged by the *Rationalism* of our young men – but as my whole practical nature & working instincts are equally outraged by the paralytic imbecility of our sounder & more Christian wing, I am not willing to *rely* on *that* for the future. We must solve our difficulties by ignoring our theological differences, & finding *in work*, a way out of our heresy & our deadness . . . I foresee that I am to do something for our body if I live, through the union in me of an actual faith & an organizing spirit & faculty.”<sup>6</sup>

Henry Whitney Bellows said, “Especially, we are apt to forget, that a horse that would *pull* must *stay in harness* – he can roll more quickly out”).<sup>7</sup> I am all about *pulling*, straining to make the world a better place, and I hope that you are, too. I am asking you to be generous in support of the Unitarian Universalist Association of congregations because it is a horse in harness.

While I admire Bellows and other institutionalists, I do not idealize them. Those active in the Sanitary Commission were generally members of the elite. From one perspective, the work of the Sanitary Commission functioned as a social safety valve for outrage. Soldiers serving the South and soldiers serving the North died in appalling numbers before and after Civil War battles. Was the Sanitary Commission’s goal nothing more than keeping men (black men and

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 301.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 412

white men) healthy so that they could die a noble death on some battlefield in the future? This is a legitimate question. We always have to discern whether compromise means enabling bad behavior.

“You cannot think straight with a heart full of fear, for fear seeks safety, not truth,” said William Sloan Coffin. “A heart full of love, on the other hand, has a limbering effect on the mind.”

Regarding ministry, I do what I do for the same reason that Henry Whitney Bellows did what he did: “Especially, we are apt to forget, that a horse that would *pull* must *stay in harness* – he can roll more quickly out”). We have to *want* to pull, in good times and in bad times. If we want to pull, we can work miracles. If we do not want to pull, then who cares about a harness? If we do not want to pull, then who cares about the Association of congregations?

May we pull in harness, for that way, we can roll more quickly out. May we support each other in loving and in being loved. May it be so!