

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, NY  
“Catching Dreams”  
September 14, 2008 Rev. Samuel Trumbore

Spoken Meditation

My spoken meditation today is inspired by the words of the Rev. Arthur Severance

Let us turn inward,  
As we remember again the inner reverberations  
of each other's joys and sorrows spoken today  
Feeling our response to what was said and unsaid,

We may, just may, discover  
a freshness deep down at the core of existence  
by seeking to tap into its renewing power.

Riding on the rhythm of the breath --

a turning INward to our own peaceful well  
from which we draw the healing waters that sustain us

a turning OUTward in the spirit of love  
to those who give our lives meaning and purpose

a turning UPward to live by the light  
of those beacons of highest worthiness which direct us all  
toward what we and our world can become

a turning DOWNward to honestly embrace our weaknesses,  
life's challenges, and time's losses.

May we find a deep down freshness that  
can give us the zest and strength to stay in the stream of life.

May we be blessed with a sense of humor, curiosity, and wonder.

May we be free of anxieties that shrink our spirits,  
and may our lives be enriched by generous, caring relationships  
and by work that fires our passion.

May we ever more skillfully learn to adapt  
to the stress and loss occasioned by change.

May we come to know ourselves and love ourselves,  
and may we come to accept what-cannot-be-otherwise  
while we treasure the promise of what-can-be.

## Sermon

*We are going, heaven knows where we are going but we know within.*

Woyaya, written by Ghanaian drummer Sol Amarifio, was the title song on the 1971 album by Oisibisa, a musical group of Ghanaian and Caribbean musicians. The arrangement of the song passed through the hands of Unitarian Universalist composers, Ysaye Barnwell of Sweet Honey and the Rock and Jeanne Gagne.

The spirit of this song is perfect for beginning a sermon on strategic planning for our strategic planning process this year.

Wait! Stop! Don't tune out yet! I apologize for using the s word with those who work in large government, educational and health care institutions. Knowing of people's resistance to endless planning in these settings, we tried to ditch the s word as soon as we could and come up with another image for what we intend to do this year. We found a beautiful metaphor for our work, "dream catchers."

As you heard during our children's portion of the service, dream catchers serve an important function in Native American culture. Hung over a child's bed at night, the dream catcher lets the bad dreams pass through and only catches the good dreams for that child.

As you'll hear today, read about in Windows and be reminded via lots of different sources and direction, Our Strategic Planning Committee a.k.a. the Dream Catching Team will be inviting all of you to participate in dessert conversations during the month of October. They will be scheduled in the evening, during the day, on Saturday mornings and Sunday afternoons, fifteen in all. If you look in your order of service, you find a form to fill out and drop off in a basket in the back of the hall to get assigned to a group. We hope to have over half our members, friends, and even visitors participate in one of these conversations to answer, hear others answer and discuss these four questions:

1. What is most satisfying or fulfilling for you here.
2. What do you long for in a religious community?
3. What do you believe we, as members of the FUUSA community, are called by our UU values to do in this time and place?
4. Where might you be interested in directing your energy to further a dream? (knowing you are not committing yourself to any activity, just registering your interest)

We're using the metaphor of dream catchers for these circles because of their filtering function. Some of the dreams spoken will pass through the circle without interest or response. They may be worthy and beautiful dreams but not be appreciated by others in the group. It just may not be the right moment in time for their reception or the words used may not effectively convey the dream. It might be expressed in a way others cannot hear and grasp its value. And some dreams

expressed will connect and find appreciation and approval. Whether the dreams expressed are caught or missed will depend on many factors. Only a few of the dreams spoken will eventually evolve into a common dream for our future.

*And we will get there, heaven knows how we will get there, but we know we will.*

The filtering and discerning process is very important because we are not looking for one person's vision of our future. The Dream Catching Team is not coming to me asking me where I think the congregation should go in the future, then checking it against what the congregation thinks. The ideas of the members of the Board or special members of the congregation will not weigh any more or less than what, say, our children might think about our future direction.

We must be careful to avoid the pitfall unique to our religious approach: hyper individualism. Individuals in our congregation, consciously or unconsciously, may wish to shape our congregation in their own image or mark it with their own scent. Attachment to individual views can be very, very strong, and can create much disharmony.

*It will be hard we know and the road will be muddy and rough...*

In a congregation dominated by individualism, many different activities serving many different wishes and agendas can exhaust the congregation. Each individual pet project consumes volunteer time, staff time and congregational money in one way or another. A congregation going off in twenty different directions at once is unlikely to be able to get anything done. The bane of any democratically run voluntary association is setting and following priorities.

What I find exciting about serving this congregation is knowing we can set priorities. Emerson Community Hall is the fruition of a seventeen year effort to narrow choices, set priorities, do extensive financial planning and work collaboratively with our architects and builders. Beginning with LRPC 1, our first iteration of the Long Range Planning Committee that proposed building expansion in 1991, through an architectural proposal in 1995, back to the drawing boards till my arrival in 1999, through several architects until the key expansion vote in 2004, the needs and desires of the congregation were queried again and again. Many people's efforts blended together in struggle and consultation to bring the project to completion. To read the whole story, I commend to you Eva Gemmill's complete and inspiring historical record of the project. (Linda Way will be more than happy to sell one to you for a nominal cost.)

This fall we begin a new planning process. And my urgent request is for everyone to make as much room as possible for deep listening. When you gather in these Dream Catching Circles in October, I encourage you to listen both within to what you want to speak into the group and to what others are saying, testing what you hear with your sense of our congregation. Some will want to connect us back to values this congregation has held for generations. Some will bring radical new ideas

that will pull us in completely new directions. Some of what you hear will leave you cold. Some of what you hear may connect with what you already value. Some of what you hear may spark a new inner flame in you. There will be room for bold ideas and strong voices and visions. There will be room for quiet voices with calm considered suggestions and tentative proposals.

And may our deep listening go beyond these walls. One key vision that informed the design of this new space was the image of a beacon. The light doesn't just shine into this space. Our light also shines out to the larger community through our beacon window. We have much to offer the neighborhood around us. We have much to offer the city and county of Albany. Unitarian Universalism in the Capital Region and in the St. Lawrence District of Unitarian Universalist Association here in upstate New York benefit from our support. Leah networks with Directors of Religious Education around the country. I network with ministers, locally, nationally, and internationally. There are many ways our collective light shines in and out of our congregation.

We are not the only Unitarian Universalist congregation that thinks of itself as a beacon to their community. Listen to what our sister congregation in Oneonta, New York has been doing. They too had just completed a building expansion about five years ago. In 2003, they too were exploring what they wanted to tackle next as they worked on developing a 5-year plan. Unfortunately their strategic planning committee was floundering in the minutia of the congregation's day to day problems. Karen Palmer, who was President at the time, encouraged the committee to bring in our District Executive, Tom Chulak. Tom met with them and dazzled them as Tom likes to do with a challenge. He urged them not just to focus on themselves but also to look outside the doors and see if they could "identify an unmet need in the community" that their congregation could address.

A number of possibilities were suggested, including one by a physician in the congregation. He had been mulling over the idea of a free clinic for people without health care. This idea along with others were considered by focus groups in the congregation and the community to see if they were indeed unmet needs. The free clinic passed that test and was further investigated in a feasibility study that morphed into a working group. They decided to go ahead with the project but spin it off with board members from the congregation and the community. Thus, the Oneonta free clinic was born. The Oneonta Free Clinic is a community based organization designed to provide free health services to the uninsured and other designated patient populations in Oneonta and the surrounding communities of Otsego and Delaware Counties.

I spoke with Karen who serves as Secretary of the clinic about the effect of the project on the community and their congregation. The project has gained a great deal of interest in the community as well as positive press for the congregation. The start of the clinic has stimulated the courage and imagination of the congregation showing them the difference they can make.

There may be new opportunities for us to shine our light on an area shadowed by neglect. As we reach inward with our Dream Catcher Circles, we will also be reaching outward. Our ARISE Core Team will be canvassing our neighborhood registering people to vote this Sunday and next Sunday afternoon. Along with asking people if they are registered to vote, the canvassers will also ask them about their neighborhood concerns. This survey may point us toward a need we can address. We will also be talking to civic leaders to get their understanding of community concerns. In these conversations we may also discover or confirm a need we can address.

*It will be hard we know and the road will be muddy and rough but we'll get there, heaven knows how we will get there but we know we will.*

The hardest work will be after we've collected lots and lots of data from both inside and outside the congregation. The Dream Catchers will then go about their work of filtering what they have heard based on two criteria.

The first criteria will be filtering the data through the identity of our congregation as we know it today. We are not a blank slate that anything can be written on. We are part of a two thousand year struggle to pay attention to the life and teaching of Jesus and not his execution and empty tomb. We are part of an association of over a thousand congregations formed by the merger of two religious traditions that themselves have as much as four hundred years of history. We have been a voice of liberal religion here in Albany for 166 years. We have values, traditions, rituals and practices honed over many years that enliven and unite us.

The second criteria is more ephemeral but in the final analysis more crucial. The Dream Catcher Team will be turning inward as they reflect on all the data they have collected seeking a decisive spark in the heart that signals the presence of the Spirit of Life; not just in one person but generally in the team. This spirit, this vital energy that animates the team's response, is known by any group of people who have worked on a difficult problem and had a significant breakthrough together. This spirit is an energy we recognize but are wary to define. In the best case, this animating spirit will be a communal awakening to a greater vision for that the members and friends of our congregation will enthusiastically embrace.

We don't know right now what that might be. As we begin this process of congregational self-discovery, there are many possible directions and discoveries. I find this process very exciting because of the great potential. We could discover a new vision that will energize and direct us toward something as grand as Emerson Community Hall, or the founding of Equinox or the Honest Weight Coop both of which had and continue to have strong support from members of this congregation.

It can be hard to imagine how we will realize this potential but I have great confidence we will get there. I don't need to know how or why because I have great faith in what we have in common. Not just faith that we share the same DNA. Not just appreciation that we share common needs for security, meaning, connection, autonomy and authenticity. Not just recognition that we must honor, value and

protect this common planet we share. There is a deeper Spirit of Life and Love working in and through us. I have great faith that when we pay attention to that inner and outer vitality, we will get there. And when we do, we'll starting building a new way.

### Benediction

Five years ago to the day, September 14, 2003, I preached a sermon titled "putting our values in stone." Here are the words I used to close that service, still on the mark even after we accomplished that goal:

If we wish to expand our facility here,  
We must also expand our vision  
    of who we are and who we can become,  
Inspired by what we have already been together.  
The light released by our mingling is not ours to hold.  
It radiates out from us whether we want it to or not.  
Let us not hide that light and cover it.  
Let us open the doors of our hearts and let that light shine.  
Let us lift it high as a beacon to others.  
This little light of ours, I'm going to let it shine.  
Every where I go, I'm going to let it shine.  
Building up a world, I'm going to let it shine.  
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine!