

Down to Brass Tacks
Sunday, January 9, 2022
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Summerfield, FL
Rev. Cynthia A. Snively

Today begins our pledge drive when we ask you to consider your commitment of time, talent and treasure to the vision and mission of this congregation. Twentieth century Unitarian Universalist theologian James Luther Adams said, "The faith of a church or of a nation is an adequate faith only when it inspires and enables people to give of their time and energy to shape the various institutions - social, economic, and political - of the common life." The social institutions of this congregation enable us to care for one another, to have fun with one another, to learn with and from one another, and to worship with one another. Our economic institutions enable us to have a place to meet and to care for it, to have a minister and a music director and to care for them, to have a variety of ways through regular giving and through leaving legacies for people to contribute to the economic well-being of the congregation, and to have ways that we can use our money to make a difference in our communities and world. Which leads into our political institutions, and no, I don't mean you need to be of a certain political party. Our political institutions as a spiritual congregation should enable us to live out our values within the congregation and in the wider world. We should be a welcoming congregation to people who identify as LGBTQ+ and speak out for their rights in the larger world. We should be anti-racist in our congregation and in the wider world. We should be environmental activists. What I mean by a congregation's political institutions is the structure that enables this. Adams says the faith of a congregation is only adequate if it inspires and enables people to create and to shape the institutions within the congregation that make these things possible.

The theme for this year's pledge campaign is Down to Brass Tacks. There is more than one story of the origin of the phrase, but the one I would like to use today is that it comes from the cloth trade. For a more accurate measure than arm's lengths, brass tacks were put into the counter at regular intervals such as at yards and half-yards. Once one had chosen one's fabric one could get down to brass tacks. How much were you going to buy?

An old joke among clergy is that the opening sermon of the pledge season is the Sermon on the Amount. But, despite the fact that a goal amount is in your pledge letter I do not want to focus on getting to that amount. I want to focus on you giving to a congregation that inspires you and that enables you to make a difference in the world. As Unitarian Universalists we don't ask you to pay an annual dues amount or to tithe a certain percentage of your income. What you give is up to you. Often people ask me or congregational leaders, "What is the average pledge?" Even if we told you the answer to that question, that should not be a good way to determine your pledge. Have you seen the cartoon of the three people trying to watch a ball game from the other side of a fence. One is tall, one medium, and one short. If your reality is that you are standing high then please give more than the people on the ground. If your reality is that you are deep in a hole of debt then come to the minister, me and ask for an exemption from a financial pledge. You may still have time and talent to contribute. Everyone giving an average is not just or fair and won't get any congregation to where it needs to be to do the work.

Still, people like to get down to brass tacks, how can I measure out what to give? The Unitarian Universalists Association has a suggested fair contribution guide that I have a link to in my January Train of Thought in the Timetable, our congregational newsletter. I have also asked our tech team to show it to you now. It suggests 2-6% of adjusted monthly income for a supporter, 3-7% for a sustainer, 5-9% for a visionary and 10% for a transformer. Notice that the percentages are not the same for each income level except in the Transformer category. Now though someone is going to ask me what is adjusted monthly income. Again, that is up to you. It could simply be your income after taxes or it could be your

income after taxes and what you are paying to put two of your grandchildren through college or maybe, particularly, if your income is very low it might be what you have left after all your necessary expenses. The chart is there for you to use or not to use at your own discretion and in your own way. You are the measurer. Put in the brass tacks where you see fit. And yes, I know some of you divide you pledge between Tri-UU and your home congregation up north. Each of us must make our own calculations.

I hope you enjoyed the silliness of our Whistle Stop video and I hope, oh, I really hope that you did not see too much of your own congregational life reflected in it. "The faith of a church or of a nation is an adequate faith only when it inspires and enables people to give of their time and energy to shape the various institutions - social, economic, and political - of the common life." The people on the board in the video were on their way to serious burn out not to shaping the institutions of common life. At pledge season we often focus on the treasure you give to the life of this congregation, but we need to think as seriously about your gifts of time and talent and how those are used well or squandered.

We recognized our 2021 volunteers earlier in this service. You may have noticed how many of you in how many roles it takes to do all that we want to do and need to do to keep this congregation functioning and living out its vision, that "We will be an influential voice for progressive religious values in a diverse community, " and its mission, that "We unite in religious community to seek spiritual growth, live with integrity, and serve with compassion." There are always positions open and always volunteers who want to move on from a particular role. If you are looking for a place to contribute talk to me or someone on a team or group of which you would like to be a part.

I spoke of placing your brass tacks to measure out your commitment of time, talent and treasure, but pledge season is also a good time to lay down our brass tacks to take measure of the congregation itself. How well are we as a community doing in living out our vision and mission? Our vision statement says that "We will be an influential voice for progressive religious values in a diverse community. How influential are we? Do people in the wider community know what values we stand for and know how we advocate for them? If not, what could we do differently or better? What do we mean by "in a diverse community?" Do we want to be influential in a wider community of diverse peoples? Do we want our own congregation to be diverse? Both? What kinds of diversity? Age, gender, class, race, beliefs, sexual orientation, various abilities? We need to know what we want to measure in order to get down to brass tacks. Our mission statement says that "We unite in religious community to seek spiritual growth, live with integrity, and serve with compassion." Does this congregation offer you and others opportunities for spiritual growth? Can we articulate what is important to us and why? Do we have something that undergirds our life and keeps us going from day to day and year to year? Are we as individuals and as a congregation living with integrity? Do our private lives and our corporate life reflect our values well? Are we serving with compassion? Are our meetings civil? Are we there for each other in times of need? Are we reaching out beyond our own walls to serve the needs of others? Are you satisfied or unsatisfied with the measure you take of the congregation as a whole when you get down to brass tacks? To quote Unitarian Universalist theologian James Luther Adams again, "Love and justice can prevail only where they are supported by the fellowship, the friendliness, the concern of each for all and all for each, the sense of responsibility found in the community..." It is up to each of us individually and all of us together to make this congregation what we aspire for it to be.

Rev. A. Powell Davies was the minister of All Souls Church, Unitarian in Washington, D.C. from 1944 until his death in 1957. He wrote prolifically and helped found multiple new congregations around the DC Beltway. He wrote this about why he showed up at church. He uses the word, "church." If you don't, please translate his words appropriately for yourself. Davies said, "Let me tell you why I come to church. I come to church—and would whether I was a preacher or not—because I fall below my own standards and need to be constantly brought back to them." He was getting down to brass tacks, taking his own measure, and seeing church as a way to bring himself back up to his own standards.

He continues, "It is not enough that I should think about the world and its problems at the level of a newspaper report or a magazine discussion. It could too soon be too low a level. I must have my conscience sharpened – sharpened until it goads me to the most thorough and responsible thinking of which I am capable. I must feel again the love I owe my fellow (people). I must not only hear about it but feel it. In church I do." Davies found opportunities for spiritual growth in attending a congregation.

He says, "I need to be reminded that there are things I must do in the world, unselfish things, things undertaken at the level of idealism. Workaday enthusiasms are not enough. They wear out too soon. I want to experience human nature at its best—and be reminded of its highest possibilities, and this happens to me in church." He was inspired to live with integrity and find ways to serve with compassion.

Davies continues, "It may seem as though the same things could be found in solitude, but it does not easily happen so. In a congregation we share each other's spiritual needs and reinforce each other. In some ways, the soul is never lonelier than in a church service. That is certainly true of a pulpit. For a pulpit is the most intimately lonely place in the world—yet it is a loneliness that has strength in it.

"Perhaps that is because the innermost solitude of the human heart is in some paradoxical way a thing that can be shared—that must be shared—if the spirit of (the Holy) is to find full entrance into it.

"We meet each other as friends and neighbors anywhere and everywhere, but we seldom do so in the consciousness of our souls' deepest yearnings. But in church we do—in a way that is intrusive, yet that leaves us knowing that we all have the same yearning, the same spiritual need of assurance and faith and hope. We are brought together at the highest level possible. We are not merely an audience. We are a congregation.

Davies says, "I doubt whether I could stand the thought of the cruelty and misery of the present world unless I could know, through an experience that renewed itself over and over again, that at the heart of life there is assurance, that I can hold an ultimate belief that all is well. And this happens in church.

"Life must have its sacred moments and its holy places. The soul will always seek its nurture. For religious experience—which is life at its most intense, life at its best- is something we cannot do without."

If you agree with Davies and if this is your holy place and these are the people with whom you find your sacred moments then please give of your time, talent and treasure to continually recreate the community of Tri-County Unitarian Universalists for yourself and for others.

I end with these words of commitment adapted from the Unitarian Church of Scarborough, England.

This is my congregation.

It is composed of people like me.

We make it what it is.

I want it to be a congregation that is a lamp to the path of Pilgrims, leading them to Goodness, Truth and Beauty.

It will be if I am.

It will make generous gifts to many causes if I am a generous giver.

It will bring other people into its worship and community if I bring them.

It will be friendly if I am.

It will be a congregation of loyalty and love, of fearlessness and faith, if I who make it what it is am filled with these.

Therefore, I shall dedicate myself to the task of being all these things I want my congregation to be. May it be so.

