

“Forging a Future Path: The Power of College UU Experience in Developing an Ethical Spiritual Identity”

**A sermon by Alison Hurwitz
Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
2600 E. Philip Ln.
P.O. Box 1791
Appleton, WI 54912-1791
(920) 731-0849
Website: www.fvuuf.org**

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Good Morning. I am honored to be asked to speak at your services today. My name is Alison Hurwitz, and I graduated from Lawrence University in 1997. It's hard to believe that so much time has passed. My husband and I met at LU, and discovered the Fellowship together. We were active members, organizing the LU UU group and serving as “Coming of Age” mentors. The Rev. Roger Bertschausen flew to Oregon to officiate our marriage in 2000 and has remained our close friend and teacher. Many of the members and mentors I encountered here have continued to offer me a degree of love, support, and encouragement that I believe is truly unique and unparalleled. During my college years, this Fellowship offered me a safe space to grow, incited me to practice my ethical beliefs, and charged me to nurture the next generation of open-minded spiritual thinkers. I am here this morning to share some of my experiences as a person who discovered Unitarian Universalism in college and who felt encouraged and impelled to live out the principles in my future life.

A Safe Space to Grow: The Inherent Worth and Dignity of Every Person

I grew up in Eugene, Oregon, the youngest child in a liberal family of academics. My mother was raised in a devoted Catholic Cajun family, attended a boarding school run by nuns, and expected, I think, to raise a Catholic family. She couldn't have been more surprised when, while studying for her Master's degree at Indiana University, she fell in love with my father, raised in an Orthodox Jewish family in Brooklyn, sent to Yeshiva as a young boy, and expected to marry a nice Jewish girl. Needless to say, their respective families weren't pleased. Yet in my parents' efforts to transcend the boundaries of their families' beliefs, they set out consciously to create a new ethical framework which embraced our extended families' religious diversity while encouraging their children to create spiritual identities founded more on moral principles than on specific religious belief structures.

This was the message we received at home. Still, my mother struggled to provide us with the Catholic heritage in which she had felt nurtured during childhood, while attempting to align that practice with her liberalism, her respect for other cultures, religions and diverse

ways of experiencing the divine. We attended Catholic church, which as I grew, seemed more and more at odds with the values of feminism, empowerment, pluralism and questioning which were so encouraged in our nuclear family. My father's own ideas on spirituality were founded more on his strong ethical principals than any specific belief system. His personal experience with the sacred was expressed most greatly through his love of classical music. As a musician and conductor, he was able to explore his deepest spiritual feelings without the need to apply them to a particular religious practice. Ours was a family of UU's who didn't know what a UU was. We learned about the validity of many forms of belief, celebrated both Christian and Jewish holidays, and were encouraged to question everything. Without the framework of a community which invited us to think in this way outside of the home, however, I reached my college years believing it impossible to find a group of ethical, spiritual questioners in an organized community.

Thank goodness, I was totally wrong!

My then boyfriend, now husband Charlie Holst, suggested we attend a UU service at the FVUUF during the fall of 1993, when the community was still housed in a converted Moose Lodge. I remember feeling nervous about the experience, wondering whether I'd feel pressured or if the atmosphere would seem too "churchy." To my surprise and delight, I encountered a service unlike anything I'd experienced before, a feeling to which I'm sure many of you here today can relate. I loved the warmth of the community, the encouragement to share through Joys and Concerns, and perhaps most of all, I was extremely impressed at the way the congregation was urged to voice feedback immediately following the sermon. Here was a community of critical thinkers coming together to consider important social, cultural and spiritual questions, actively energized to think for themselves. The words of my favorite hymn from that time come back to me when I remember my elation in finding a group of people for whom "to question truly is an answer."

For many college students living away from home for the first time, the transition from the close family group to the new world of the university experience can feel daunting and sometimes lonely. I had traveled almost 2000 miles from my home in Oregon to attend school at Lawrence; Charlie had come from Colorado. It was a great comfort to be invited to participate in Circle Dinners, and though we didn't have the kitchen facilities to prepare anything more elaborate than chips and salsa, we were welcomed into our UU friends' homes with open arms. As we sat around tables in homes throughout the Fox Valley, we were repeatedly impressed by the ways in which UUs acted upon their beliefs. Whether it was by serving in a soup kitchen, joining a social action committee, or mentoring the young adults in the "Coming of Age" program, these members demonstrated their socially conscious ideology by personally contributing to the communities in which they lived. Becoming inspired by the activism in the wider UU community beyond the Lawrence campus helped us to think about ways we, too, could live in a more service-oriented, empowering way, a discussion that continues to guide our actions more than 14 years later. When then "Coming of Age" coordinator Lee Boeke Burke invited us to serve as mentors, we were honored by the opportunity, especially

since we were the youngest mentors then on record. She became one of our closest friends and guides, which she remains to this day.

Through the amazing experience of being mentors, we learned about the importance of investing time in the things we care about, and the great significance of listening without prejudice or preconceived ideas. In a way, I felt that we were mentoring ourselves as well, through the process of developing an active, open-minded spiritual identity. We emerged from that time imbued with a new sense of purpose, and encouraged by the effects of our commitment: we witnessed the palpable changes wrought by our simple gifts of time, of listening, of encouraging young people just a few years younger than ourselves. A vibrant spiritual life, we learned, gained great value from advocacy in a multitude of forms.

Motivated by our experience, we decided to bring our new insights back to the college campus. At that time, the only two religious/spiritual student groups were a conservative Christian student organization (one that I remember principally for their photos of aborted fetuses in our cafeteria during the dinner rush) and a Jewish student organization, which tended to be quite insular. We wanted to give students who might be searching for a 3rd option the chance to ask questions, ponder ethical dilemmas, and discuss social problems in an open, free, and stimulating environment. With the support of Rev. Roger Bertschausen, we formed the Lawrence University Unitarian Universalists (LUUU). Quite a mouthful! Members of the fellowship helped us develop themes on a variety of pertinent topics, and came to campus weekly for dinner and dialogue. Professor Beth Destasio led a discussion on the ethical implications of stem cell research. Jane Keggi described her personal experiences with Buddhist meditation and shared her story of meeting the Dalai Lama. Chester Behnke encouraged us to share our thoughts about a church experience in which we could be fully open about ourselves, without feeling like we had to hide portions of our identities. These discussions opened our minds and encouraged us to think deeply about a diverse array of subjects. Not only did members aid us greatly by providing a multigenerational perspective on the issues we were debating, but they also suffered through the less-than-tasty cafeteria cuisine of that time, a sacrifice for which we were especially grateful!

By the time Charlie and I graduated and got engaged, we felt that our life goals had been greatly affected by our years as members of the FVUUF; we knew that no matter what we did, we had a responsibility to ourselves and to others to live in a way that supported our beliefs. Charlie was motivated to apply his scientific training to developing better treatments for cancer. I wanted to find a way to use my artistic education to connect people to important social issues. It was time to apply what we had learned to our experiences in the wider world.

Activism is Ethicism:

Practicing Justice, Equity and Compassion Every Day

We probably couldn't have chosen a better place to practice integrating our ethical choices into our everyday lives than San Francisco. With its famously progressive politics, and culture of social activism, the city was the perfect location for us to apply our beliefs to our daily lives. While Charlie attended graduate school in Molecular Biology/Oncological Research, I pursued my dream of teaching Ballroom Dancing. I found a great studio whose owner believed in integrity, responsibility, and continuing education for every teacher. While I missed being a part of an academically rigorous community, I grew immensely as I got to know a vivid cross-section of diverse people. I learned to communicate with people of many different learning types, and realized that the more I listened, the more I discovered how to help them best. After we married in July 2000, I felt ready to start my own business as a dance teacher, learning marketing, editing, the importance of maintaining cash flow, how to teach to a room of 100 people at a party, and a host of other crucial skills for growing as a business woman. My venture, though always challenging, was a success.

Still, I felt that I needed to be making a difference, not just in the lives of my students, but also in the greater SF area. My closest friends in the dance community helped me to reinforce my values of community activism. San Francisco, like many large cities, has a significant population of homeless individuals. Many of these people are dealing with mental illness, post-traumatic stress disorder, drug addiction and are victims of mental and/or physical abuse.

Together with my close friend Alise, a Buddhist Ballroom Dancing teacher (and there are not many of them!) I set out to find a way to connect dance to helping the homeless. We were able to work with the director of a shelter in the worst neighborhood in downtown San Francisco to raise money and awareness for this all too often ignored segment of the urban population. Together, we promoted, directed and produced a full-length show, highlighting a variety of dances that developed in the streets. Homeless clients of the shelter worked as volunteers serving refreshments during intermission, handing out programs, and providing information on the shelter. Alise and I wrote press releases, gave radio interviews, collaborated with a composer to create music for the show and an artist to create live artwork as the backdrop to the stage, directed 20 dancers, rented the lights and sound equipment, and learned a tremendous amount about the power of pursuing an ethical goal. It was not easy, but it was extremely important to us that we make the effort to connect our artistic sensibilities to our altruistic ones. "Street Beats" raised awareness, but most of all, it taught us that we were capable of much more than either of us had previously thought possible. As dancers, we were able to integrate our beliefs in justice, equity and compassion into our art. It was a small yet potent victory.

The following year, we were joined by another close friend and dance teacher to organize a Ballroom dance showcase and party. "The Main Event," helped to raise money for Caduceus Outreach Services, a charity working with homeless individuals suffering from

mental illness, and the Major Project, which helps poverty stricken children to gain access to critical healthcare services. It felt so good to continue using our dancing to give. Organizing these and other programs gave me extra energy, raised my consciousness, and grew my spirit in ways I can't easily describe. The contributions we made toward a better world may have been small, but the enlargement in my heart was great.

Each day, I remind myself that we are all ministers of one sort or another; we can have an important influence on others and on our communities by dedicating ourselves to doing our work with integrity, empathy, respect, devotion and hope. As a teacher, I try to give my students a greater sense of self-confidence and esteem, combined with a healthy dose of humor. Above all, I want them to feel that they, too, are capable of much more than they might previously have thought possible.

The UU principles that I learned in my college years had a direct and dramatic effect on the choices I have made since. They taught me that community is not necessarily just where we live, but what we choose to create.

Nurturing the Next Generation: The Goal of World Community

I believe strongly that there are many, many young adults embarking on their college years who would benefit immensely from the kind of UU community into which you welcomed Charlie and me, more than 14 years ago. At 19, I was dealing with all of the new experiences and unique questions that face us during our college years. The FVUUF gave me a home and a safe haven in which to explore and grow as an ethical, spiritual adult. I credit the amazing men and women of the Fellowship with giving me the courage to believe I could effect change in the world, as I felt called to do.

Rev. Roger Bertschhausen mentioned to me recently that since Charlie and I graduated, there has been no regular UU student group on the Lawrence University campus. This year, for the first time since 1997, students are actively seeking to reinstate the LU UU group and to involve themselves more fully in this incredible UU community. I urge you, if you are interested in making a huge difference in these students' present and future lives, get involved! Visit the campus group and join in conversation. Invite LU students into your homes through hosting Circle Dinners. Let them know about opportunities to volunteer, whether as Coming of Age mentors, or by participating in the host of other activities within the fellowship. College students bring vitality, enthusiasm and energy to congregations. Their fresh perspectives often help reach other young people and get them excited about service to their communities. The positive impact you will have through reaching out to students and making them feel welcome cannot be overstated.

As Charlie and I look forward with joy and hope to Spring 2009, when we welcome our first child into the world, our thoughts go more and more to the environment we want to create for our child, and for all children. We work for a world where the 7 UU principles

are demonstrated every day. Where we care as much for the less fortunate as for the lucky ones. Where we guide the next generation of human beings to live on this earth with compassion, respect, and dignity. As Mohandas Gandhi so famously stated, “We must be the change we wish to see in the world.”

I would add, “We cannot forge the entire future path, but we can choose to be a guide through the wilderness.” May each of us create a path that helps our next generation to find its way.