

MESSAGE DELIVERED AT TOWN HALL MEETINGS FOR MULTI-SITE PROPOSAL

I rarely read advice columns, but five years ago I cut out a feature from “Tell me about it” in the *Patriot News*. A woman expecting her second child was having second thoughts: Were she and her husband in danger of falling into a rut, with **“two demanding careers, two children, [and] not much money to pay someone else to do the housework?....[H]ave we doomed our marriage?”** she asked Carolyn Hax. She signed herself “Dragville?” Carolyn responded that the marriage was indeed doomed if she and her husband expected to have everything-- the careers, kids, and nice clean house-- without putting aside energy to make their family work. **“It’s a common mistake,” Carolyn wrote. “It’s so easy to focus on the individual items that make up your life: We need to do X for the kids; we need Y amount of money; Z is necessary for my job and I need this salary, etc. That’s because they’re...conveniently black-and-white [decisions], so making them brings a sense of progress—all while leaving the bigger, scarier, grayer issues entirely unaddressed.”** Carolyn encouraged “Dragville?” to force herself to think bigger, to consider what decisions would benefit not just one family member or another, but what would benefit the whole family. She noted that such decisions are, in our have-it-all society, often framed as “sacrifices.” **“If parents dial back their ambitions, or choose to relocate,” she wrote, “it’s so often framed as giving something up or doing without. Instead, it’s actually doing with...If you make...a fulfilling family life the goal, if you’re looking out for each other instead of falling out of balance in who’s contributing what, then kids and the attendant chaos can actually be good for your marriage.”**

I’m certain this item initially caught my attention because I could so identify with the situation. Having twins put James and I exactly in this position on the very first pregnancy. In the end, I had to dial back my ambitions; we had to relocate. Sometimes I’ve had to hold down resentment, had to stop counting contributions; had to muffle the voices of feminist analysis...but I’ve never doubted that we made good decisions for our family.

As time has gone on, this little piece of advice from Carolyn has assumed broader application. I see the Dragville of the Republican-Democrat gridlock where black-and-white decisions are heavily negotiated, and common vision is completely lacking. AND I see the Dragville of the cycle that we at UCH have gotten ourselves into. This is a congregation with two children. Whether or not you voted for birth control; whether or not you wanted better family planning; whether or not you wanted to sell one of the children to science, we have two buildings--each of which offers sanctuary and meaning to a significant proportion of our congregation. The Multi-Site Task Force looked at the options of doing without one or the other building, and looked at the possibility of splitting the congregation, but our conclusion was that these choices were even scarier and grayer and uglier for the future of Unitarianism in Harrisburg than facing up to the big question of what would be a good choice for all of us. Some day it may be that we will be so big that we will have two flourishing UU congregations in Harrisburg, but that does not seem to be the case yet. Right now we just have two wards that both need nourishment. Whatever covert back channels may or may not have operated in the past, THIS decision is about US, not just allocations to one or another of the campuses.

We are asking you to think NOT in terms of “this is Dragsville,” but in terms of ways of making our Unitarian values flourish in this time and place. That will mean looking out for whomever you consider ‘the other.’ This will mean to stop counting who does what for whom, and start thinking about the overall health of a family that maybe has grown a little beyond our immediate comfort level. It will mean healing from past insults, and assuming best intentions. It will mean thinking about decisions not in terms of what this one or that one gets or sacrifices, but in terms of what would be a best fit. (An example of that: REALLY? Is it really true that Sunday services can ONLY commence in the hour between 10:00 and 11:00, that 30 minutes earlier, 9:30 is WAY too early, and 30 minutes later, 11:30, is WAY too late? How much energy are we really going to spend on insisting that?) Once factions develop, those who identify with them can get so much energy resisting the other factions, building up their cases. But obviously, that gets us nowhere and just ends up being an energy sink. We need all our energy to make the whole thing work, and then hopefully no one will feel that they are doing without, but everyone (at least most of the time) will be doing with.

The Multi-Site Task Force has spent a lot of time looking at both the financial and spiritual viability of this proposal for a Chalice Center. But it isn’t the letter of the proposal that really matters, it’s the commitment of the congregation to own its two locations, whether or not the older or the younger one seems more promising, whether or not we can afford to send both to college, whether or not we need to rearrange our schedules to accommodate them. We have two buildings: look at them as assets rather than albatrosses; conditions for possibility and growth rather than for collapse. It will take some time to rebuild trust among the entire community, but I ask you to take this first step toward a healthy community that thrives even in a bit of chaos: a community that seeks to honor the inherent dignity of every person, works for social justice, affirms the right of conscience, mends the web of nature, and *also* accepts one another, and makes democratic process work.