



Stewardship: The Art of Preservation

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I always like to know what I'm talking about when I address a group, and today it is especially important, as my chosen topic is stewardship. In an effort to be as precise and accurate as possible, I decided to begin with looking up the definition of the word, to wit:

Stewardship

[**stoo**-erd-ship, **styoo**-]

noun

1. The position and duties of a steward, a person who acts as the surrogate of another or others, especially by managing property, financial affairs, an estate, etc.
2. The responsible overseeing and protection of something considered worth caring for and preserving:

I have always been a bit of an amateur philologist, that is to say, a person who pursues the study of literary texts and of written records, the establishment of their authenticity and their original form, and the determination of their meaning.

I have always had the knack of working out the meanings of words from the context in which they are used in speech, or from usage in written text. Nevertheless, I find it enlightening to look up the meaning of a word in the dictionary that I think I already know. This almost always gives me a more nuanced and deeper understanding of the word itself.

In the context of today's sharing I draw your attention to the second dictionary definition of the meaning of stewardship, namely: "The responsible overseeing and protection ***of something considered worth caring for and preserving.***" This definition resonates with me. It does so in the context of conversations that I, along with all of us have had about First Church UU in Leominster. When speaking about the importance of First Church in our own individual lives, in the context of the Leominster community, as well as in the context of the community beyond, there is nearly universal agreement that First Church is an important force to be reckoned with. Voices ring with conviction while discussing this topic. Passion is palpable, and love of our venerable institution and one another is apparent even to the casual observer.

Indeed, churches are literally as well as figuratively pillars of the community. Although the contribution of churches to the wellbeing of the community and quality of life therein often "flies under the radar," this contribution is tangible, far reaching and most importantly, indispensable. Simply by being there, representing nothing more than a reminder of the better, the more noble, and more the caring aspects of human nature, they perform a vital service that no other community institution can or will provide. In short, churches are important. People who worship at churches not only meet their own spiritual needs, but in the process, by sustaining those churches, provide service, support and spiritual nourishment to the community at large.

It is no surprise that churches are in trouble nowadays because of declining participation by the faithful, and the attendant financial problems that result from this. Making ends meet, an

always difficult challenge is in many cases exacerbated by maintenance of physical plants designed in an era when soaring structures and grandiose facades were the order of the day. In retrospect, today's emphasis on functionality and economy of (sometimes nearly disposable) church buildings stands in stark contrast to the philosophy of yesteryear which seemed to emphasize the creation of a monument to last a millennium.

It is no secret that in this modern era we have a multitude of persons, places and things competing vigorously for our time, attention, and especially, money. Each day subjects us to a cacophony of stimuli designed to grab and keep our attention just long enough to make a commitment of resources that, as we are promised will increase our feeling of safety and satisfaction while slaking our intrinsic human need for fulfillment, sense of purpose, and bring us peace of mind, and contentment. AS IF!!!!

In 1906, when our building was brand new, and carrying on the tradition life was a great deal different in Leominster, and America as a whole. The average wage was about \$0.22 per hour. A head of household took home about \$450 per year. If you do the math, that meant he had to work quite a bit more than 40 hours per week. Note I said "he" – that isn't chauvinistic pronoun usage. Almost all families were provided for by a male head of household. About 14% of American homes had a bathtub, 8% had a phone. The phrase "data rates may apply was non-existent! The life expectancy of a man was 47 years. I note parenthetically, I would have had a reasonable expectation to be dead for 17 years back then!

In 1906, so many things affecting our lives and wellbeing were out of our control. As that mortality statistic implies, control over our own lives seemed more tenuous then than it does today. In 1906, we had prayers, poultices and aspirin as means of influencing our fate. Nowadays we have Google and MRIs. It is an open question whether or not they and other modern accoutrements like cell phones, iPads, flat screen TV and the rest of contemporary

baubles have any effect on our peace of mind, sense of personal security, fulfillment, satisfaction, or happiness. We make a lot more money nowadays in real terms than \$0.22/hour, but in reality the excess is gobbled up by the modern economy that promises lots, but delivers somewhat less than the hype would imply.

Nevertheless, churches persist. In contemporary life as well as back in 1906, a need for spiritual fulfillment that transcends economics, lifestyle, budgets, economies tugs at our souls. We strive in 2017 as in 1906 to answer the ultimate questions of what we are doing here, where we belong, how should we live, how should we relate to our fellow human beings, what is right, what is wrong, where do I fit in? You cannot Google these questions. Well OK, you can. Be prepared for disappointing answers however.

Something draws us to churches at one point in our lives or another. For some, reasons are limited to christenings, weddings, and funerals. Well, we need some place to hatch 'em, match 'em and dispatch 'em. Some of us need more. Some of us need to hear the words, say the words, sing the hymns, and reaffirm the principles by which we live. We may be smaller in number, but I would argue that the need for all of us is greater than ever. Some folks just haven't realized it yet.

We also learn by practicing our particular brand of faith, Unitarian Universalism that we are part of an interdependent web of existence. If you think about it, this message is reaffirmed every day. One simply cannot escape it. The past is part of that interdependent web. This leaky roof over our heads, the sanctuary and the pews, the organ, the meeting hall were built by contributions from many a folk earning \$0.22 an hour, \$450/year. Not only did they build and sustain this church, they went beyond the day-to-day needs. They established an endowment fund to sustain the church in the future. Somebody by the name of Kendall established a sum of

money way back when, and designated First Church as a recipient of the interest from that fund.

At this time in our history, which stretches back to 1743, we are operating day-to-day because of the generosity of those in the past, because the Endowment and Kendall fund provide a very substantial amount of our operating budget with which we cannot do without. This convinces me that the past is an indispensable part of the interdependent web of existence.

What of the future? Will that form an as yet to be determined part of the interdependent web of existence. Well, from First Church's point of view, that is problematic. Human nature being what it is tends to accept repetitive events as the norm. Each year, as we receive funds from the Endowment and Kendall funds, we tend to regard that as a "normal" part of our day-to-day business. Unfortunately, we have become dependent to the point where this is unhealthy and possibly unsustainable.

Let me be clear, we must challenge ourselves to think about the long term future of First Church if the future is to be a part of the interdependent web of existence. We cannot guarantee this future if we continue to operate as we do today. It is sometimes all we can do to get through a year with the books roughly balanced. Declining interest and the demands and distractions of modern day life pose a considerable challenge when thinking about how to ensure the future. However, we must do it. What we have here at First Church is too good, too indispensable to too many lives, too important in the grand scheme of things to neglect in our analysis and prioritization of near term objectives. A part, probably a small part of our bandwidth must be devoted to ensuring that First Church carries on so that congregants that we have yet to meet are able to walk their spiritual journey the way we do today. This pillar of the community must not fall.

We will probably discuss more practical ways and means of doing this starting with our next business meeting later this month. I ask all of you today, to start thinking about our longer term future not in the context of how we can make it through on a year-to-year basis, but what we can and should do to ensure the long term future of First Church. I believe we must make a consciences effort to “*preserve*” First Church for generations yet to come. Make no mistake, the challenges are great, but please believe with equal certainty that the rewards are even greater. Google is great, but Google won’t light a candle of joy and concern for us, nor will it provide one with the soul satisfying feeling of being part of something greater than ourselves. Some things transcend Google. There, I’ve said it!