

To the Seventh Generation
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What we've just heard is a bit from an ancient document, born at least five hundred years ago. Its origins are told in the legendary story of the Peacemaker, Deganawidah, who persuaded first five and eventually six warring nations in the northeastern part of this continent to join into one powerful confederacy. Europeans called it the Iroquois confederacy; the nations call themselves the Haudenosaunee—the people who live in long houses. The Peacemaker convinced the leaders of the Haudenosaunee nations that they would be greater and more powerful together than separately. What we call their “Constitution” is actually an oral history woven into two ancient belts of shell beads called the “Great Law of Peace.”

It's an extraordinarily complex and sophisticated system of government and principles for human society, and in fact many historians believe the Great Law of Peace profoundly influenced the Founders of the American Republic as they shaped our similar, two-house legislative structure. Its goal was not to create a more powerful conqueror nation but a peaceful, compassionate one that would insure harmony and sustainability long past the lifetimes of its creators. To the seventh generation, as later Haudenosaunee leaders have come to say.

We've come to think of the “seventh generation principle” mostly in the context of the natural world, and sometimes we use it as a sort of shorthand for indigenous environmentalism: “We have to take care of the Earth so that it will be here for the seventh generation.”

But there's more to the Haudenosaunee Seventh Generation principle than environmentalism. The part of the Great Law of Peace we heard is taken from the ceremony of dedication for those chosen as leaders. In every decision, in every question that arises, new leaders are charged to “Look and listen for the welfare of the whole people and have always in view not only the present but also the coming generations, even those whose faces are yet beneath the surface of the ground -- the unborn of the future Nation.” The ceremony tells them that every act of their leadership, no matter what the topic, should be an act of stewardship on behalf of future generations.

Stewardship is the care and nurture of something of value that has been entrusted to us. We often think of it in terms of possessions and property: We protect and manage something that's ours, because we own it and want to keep it, to increase its value. The Seventh Generation principle of stewardship is different: It's rooted in a deep sense of relationship, not only with the people of the present community, but the people of the community as it will be long into the future, long after we are gone. We think of them, we make decisions with them in mind, because we are related to them. We care for and nurture the ongoing life of our community, not because the community belongs to us, but because we belong to the community: past, present, and future.

That's the sense of stewardship I want to invite us to take to heart today, as we launch this year's Pledge Campaign, the foundation of the financial life of our Congregation. Think of the

people—past, present, and future—that we are in relationship with because we are part of this religious community.

Think of people hundreds of years ago, who rose up to say that the dogmas and Biblical interpretations of the past were wrong, that there was another way, many other ways to be a good Christian, a good human being. Think of people in the first century of this nation, who declared that it was wrong to use taxes to support a politically established Church, that religious freedom included both freedom of thought and the freedom to support a chosen faith community financially without government coercion. Think of people who proclaimed that living a life of faith means creating justice, freedom, and compassion in this life, in this one precious world. Think of them: Our ancestors, who lived and died for their faith and entrusted it to us, to their “seventh generation.”

Think of the small group of people who 30 years ago brought this congregation into being, people we’ll name and celebrate together next year as we mark that anniversary. Some of them are still with us today. They found each other, they talked and planned; they made careful decisions and thought about not just what they wanted but what they wanted for us and for those who come after us. We have this beautiful location, this wonderful space because of them; we have a healthy leadership and financial foundation because of them. We are the coming generations they kept in mind.

Think of what this community and its people mean to you right now: The moments of beauty and exaltation, delight and deep resonance in our Sunday services; the unreserved affirmation of your worth and dignity as a whole human being—even when you might be having trouble believing that about yourself. Think of the fellowship and the friendships, the laughter, the compassion and companionship in hard times. Think of the opportunities to serve the larger community and to magnify your individual voice in the greater causes of justice, equity and compassion. That’s our present, here are the people of today with whom we work, as the Haudenosaunee say, in calm deliberation, in firmness tempered with tenderness, and in endless patience.

Think of the youngest people among us: the youth who led us in worship last week, the children over in the preschool or on the playground right now. Think of the children and families and individuals of every description still to come, next month, next year, ten or thirty or fifty years from now. They will depend on us and what we do now to make sure there is a strong and healthy congregation, a religious community to meet and sustain them in their life’s journeys. They are our seventh generation. They will look back to us in gratitude and in respect, they will take up the stewardship we entrust to them in their turn.

Stewardship takes many forms. There are many ways of caring for the legacy we will pass on to the coming generations, from changing light bulbs and taking out the trash to printing newsletters and copying orders of service, from painting classroom walls to managing Facebook walls, from working in the Food Pantry or on a voting rights campaign to helping develop a children’s religious education program; from participating in Sunday services to planning next year’s budget to making wise decisions at Board meetings.

We need all of this; in a small congregation like ours every single hand is needed in some way. And with all of that, we need financial stewardship as well.

Sometimes people think of financial stewardship for a congregation as an unfortunate necessity. “Sadly,” they’ll say, “it takes money to get along in the world; we wish it weren’t so, but I’m afraid even spiritual and religious communities need to have money, isn’t that a shame? Wouldn’t it be nice if we could just get along by all pitching in, and didn’t need to ask for a pledge once a year so that we can make a budget and plan for our financial life next year? Oh, well, it’s an imperfect world, so let’s at least get it over with as quickly as possible.”

You will probably not be astonished to discover that I don’t see it that way. In fact, I think there is great power in thinking carefully about my financial life and deciding what I am able to commit to sustain and nourish the life of my religious community. Especially when I think in terms of my relationship to the previous generations and the generations to come, making a financial pledge to whatever extent I’m able strikes me as a life-affirming, celebratory act, for myself and for my community.

Here’s what I’m thinking of. When we look at what we earn and own, at the financial compensation we have received for the time, energy, imagination, and care we have given to our work life, most of it goes for things we can’t control. We don’t know what the money we spend at the grocery store is supporting. We’re not always in sympathy with what our taxes fund. We aren’t in charge of what the bank does with our mortgage money, or the landlord with our rent, or the phone, power, or cable company with the money we send them every month.

But the money I choose to commit to this congregation? With that money, I can say: This much goes only to support the things I value most in the world.

This much of the money I receive for my life’s energies goes to enhance my ability to make a difference here in this wonderful place, this fragile place, this place where wealth and poverty live side by side, this place of beauty and hurt, of bounty and need.

This much goes to nurture a community which has faith in freedom, which trusts in love, which cherishes justice, and which honors the emergence of new truth wherever it might arise.

This much goes to sustain the gifts of free, liberal religious community across time so that they will be here for those who seek us out not just 30 years from now, but beyond the foreseeable future. To the seventh generation.

I don’t know about you, but in my life, no other financial choice offers that much power. That’s the power of pledging.

The power doesn’t come from how much we can afford to give, but from how much it means to us.

There was a woman in a congregation I served once, a woman in her 50s who lived with significant intellectual and emotional disabilities. She had no immediate family; she lived on a

very small trust and public assistance, in a semi-independent apartment she was only able to keep because of the support of social agencies and her friends at the church. She had made the same pledge every year for as long as anyone could remember: Fifty-two dollars. One dollar a week. She put it carefully in an envelope and wrote her name on it, and she put it in the basket. If she ever missed a week, she made it up the next week, and she made sure to tell me she had. One year her situation changed slightly, and she increased her pledge to sixty dollars. One Sunday each month, she'd put two dollars in her envelope. She always told me joyfully when it was a two-dollar Sunday.

I learned so much about the power of pledging from her. That pledge, so small to some, was a significant amount of money in her life. It was one of the few financial decisions she could make entirely by herself, and she had decided that it was going to something that mattered to her, and that's why she wanted someone to notice. It was a sign of her freedom: her ability to make her own choices, and commit herself to something important. That decision to increase her pledge by a few dollars a year was as powerful for her as the decision of one of our wealthiest donors to raise her pledge from \$6,000 to \$8,000 dollars. That's the power of pledging.

Right now, this morning, someone needs to hear that their life has worth and dignity, and that they deserve love and compassionate community even if the whole world around them, even their own family, is telling them otherwise. Someone needs to hear that their search for truth deserves respect, even if it has led them away from what is acceptable in the tradition they grew up in. Someone needs to know there is hope for them, even if they feel utterly lost. Someone needs to know that justice and equity and compassion in this world, in this life are holy goals, worthy of our highest commitment.

This beloved community of ours, this Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Outer Banks, we have the power to offer those gifts. They are needed today, and they will be needed long after we have become ancestors.

That's the precious heritage we've been entrusted with. The life and health and future of this community is always, always in our hands. May we treasure it, delight in it, nurture and grow it. May we ensure that it will be here for our seventh generation—and for many more generations to come.