

Building Community – A Kaleidoscope of Vision  
A sermon prepared and delivered by The Rev. Brenda Casavoy  
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I hope most, if not all of you, have had the pleasure of viewing a Kaleidoscope. For those of you that are not familiar with a kaleidoscope, it is a tube of mirrors containing loose colored beads, pebbles, or other small objects. The viewer looks in one end and light enters the other end reflecting off the mirrors that are inside. An arbitrary pattern of objects show up as a beautiful symmetrical pattern. The way in which the kaleidoscope works reminds me of how people come together as a community. We come together as individuals, each unique to ourselves and join together to form a creative community. Notice that I have used the word "creative" before community. Not all communities come together for the good of all and one must ask about the nature and the focus and purpose of the community. There are some communities that are narrowly focused, which serve the past, which seek to include the individual into a rigid, collective identity that can be profoundly dangerous. However the creative community as Rev. David Bumbaugh describes it in a sermon that he delivered at the Unitarian Church in Summit NJ, "is one which honors the integrity of the individual which accepts people as they are, values the past out of which they have come, but which finds its focus in the future, in the unrealized possibilities, in the richness which results from honoring diversity. In short, the creative community is a community of renewal, open to the ever present possibility of transformation. And that is what a religious community, at its best, is all about.

This is an exciting time for the First Parish Church in Billerica. You started your church year with a new minister, Rev. Tony Lorenzen. I had the pleasure of attending a service here on September 16<sup>th</sup> and in listening to Rev. Lorenzen's sermon "Meet me in the land of Hope and Dreams", he talked about the visions and the future of this church as you move forward. He encouraged the congregation to welcome an attitude of dreaming big dreams including the expansion of membership and reaching out to the community amongst many other things.

As a community your visions and dreams can be realized as you combine your talents with willingness and commitment. Yes, all these things will take time. It will take one step at a time but it can be accomplished.

As Dorothy Day writes about Commitment in number 560 in your hymnals:

People say, what is the sense of our small effort?

They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time.

A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread in all directions. Each one of our thoughts, words and deeds is like that.

No one has the right to sit down and feel hopeless. There is too much work to do.

I believe that most of us would agree with Dorothy Day that we must lay one brick at a time and to take one step at a time. Sometimes it may be a slow process but with patience and time many things can be accomplished. There may be some of you that have had your own personal visions or some of your dreams have become realized. We often hear many stories of how a simple idea and a willingness to try have created the most rewarding and successful accomplishments. Great things are possible with vision and with the help of communities. Let us embrace the covenant of the Unitarian Universalist tradition by providing living affirmation that community brings out our humanity and our hope.

One of my favorite examples of community comes from the book "The Kingdom Assignment" written by Denny and Leesa Bellesi and under the title it says "What Will You Do with the Talents God Has Given You." The book clearly demonstrates what happens when people come together in community and although it is Christian based it supports the UU tradition in providing living affirmation that community brings out our humanity of hope. So in the light of embracing all traditions I will use this illustration in my attempt to bring to you today the importance of a community effort with a Kaleidoscope of Vision. This book documents actual events of how a community effort made a difference in many peoples life.

To give you a brief history of the authors Denny Bellesi was the founding pastor at Coast Hills Community Church in California from 1985 until 2003. Since the early days of his work the idea of helping others, on a larger scale, was always lurking in his mind. He just was not sure how or when it was going to happen. He had often shared his thoughts about this with his wife Leesa. Then one day as Pastor Denny and his wife were watching the movie "Pay it Forward" in which a seventh grader and his class are given a project by their social studies teacher. The project was to come up with an idea that could "change the world" and then dare to put it into action. Pastor Denny states in the book that "The movie triggered an idea that hit Leesa and me almost at the same time. We simply looked at each other and said, "Its Time." He wanted to play out their dream by using the model of the parable of talents with the congregation.

*The Parable of the Talents* is one of the stories Jesus told to teach a moral lesson as written in Matthew 25:14-30. Although the word "talents" in the story refers literally to money, you can obviously extend the meaning to other areas.

## **The Parable of the Talents**

The parable tells of a master who was leaving his home to travel, and before going gave his three servants different amounts of money. On returning from his travels, the master asked his servants for an account of the money given to them. The first servant reported that he was given five talents, and he had made five talents more. The master praised the servant as being good and faithful, gave him more responsibility because of his faithfulness, and invited the servant to be joyful together with him.

The second servant said that he had received two talents, and he had made two talents more. The master praised this servant in the same way as being good and faithful, giving him more responsibility and inviting the servant to be joyful together with him.

The last servant who had received one talent reported that knowing his master was a hard man, he buried his talent in the ground for safekeeping, and therefore returned the original amount to his master. The master called him a wicked and lazy servant, saying that he should have placed the money in the bank to generate interest. The master commanded that the one talent be taken away from that servant, and given to the servant with ten talents, because everyone that has much will be given more, and whoever that has a little, even the little that he has will be taken away. And the master ordered the servant to be thrown outside into the darkness where there is "weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Like the parable of talents, Pastor Denny's idea was to give \$100.00 to 100 people and to ask them to invest it for God for a total of \$10,000 dollars. But where was he going to get the money? That was the question he took to the Missions Outreach team at his church. Needless to say he was greeted with a great deal hesitation but after telling them and I quote; "something tells me this is what Jesus would do", he was approved for the project.

The book begins with "An Assignment That Changed Their Lives" which was the proposal that he gave to one hundred people at the church in California. It reads; I have an assignment for you that will change your life - A Kingdom Assignment. Before you say no, before you tell me you're too busy, too untrained, or too ill-equipped to handle one more assignment – especially one for the Kingdom of God- think about this;

If you accept this assignment, you will take a small amount of money and increase it up to a hundredfold or more. You will have the means to help countless people-some with food and clothing, others with medicine or the gospel message-and in the process, no matter how much money your investment turns into, no matter how many people you will help, you will walk away with more than what your investment will ever make and more than those you've invested in. Interested?

Getting 100 volunteers was not an easy task but after his fourth service he had given away the entire \$10,000.00 dollars with the following stipulations; Should they chose to take part in the Kingdom Assignment, there would be three conditions.

First they would need to recognize that the money did not belong to them; rather, it belonged to the Master. It was God's money. Second, they were being trusted to invest the money in a way that would extend God's Kingdom. They could buy a homeless man dinner and a Bible or start a mission that might live on for a hundred years. Whatever they chose to do was between them and God. Lastly, they were told that they must return in 90 days and share the results of their investment with the congregation.

The results were incredible. In just three months \$10,000 dollars had become more than \$100,000.00 dollars. Thousands of people had been clothed or fed or brought into a relationship with God. Whole communities were changed in the process.

At their worship service on February 7, 2001, all one hundred participants shared their stories. As a matter of fact NBC's Dateline televised the event on national TV. People spoke in tears about how the Kingdom Assignment had given them an entirely different approach to life. There were stories of how a \$100.00 bill became \$13,000.00 dollars and how whole churches were started up with that simple, small amount.

There are so many fascinating and touching stories in this book of real events and real people helping one another. I will share with you today just one of the many stories in this book. This one is Terry's story as described in the book. Terry had attended our church for many years. She lived in a large home in the most affluent area of our community and drove an expensive car. She had a full-time housekeeper and was successful in everything she set her mind to accomplish.

Most people didn't know that many years earlier Terry and her young daughter had escaped an abusive relationship. The pain of that ordeal, paled, however compared to the pain of watching her godly husband, Steve. Lose his eyesight to a debilitating disease.

Steve is a successful lawyer, and, because of his blindness, Terry spends hours each day reading legal briefs aloud. In addition to that, Terry and her husband have four active children. She is a walking illustration of the Scripture, "To whom much is given, much is expected."

The day Terry received the money she tucked it away and uttered a deep and heartfelt prayer that the Lord multiply it for His glory. Later that afternoon she attended a birthday party at a local restaurant. When the guests were gathered at a long table, Terry pulled out the \$100.00 bill and held it up. "I got this at church today." She smiled, watching as the eyes of several people grew wide with interest. "Isn't it supposed to work the other way around?" One of the men at the far end of the table laughed lightheartedly and waited for an explanation. Terry smiled, sure that none of them had ever heard anything like what she was about to share. "Actually it's a Kingdom Project. The pastor gave away \$10,000.00 dollars and asked us to multiply it for God." For a moment the room fell perfectly silent. Then one at a time the guests began to talk until the sound filled the room with "I want to help.....?", "What are you going to do ...?" "How can I get involved...?" "Can I match it with money of my own ...?"

By the time Terry left the party that night, her \$100.00 dollars had turned into \$1,800.00, including a free dinner donated by the restaurant. Not only did she have nearly twenty times the assignment money, she also received a tip from someone at the party as to whom she might be able to help.

One of the guests knew of a woman taking night classes at a local college and holding down two jobs. This woman had two children living with her and a third who was in a live-in recovery facility. The woman had escaped an abusive relationship, but was then assaulted and stabbed while staying at a safe house. She had been trying to make a better life for herself and her children, and the assault took what dignity she had left. Through a series of phone calls, Terry arranged a meeting with this woman named Lisa. Though they came from different lifestyles, Terry knew they had something very special in common. They both had been abused.

The afternoon of their meeting at Terry's home, Lisa knocked tentatively on the door of what probably looked to her like a mansion. A warm, outgoing woman answered the door, and the awkwardness between them lasted only a moment before Terry said, her voice thick with emotion. "God has brought us together because He wanted us to be friends.

The money raised at that Sunday afternoon birthday party allowed Terry to help Lisa with her rent. In addition, Terry purchased gift certificates for Lisa and her children to help them get through Christmas. Not long after Terry made her delivery she received a call from Lisa.

"There was some money left over," she said, joy ringing in her voice. "Me and the kids bought some present for some other children we know. Children with far less than us." Terry listened as tears filled her eyes. Only God, she reasoned, could design a project that allowed a single \$100.00 bill to keep giving and giving. The more time Terry spent with Lisa the more she saw, though they had nothing in common on the surface, there were things they could learn from each other – lessons about everything from their children's schooling to the difficulties of trusting again after living in an abusive relationship.

Terry and Steve were able to help Lisa with her legal problems concerning her middle child, and in a matter of weeks the two families began attending church together. Someone from the congregation offered to care for Lisa's eight-year-old daughter after school while Lisa worked. A fund was created to purchase a computer for her oldest son so he could compete with other students applying for college scholarships. And God wasn't finished yet. When long lost relatives of Lisa saw a story about her and the Kingdom project in a local newspaper, they contacted her and a reunion was staged. "What can we do to help?" they wanted to know. They started making plans that day to take Lisa under their care. "I don't understand about the project," one of Lisa's relatives said. "But I know this. Lisa will never be without family again because of it. "

This is truly an inspirational book and I believe it is a perfect example of how one person's vision, along with community involvement can make a difference in the commitment to serve humanity.

Let us now take a moment to reflect on the similarities between the kaleidoscope and how this integrates with community. Let us ask ourselves, Is this how life is, if only we step back far enough to see it all and hold onto our visions – a kaleidoscope of events joining, merging, dancing in rhythmic harmony. Not as observers of the pattern but part of the very texture of which it is constructed. A collection of individual pieces weaved together to become as one. I welcome all of you to become a beautiful symmetrical part of the First Parish Church community in holding the vision of your congregation to move forward during this year by "Meeting together in the land of Hope and Dreams", and realize your visions for the future of this church.

Blessed Be.

Book Reference: The Kingdom Assignment, Authors Denny and Leesa Bellesi published by Zondervan.