

My Inspiration:UUSIC Volunteers

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Thank you for the opportunity to share my inspiration with you this morning. I was asked to do this talk shortly before the Youth Service this past spring. During that service, my main thought was "I just hope I can be half as eloquent as these teenagers..." It is never a good idea to be shown up by a teenager!

After the call, I sat and pondered my inspiration. I thought about the diversity of our members, which I truly value. I thought about our guiding principles which seem to be a natural fit in my life. I thought about the RE program which was a big reason we became UUs. All of these things I value at the UUSIC, but they didn't feel inspirational to me, as I sat there searching for a topic.

I haven't read the writings of deep philosophical thinkers since college. No sacred texts made it onto my beach reading list this summer. No weighty poems came readily to mind. Like a speaker before me, I went to the dictionary and looked up "inspiration". Perhaps a simple definition would provoke a 10 minute talk?

As I sat there desperate for some....well...inspiration, I called out to my family, "Hey guys, what is it that inspires me?" And my children, in their childlike egocentric way, answered "we do!" I realized they were partially correct. It is the members of the UU, or rather the "You-yous" who inspire me. Specifically it is the amazing volunteers and the incredible volunteer actions which inspire me and make me proud to be part of this community.

Volunteers and persons who's life work involve carrying out a mission, employees of nonprofit organizations for example, have inspired me since my graduate school days. I remember a turning point in my life as a graduate student in the Department of Horticulture at Michigan State University. The department had just moved into a new building the year I began my studies. My lab and office were located on the fourth floor. From my window I had a great view of the new gardens being built around the building. Being the Horticulture department, these gardens were state of the art. A large children's garden was included in the plan. 4-H volunteers were in charge of this garden.

I watched out of my window as, day-after-day, a totally volunteer crew transformed a mud hole into a very special place for the community. I remember the day I came to the realization that the work those volunteers were doing outside the building was likely to be much more meaningful to society than the work being done inside the building. Needless to say, my graduate career was in serious jeopardy after that day!

This past spring I was a member of the committee which developed our Mission Goals. This productive committee came up with a handful of action steps to carry out our Mission Statement. Three aspects of working on the mission goals fascinated me: 1) How much the mission

goals are homegrown, in other words, how much they reflect the interests of the individual members of our society. 2) At one point in our work, we looked at past lists of mission goals and I was struck by the extent to which our mission goals have changed over time. And three, with the exception of a few, the goals are carried out by volunteers.

Some might say the mission goals, by stating what actions we are willing to put resources behind, essentially state who we are. And, I have to conclude that, in a large part, who we are is a result of volunteer action.

So, I think the volunteers at the UU rock, all of them - from the guys who wash dishes at the annual auction dinner, to the people who represent us at the Free Lunch program, to the RE teachers, to the teenagers and adults who spent their spring and summer vacations helping out in New Orleans, to the dedicated members of the various committees and the board. And now I have to tell you what is on my reading list (instead of those sacred texts) to explain why I think our volunteers are special.

I most likely can be found reading books like The Childhood Roots of Adult Happiness: Five Steps to Help Kids Create and Sustain Lifelong Joy by Edward Hallowell, A Mind at a Time: How Every Child Can Succeed by Melvin Levine, The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage Are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids by Madeline Levine and this one - Authentic Happiness by Martin Seligman.

In Authentic Happiness, Seligman has compiled a list of 24 traits known as signature strengths which, when exercised on a regular basis in a person's life, leads to a sense of fulfillment, authenticity and integrity. Seligman defines the happy life as one in which you use your signature strengths in your work and family life and the meaningful life as one in which you use your signature strengths in the service of something larger than you. I would like to suggest that UUSIC provides a place for members to use their signature strengths as volunteers.

Here at the UUSIC, not only are we able to believe what we want, worship who or what we like, and think what we are inclined to think, we are also able to volunteer in ways which use our signature strengths. It is my belief that because we at the UUSIC embrace diversity rather than conformity and value inspired action rather than compliance, volunteers at UUSIC are able to use their signature strengths thereby enriching their lives and providing inspiration for me.

The fact that the ways in which we choose to volunteer can make it all the way into our mission goals supports my belief that the organizational structure of the UUSIC supports its members in exercising their signature strengths. This is good thing! It is the flip side (the positive side effect) of the hairy, complicated mess that non-profits often adopt as their organizational structure. In a more controlled, regimented,

topdown style organization, individual's signature strength never see the light of day. Not so, here at the UUSIC.

I remember seeing Natalie McMaster, playing her blue electric fiddle and step dancing at Hancher. She appeared immensely fulfilled in her life's work. Up on that stage, it was clear she was exercising her signature strengths (those being vitality, creativity and playfulness, I am guessing). Although, different than mine, I enjoyed watching someone exercising their signature strengths. I was inspired by her.

At the UUSIC, I am inspired by our volunteers, who use their signature strengths to enhance our experience. I am glad to be part of an organization which allows, and encourages, authenticity and fulfillment on both the individual and organizational level.

Thank you.