

**Opportunities**  
**Sermon**  
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**First Unitarian Church of Baltimore**  
**October 5, 2008**

After I submitted the title of this talk with you about “Opportunities” I began to wonder if perhaps it was a misnomer, or whether I might have more appropriately called it, “You just never know.” And before I finish, you’ll understand why.

Initially inspired by the Opportunities Fair to be held right after church in the Enoch Pratt Parish Hall, after a delicious lunch, I was thinking about how terrific it is to have so many energetic and dedicated committees and groups here at First Unitarian, and how open they are to participation from all of us. Some congregations and their committees tend to become a little territorial and turf-oriented, and that atmosphere, as we all know, is a real downer for new members and prospective members, and even long-time members who are drawn to this or that committee because of the services and the ministries they perform for the church. Inbreeding is not healthy biologically or organizationally. And so it’s wonderful that our groups and committees are so inclusively minded and welcoming to all ages and all talents.

So let me encourage you to stay after lunch to visit with any or all of the folks at the many tables in the Parish Hall. You may discover an unforeseen opportunity!

And that is the joy and near miracle that I really have in mind. Because, you know, you never know!

What happens when we volunteer, or work with groups for social justice, or work with committees that minister for the whole church? Veeery little bad! And usually, lots of good.

In fact, I think there should be a bumper sticker that reads, “Volunteer Work Pays.” Let me tell you why.

When I was a senior at the University of Texas at Austin, we just call it “The University”, I was majoring in government. I decided to learn what I could first hand. So I took myself down to Senator Lyndon Johnson’s office, presented myself to total strangers, and offered to work for them, doing whatever, for nothing. It wasn’t a campaign year, so they were kind of surprised, and since all my parents friends were Republicans, I didn’t have any reliable references for them. They gently listened to me, and said they didn’t usually use volunteer workers in that office. I left, disappointed and crestfallen.

But in about a week, I answered the telephone, and the nice man who’d spoken with me said if I still wanted to come on down, they’d put me to work. So I

went, and worked every Monday, Wednesday and Friday afternoon for them. I delivered coffee. I stuffed envelopes. I sealed envelopes. I ran errands. I learned precious little about politics except that there was LOT of GRUNT work involved. Then they asked me to do a little research project for them, and when I completed it, they paid me something. In fact they paid me a little bit for the whole time, after several months.

Then in the spring, Adlai Stevenson came to town. He was running for President, and was speaking in Gregory Gymnasium, where they hold UT basketball games, the state high school basketball championships, and where Arturo Toscanini and the NBC played on his last national tour. I'll never forget that. My mother and I went. The whole town was upset because the program included the tune that went, ta ta da ta da, ta ta da da da! (the "William Tell Overture", by Rossini, theme song for the Lone Ranger radio program of the olden days.) The Austin folks thought the selection was condescending, an insult to our parochialism. But the orchestra played it anyway. Then for an encore, they played "The Stars and Stripes Forever" and the whole gymnasium shook and nearly collapsed from all the cheers and energy.

Anyhow, that nice man in the office called me in and asked me if I would like to go hear Adlai Stevenson and then to drive him around the University after the evening events. Would I ever! So I sat on the front row, right beside Speaker Sam Rayburn, who was gently gruff and delightfully patronizing in a nice way. And after the speech to a house even fuller than for Toscanini, Speaker Rayburn asked me if I would like to go to the reception at the Law School for Gov. Stevenson. I allowed as I had not been invited. The Speaker looked me straight in the eye and said, "Honey, just take my arm." So I rode over to the Law School reception with the Speaker, Newton Minow, and Gov. Stevenson and had a grand time. Gov. Stevenson graciously held the elevator door open for me, and when we went in, Speaker Rayburn reminded me to take his arm, and in we sailed. I knew a couple of the faculty, friends of my parents, who were kind of surprised to see me, but at least I had some folks to talk to. It turned out that I didn't have to **drive** Gov. Stevenson around the university campus. We rode **together** in the back of a very fancy, long black Cadillac. Riding in that car, just Adlai Stevenson and me, folks, is as close to heaven as I'll probably ever get. And as far as I'm concerned, it's close enough.

All because I volunteered. You just never know!

Later than spring, the Johnson people appointed me a delegate to the State Democratic Convention, and put me on the credentials committee.

Not only that, they offered me a job in Washington!

You just never know, when you volunteer!

And a year later, Senator Johnson, who was Majority Leader, invited me to come over to the Capitol to work in the Majority Leader's office. I was 23 years old

and could barely type, much less take shorthand, but he said, “Don’t worry, Honey, just tell’um to slow down.”

So for over two years I sat in the Senate Gallery and watched the United States after work, visited the Supreme Court during lunch time, and when Senator Johnson got important phone calls, like from President Eisenhower, I put the White House operator on hold and went down to the Senate floor to let him know that the President was holding the phone for him. He loved that! So did I. At 23, and all because I’d volunteered. You never know!

Many years later I was back at the University, working on my doctorate. President Johnson was in his permanent resting place at his beloved ranch. A friend of mine headed up the Austin Women’s Center, which helped prepare women looking for their first jobs, or women returning to the workplace. She said they often got discouraged, so I offered to give a workshop for the staff on “Dealing with Rejection.” The staff said, “Wow, we’d like for you to do this again with some of our clients.” So I did, and then the women said, “Wow, I know lots of women who would benefit from this.” So the Women’s Center advertised it on the radio and booked me at several public libraries. I did all of it as a volunteer, *pro bono*, loving the experience and grateful for the opportunities to work on my presentation and facilitation skills.

Finally the time of reckoning arrived. I had to conduct the research and write up the results for my dissertation. The topic was relocation stress, and I needed two groups to compare...folks who had not changed residences for at least a year, and another group who had moved to Austin from at least 100 miles away within the past three months. The first group was easy, but where was I going to find over a hundred people who had just moved to Austin. I visited and called Lockheed, Abbot Labs, IBM, all the biggies. No dice. I was feeling pretty desperate. I mentioned my predicament to my friend who still headed the Austin Women’s Center, and she said, “Oh, I think I can fix that! The Women’s Center is helping spouses who are moving to Austin with MCC, Micro Computer and Electronics Corporation.” The new company was just starting up, a consortium of many corporations that were collaborating on fifth generation computers. Whatever that meant.

And so MCC became my experimental group, including Admiral Bobby Ray Inman, the president. All because I had volunteered to do a little workshop for eight staff members at the Women’s Center.

Now I don’t want to give the impression that every time you volunteer you’ll end up with a job offer, or get to help with a big project. But I had more fun than a barrel of monkeys, even before the big and unforeseen rewards came.

What I do want to suggest is that when you volunteer, you never know where it will lead. The important thing about volunteering is to volunteer for something you care about, a cause you support, a need you’d like to fill, a place where your skills

are needed. Maybe it's tutoring or teaching English as a second language. Maybe it's helping to put out the Beacon.

Maybe it's singing in the choir. Maybe it's helping with Building and Grounds. Maybe it's teaching RE. Maybe it's visiting members who are homebound, or delivering casseroles to families who are overwhelmed by a new birth, a death, an illness. Maybe it's helping with the Stewardship drive. Or the Membership Committee, or ushering. Or just sitting quietly with someone who is going through a bad patch. The important thing is to hook up with a group, and enjoy helping them do what they do for the church, and get to know more folks here. We have an amazingly talented and interesting membership.

Whatever you do, I'll bet you'll have fun and feel better about yourself. And if you don't, then do something else! There's plenty of variety. There's a lot to do. There are plenty of opportunities.

And guess what, you just never know.

Amen.