Remarks for 8/19/18 on Leaving a Legacy:

“Leaving a Legacy”

My goodness, that sounds burdensome, doesn’t it? During this morning’s remarks, I hope to break this concept down a bit, into a less onerous and more user-friendly process. This is important because, as we must realize - we are indeed going to leave a legacy of some kind- one way or another. So, why not approach this legacy-building consciously and take part in its development.

Until recently, I’d always thought of leaving a legacy as something for “later” – something primarily related to disbursement of our funds and holdings, after we pass. And, while hopefully we do create a last will and testament, sooner rather than later… that document may merely designate our heirs, and in cases of large estates, be intended to reduce conflict among those heirs, and perhaps avoid tax liability for them.

My point here is that our pre-planning is often designed more to avoid negatives, than to enhance positives. And, more to point, once these legal documents have been completed, we may think our legacy work is finished.

On the other hand, the renowned American poet, Emily Dickinson, once wrote “my friends are my estate”, possibly implying she viewed her interpersonal relationships as more important than her poetry. Yet, most of us would certainly think of the latter as her legacy.

Nonetheless, most of our own legacies lie somewhere between a large financial estate and the memories of our closest friends.

I recently retired from my position with the Edgewood College Marriage & Family Therapy Program and set out on the great journey of creating my new life as a semi-retired person.

Earlier this spring, when I discussed today’s reflection with Michael Schuler, I’d expected to include a few personal retirement references, but to focus primarily on my professional knowledge of the process of aging. After all, I’d studied gerontology since the mid- ‘70s- when I had no “face validity” whatsoever… until now when I have lots of face validity- with clients… and everyone else.
However, I’ve been learning many things over recent weeks, not the least among them being that leaving a legacy, in fact, needs to start long before we’ve left. And, this surely applies to leaving anywhere—whether leaving a career… or leaving this life.

So, I’ve decided to focus on the proactive process of consciously leaving a legacy, rather than on the characteristics of that phase of life wherein we commonly begin to think of our legacy. People in the field of aging use the term “life review” to describe how people of a certain age, may begin to mentally review their lifetimes, including how they may be remembered. This is not that. This is about the proactive process of creating our legacies.

You folks in the room under ages 40-50, I’m speaking to you when I ask “How do you want to be remembered, and how can you get to a place where you feel you may be remembered as you’d like?

And, I assure you folks over 50, it’s never too late to consciously create a legacy… which warms your own heart and gives you some reassurance that those for whom you care will indeed remember you for what you hold most dear and value as the guiding principles of your life in this world.

In fact, Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot at Harvard has described what she calls “The Third Chapter”- the years between fifty and seventy-five. She says the folks she interviewed “were on a search for meaning, for purposefulness, in this penultimate chapter of their lives. We’re living longer… The arc of our lives has changed enormously. We’re (not necessarily) dying at 50. We are, if we’re lucky, living to eighty, eighty-five, ninety. So, this period I’m talking about… offers us the opportunity, and the challenge, of doing something meaningful. This is, perhaps, the transformative time of our lives, the most exciting, in terms of new learning. Limitless in its opportunities.”

As you may imagine, this discussion appeals tremendously to me, and it certainly underscores the possibility of our creating a legacy far after people in earlier generations may have felt their lives and opportunities were over.

Some of us seem to avoid conscious consideration of legacy-building during our younger years, thinking we have plenty of time … and that our current obligations and responsibilities must always take precedence. And, even after retirement, we may avoid engaging in this consideration, using the excuse of all those post-retirement plans with family and friends, volunteer obligations, and now, more and more, part-time jobs. Unfortunately, unexpected illness or disability can sometimes move us quickly to the phase of “life review” - before we’ve even taken time to consider our legacy.
Now, I trust that most UUs (we who often wear our hearts and values on our sleeves) have shared our strongest concerns and priorities with our loved ones…… Yet you’d be surprised at the number of family members and friends who remark at wakes and memorial services: “I had no idea he was a member of …….”, or “that she cared so much about ……”. Don’t let this happen to your loved ones- make sure they know who you are and what you hold dear.

What are most of us avoiding anyway, by not taking time for conscious consideration of what is most important to us, and thus what our legacy will become? Perhaps we’re avoiding things as simple as…

- Listening to ourselves;
- Tallying up our personal pros & cons- not judgmentally, but as objective assessment toward possible change;
- Identifying whether we have regrets, and whether they can or should be addressed;
- thinking about what truly does matter in our lives and taking steps to bring these things to the forefront… by one means or another.

For those of us who are not financially wealthy enough to simply write a check to leave our mark, yet hope to be impactful in how we live and what we eventually leave behind, what might become our legacy?

Recognizing the fallacy in the yuppie saying “whoever dies with the most stuff wins” is another argument for making time for consideration. One of my very favorite stories in Brian Andreas’ collection of Story People books goes like this:

“What do I get for this?” I said.

And the angel gave me a catalog filled with toasters & clock radios & a basketball signed by Michael Jordan.

………… I said, “but, this is just stuff!” ……

And the angel smiled and folded me in her arms.

“I’m so glad you said that” she whispered to me. I knew you still had a chance.
For those who feel you may need a bit of a jump start in identifying a possible legacy for yourself, you need go no further than our FUS Bond of Union and Mission Statement, both of which call us to promote “charity among all” and support our “seeking to be a force for good in the world”. Thankfully, FUS offers us many service opportunities within our own faith community and, as I look around this auditorium, I see the faces of many people who are active in these programs- some whose names are even synonymous with them.

Also, please remember, our Social Justice Coordinator, Tim Cordon, continually offers numerous opportunities for service to the greater community, including (conveniently) our annual FUS Service Day, coming up on Saturday, August 25, and this afternoon’s Pride Parade.

Our 1st UU Principle, “The inherent worth and dignity of every person”, guides us toward innumerable professional, volunteer and personal responsibilities which enrich our community- and even the world.

In addition to financial contributions, like those many of you have generously given to FUS and other worthy non-profits over the years, one’s legacy may include gifts of Vocational dedication to a cause (such as teaching, fair housing or social welfare; Public service (such as serving as an elected official or community agency Board member; Volunteer work (such as in a school, senior center or other non-profit); and Caregiving for family and friends. Many people at FUS are building a legacy by lovingly caring for and supporting loved ones with debilitating disorders.

In fact, you may be building a legacy right now, without even being aware of the impact you are making in the lives of others.

The quote from Jane Goodall on the front of our Order of Service, indicates what she, and many highly admired people, have learned. Not only are their stories magnified, as in the old “telephone” game, until they are made out to be saints (or demons) but also, I believe those of us who are not publicly renowned tend to downplay our impact on others, tend not to recognize the legacies we are creating.

In “Everything Good is Simple”, Nikki Giovanni sums up the kinds of every-day things that can inspire us, when she writes:
Everything good is simple: a soft-boiled egg... toast fresh from the oven with a pat of butter swimming in the center... steam off a cup of black coffee... John Coltrane bringing me “Violets for my furs”

Most simple things are good: lines on a yellow legal pad... dimples defining a smile... a square of gray cashmere that can be a scarf... Miles Davis “Kind of Blue”

Some things clear are complicated: believing in a religion... trying to be a good person... getting rid of folks who depress you... Horace Silver “Blowing the Blues Away”

Complicated things can be clear: Dvorak’s New World Symphony... Alvin Ailey’s Revelations... Mae Jemison’s ride in space... Mingus “Live at Carnegie Hall”

All things good are good: poetry, patience, a ripe tomato on the vine... a bat in flight... the new moon... me in your arms... things like that

While we often think of those who leave legacies as famous people or people with substantial wealth, legacies are being built every day by otherwise regular people whose behaviors make them special in some way- special enough to have a profound effect on someone else.

I want to tell you about my former boss, Don Warnke. He was an excellent supervisor, so much so that he was always encouraging me to think expansively- not only to develop new ideas for his agency, but also to expand my own professional development. After we’d worked together for several years he encouraged me to attend the Franklin Covey training called “What Matters Most”. I cautioned him that it could cause me to want to leave his agency, and he said, “I know that, but you need to find out”.

So off I went to this “What Matters Most” workshop, and there I was on the morning of September 11, 2001. We were all deeply shaken that day, but as a result the confluence of that workshop, on that day, a personal paradigm shift began for me. And, Don’s legacy turned out to be my going back to grad school, becoming a therapist, and extending my (hopefully) positive influence to hundreds of clients and students since then. It also influenced me to become an FUS Lay Minister, and this service truly feeds my soul.

I see Don occasionally now, and I always try to remind him of his legacy. I think he gets it. And, I trust, we all “get” the legacies we are leaving.
Before I close, I have to say, who knew Jane Goodall wrote poetry? Yet I learned that she’d originally planned to major in literature, until she was convinced to become a scientist. And, where would we, not to mention chimpanzees and other vulnerable members of the Interdependent Web, be without her pioneering work in the forests and current international conservation and peace efforts on behalf of us all?

Prior to my retirement from Edgewood, I’d often told my students and loved ones that I looked forward to someday, more-or-less “holding court”, if you will, in a large overstuffed chair in my home where they would all visit to ask me for wise counsel and to—this part is very important—bring me bonbons.

So far, this is not happening. Perhaps I had a foreshadowing of this in becoming a therapist, so I would never actually have to fully retire. In any case, I plan to continue working on developing my legacy… as I find I’m not quite ready for those bonbons.

English writer and socialite, Elizabeth Bibesco wrote:

“Blessed are those who can give without remembering and take without forgetting.”

That sounds to me like an excellent legacy.

Let it be so… blessed be and amen.