

The Year of the Train: A Reflection on the Yard Sale
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I want to reflect today, in a somewhat nostalgic tone, about our yard sale.

The Yard Sale, held over July 4 weekend every year for many years, is our major fundraiser, and brings in a large part of our church budget every year. People come from as far away as Hazelton to buy there, and for many in our larger community this event is the major way they know us. For many, many years it was run by Marie and Ned Clark, who through their incredible skill and dedication turned it into a major annual event. In the last two years the torch has passed to the current team, led by Susanna Jackson and Cassie Stafford, but involving almost everyone at UUCSV. Many, many people chip in how they can to make the event a success.

In recent years, our yard sale regularly raises more than \$25,000 from the collective efforts of selling T-shirts and stuffed animals for a quarter. Every year, as I start to develop new muscles from moving furniture and boxes, I wonder if perhaps *this* is the year when the basements of central Pennsylvania will finally be empty. Then, as the work gets underway and I see the furniture and appliances and coats and books pile up, I wonder instead if *actually* basements are portals into an Element Plane of Stuff, where toys and video tapes and lamps and god-knows what else are disgorged out into our Valley, to be brought to UUCSV for spiritual cleansing through the ritual acts of sorting and pricing before they are re-released, reborn, into the community.

That sounds a lot better than “selling used stuff,” doesn’t it??

The financial implications for UUCSV this year, when the yard sale cannot be held due to COVID-19, are significant. We’ll talk about that in our Townhall meeting in May. But the importance of our yard sale goes far beyond money.

The yard sale is about the community that is built as we pool our efforts to move desks, collect dishes, sort and price items, and bake and cook food for the café. It may sound strange, but it’s fun to move furniture until your muscles ache with Susanna, Cassie, and Alex Chang. Or to be inspired by the amazing organization skills of Marie and Lenore Askew. Or to sample the delectable treats made by Pat Williman, Cindy Rubin, JaneEva Boone, Clayton Lightman, and so many others. We make a great team, my friends.

The yard sale also speaks to our seventh principal. We respect the interdependent web of life by working to keep things out of landfill and give them new life. I could give you statistics about how much clothing the average American throws out every year, or how much of the material in landfill could be reused, recycled, or composted. Exact numbers differ based on how things are counted, and where, and by whom. But we all know we have become a disposable society, where we buy more things than we really need, replace them more often, and throw more away. Buying used objects – and making it easier for others to do the same – means a little less going into landfill. That means a little less demanded from factories, a little less being shipped on ships, trucks, and trains, a little less packaging.

But the interdependent web of life is not just about respecting the earth and pushing back a bit against a disposable culture. It is also about the interconnections that emerge in the collecting together and the sending out of beloved objects. These objects often connect people who may never meet in person, tying them together through the love of some physical thing. And let's be honest – physical things do matter. As much as we may pretend that we humans are beings of thought and intellect alone, the truth is that human dreams and visions are realized through objects – hammers and nails, mixing bowls and spoons, books and pencils, easels and paints. Objects matter. And the objects at our yard sale matter, too.

For example, the objects at the 2014 yard sale mattered a great deal to my mom, who lives in Colorado. That year, she happened to be visiting us during the yard sale, and found that we had amazing quilting materials – an amazing array of fabrics and threads, quilting gadgets I don't know the names for. My mother, who was just beginning quilting at that point, bought a lot of those supplies and took them home to Colorado. She went on to become a fantastic quilter, making imaginative quilts for all the new babies in her life. And whenever I mention to her that our church yard sale is coming up again, she asks me to please keep an eye open for fabrics and quilting supplies!

Except we *don't* always have amazing quilting supplies. My mom just happened to visit in 2014, when the yard sale was in “The Year of the Quilt.”

Or, as many of you remember it, the year that Jean Weston passed away.

I didn't know Jean Weston very well, but of course no matter how long any of us have been at UUCSV, we all know Jean's amazing quilts. They adorn our sanctuary with colors and shapes and visual music. I can't make a quilt myself, but I can still recognize the artistry and skill in those pieces. They are simply amazing, and UUCSV is blessed to have them.

What my mom found at the 2014 yard sale was the collection of materials and tools that Jean had used over years, the objects she needed to create that art. It was a sad moment, a moment of loss for those who knew Jean and wished she might continue creating quilts for a while longer. But at the yard sale, the materials that Jean had needed for her own work were whisked away by willing and eager hands, and became inspirations and tools for others with the same passion for fabric and thread and design. I saw what my mother made of those materials, and what her skill has grown into since then. How many other quilters emerged from the spark Jean lit at the yard sale?

It seems a theme often emerges at our yard sale. Last year's yard sale (2019) was clearly “The Year of the Train.”

But for us, it was the year we lost John Williman.

It's not my place to eulogize John. I only knew him from church; he has many friends and family who could say far more about him. I know that when it is possible for us to gather again, that moment will come, and I plan to be there to listen.

I remember John from church, a quiet calm presence. He was always delighted to talk with me about Latin America, and we shared an interest in global history. He had traveled the world in the Navy, and that sparked an interest in distant places that showed in his curiosity about my work in Bolivia and in his huge collection of maps. I didn't know about his fascination with trains, however, until he and his wife Pat asked yard sale volunteers to come pick up things for

the yard sale. I lived nearest, so I dropped by – and found myself carrying boxes and boxes of books and magazines about trains.

John spoke to us as we were loading up his things, including about his upcoming surgery, and the risks he knew he was taking. He had a calmness of spirit that I admired. When I heard he had passed on, I felt a hole.

At the yard sale afterwards, I would see John's trains. I would see little children flipping through those books, looking at the bundled magazines, and wonder which of those children might take the spark of John's passion and kindle it back into flame. Pat told me, when I shared this sermon with her this week, that John's fascination with trains had developed as a boy growing up in New Jersey, watching trains carrying supplies for World War II, and that he loved to travel on passenger trains as well. Now his love was there for new children, perhaps fascinated by our occasional cargo trains, to pick up and take home.

And I felt that perhaps that hole I felt about John's loss wasn't just a hole, but also a portal. A portal that brought the love of steam and iron and gears and wheels from one generation to the next. Those books allowed children who had never met John to touch some part of him, and be connected to him.

The interdependent web of life is often invisible. We are connected to others in ways we don't realize or see. We often think of those connections in noble terms, as butterfly wings leading to hurricanes. But sometimes those connections are through the mundane, the unremarkable, the deeply physical. Even a casual purchase at a yard sale links us to someone we may never have met, but whose unseen passions can inspire us to begin a new journey.

Blessed be.