January, 2018

As ALUUC nears the anniversary of its 65th birthday, and I approach my 15th year in your service, I wanted to share an article that I contributed to FOCUS exactly ten years ago. I think that this message is still quite relevant. - Martin

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An old adage claims that “Change alone is unchanging.” These words come to mind as another year passes and, yet another commences. It is easy to say and comprehend, but difficult at times to accept. We measure the years of our lives by the time it takes the earth to circumnavigate the sun – but also in terms of key events. We are the sum of those events, whether they be tinged with sorrow or with joy. During the past twelve months, some have been blessed with new love, new children, new friends, new jobs. Others have been less fortunate. Abraham Lincoln once related the story of a monarch who challenged his advisors to find one phrase that was always true, regardless of circumstances. After much deliberation, they offered the words, “This too shall pass.” They also suggested that such words would offer a measure of consolation in times of distress and a measure of prudent pause. Whatever this New Year brings, let us embrace the changes through which we pass, and may we continue to join together in the spirit of fellowship, hope, and reverence.

February, 2018

In January, the world’s media reported that the President had made horrible comments about the nations of Africa and elsewhere, including Haiti. At the time, I happened to be in Madrid. To me, this was as much an affront spiritually as it was political. Subsequent to that report, various people confided that they no longer felt safe vacationing in the USA. Only a few years ago, these same people had been enthusiastic supporters about the nation of which I am a citizen. No more, at least for the foreseeable future. These conversations called to mind recent reports that the number of foreign exchange students enrolled in US institutions of higher learning has plummeted during the past year. (I expect that the reaction has been similar in our nation’s high schools.) Meanwhile, Spain jumped ahead of the US in 2017 in terms of tourists for the very first time. Simple cause and effect at work, it would seem.

As I absorbed all this, my thoughts turned to two 19th century Unitarians - firstly, Abraham Lincoln and then to Walt Whitman. Lincoln was a friend of the immigrants of his era – for example, he sponsored a German language newspaper in St. Louis. His enthusiasm was infectious to his generation - and perhaps no one caught the spirit as thoroughly as Walt Whitman.

Whitman was the quintessential voice of the American ideal - during a time when America was emerging as the leading Western Democracy. Many of his poems are infused with optimism as well as gratitude; his poetry incarnated equality between men
and women, between native-born and foreign born. Truly, he affirmed the “inherent sense of worth and dignity for all people,” regardless of race, religion, or ethnicity.

I vaguely recalled one such poem and quickly located it on the internet. I promptly created a simple meme and posted it on social media - it featured a photograph of Whitman and the poem "You, Whoever You Are." Almost immediately, this meme began to receive multiple likes, and assumed a virtual life of its own, well beyond the immediate circle of “my friends.” I was astonished to see it go “viral” (perhaps not of the same magnitude of a post by George Takei, but more popular than anything I had ever posted before!) as of today, this Whitman post has received 467 reactions and 452 shares – many by people whom I’ve never met, nor are likely to meet.

Here is the poem, which in my estimation which sings across the centuries and still captures the spiritual essence of America (and Unitarian Universalism):

You, whoever you are!...
All you continentals of Asia, Africa, Europe, Australia, indifferent of place!
All you on the numberless islands of the archipelagoes of the sea!
All you of centuries hence when you listen to me!
All you each and everywhere whom I specify not, but include just the same!
Health to you! good will to you all, from me and America sent!
Each of us is inevitable,
Each of us is limitless—each of us with his or her right upon the earth,
Each of us allow’d the eternal purports of the earth,
Each of us here as divinely as any is here.

March, 2018
(no article)

April, 2018

I used to call it Holy Week. I remember well some of the practices, which included walking the Stations of the Cross. To my young mind, it was natural to confuse the notions of Rebirth, Regeneration and Resurrection. But of course, while similar in certain respects, they are quite distinct from one another.

When I moved out of the mainstream of that faith, I deliberately retired certain theological rituals and constructs from my lexicon and practice. I remember how one gifted mentor wondered how much of my evolving faith was merely reactionary. It gave me pause, and eventually, I reexamined some ideas and rituals which I had left behind.

Within the liberal tradition, I have sometimes noted that it is natural to cherish Christmas, and to celebrate the promise that the spirit of hope and goodness will be infused throughout humanity. Easter, however, is something altogether different. This holy day is founded on the notion that one who was dead was resurrected. Not sleeping, not in a coma. As such, its adherents believe that Easter testifies to a unique supernatural event.
By now, many of you will have noticed that Easter falls on April Fool’s Day. No doubt, many a Christian colleague is already preparing a sermon based in part upon several lines from St. Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians:

*We have become a spectacle to the whole world, to angels as well as to men. We are fools for Christ, but you are wise in Christ.*

While I personally do not subscribe to the supernatural essence of a traditional Easter, I am mindful that small “miracles” can and do arrive unexpectedly. Some of you may recall that it was a year ago that my older brother passed away. One of his treatments involved a bone marrow transplant. I and my siblings were all tested to see who would be the best match to be a donor. Even though we understood that the procedure could be painful, none of us shirked the opportunity. The optimum choice was my younger sister Colleen or myself. In the end, Colleen was chosen to donate her bone marrow. Brian endured yet another round of radiation, killing off all the blood-producing cells in his body. And then, these new cells were introduced. We all trusted in the miracles of modern science, and I can assure you, that we all also prayed for his recovery. And he did recover - and a strange thing had happened. Originally, Brian's blood type was A+; now, he was type O - the same as Colleen. I was impressed enough to note that transformation as the seed of an Easter story about death and resurrection. Does it satisfy all the theological criteria of an Easter story? Perhaps not, But sometimes the personal stories that are woven into our own lives carry the most meaning.

And so, I commend to you this time of awakening and rebirth, in Nature writ large and in our own lives. At the least, may this season be one of spiritual blossoming and renewal for us all.

May, 2018

*Ministry by the numbers, 2017-18*

As we approach the annual meeting, I start to review the year and sift through mounds of data to account for my activities. In addition, I have been reviewing my personal timeline as part of the “Writing Your Spiritual Autobiography” RE Class. Some things I keep track of are “Life Events,” and others relate directly to ALUUC. Examples include the following:

*A few, select Life Events & data:*

57 trips around the sun: 21,078 days – and counting.
Distinctive nicknames acquired throughout life: 20
Met Angela on June 17, 1997 – approaching 21 years.
Became a father when Celeste was born on May 29, 1999 – almost 19 years.
Ordained on April 27, 2003 by UUCC – nearly 15 years ago.
ALUUC voted to call me on May 11, 2003 – almost 15 years ago.
**Snapshot of this liturgical Year:**

Preached at 24 Sunday services thus far. 6 more scheduled. Does not include Christmas Eve.

Preached at other UU Congregations: 2 (Decatur, Park Forest).

Weddings officiated: 2 + 3 additional by other Officiants

Celebrations of Life conducted: 5

Child Dedications: 2

How many Geneva robes owned: 2

How many stoles owned: 9 (3 new ones this year)

Attended regional UUMA gatherings in Bloomington: 7

Actual Labyrinth Walks conducted: 5

Pot Lucks attended: 4

Organized Holiday Open House/food drive at home: 1

Held Fantasy Auction Spanish Dinner at home: 1

Attended Committee meetings (ALUUC, FCCG, MAR-UUA, PFLAG, etc.): lots!

Number of Facebook pages I administer: 8

Attended Board meetings (including retreat): 8/10

Attended public vigils, rallies and marches: 6

Adult RE Classes: 2, UU History & Writing Your Spiritual Autobiography

ALUUC formally established: February 11, 1953: 65 years – and counting

Number of founding members in 1953: 19

Current Members of ALUUC: 258

New members welcomed into ALUUC: 22

Returning Members to ALUUC: 3

Just as one person will emphasize particular moments of their own lives, so too will we remember special moments and events around ALUUC. Did you help erect the Garage? Help create the Fantasy Auction? Win the Mexican Train Tournament? Did you meet new friends at the Weingardt Farm, or at a Circle Supper? Really, when one stops to think about it, this year has been filled with a flurry of activities, of which this list barely scratches the surface – when you reflect upon this year, I hope that your memories thus far have been rich and rewarding. At any event, we do well to remember that with respect to any person, or of any institution, the whole exceeds the sum of all parts.
June, 2018

Did you know that I can sing? You know – carry a tune in a bucket. In fact, I’ve been told several times in the past decade that I have a fine tenor voice. If so, it is an acquired trait, not a natural gift. Still, I typically don’t sing by myself in public. Rather, I find it much more comfortable singing during a service, with a hundred other voices blending together.

As a child, I enjoyed singing with my classmates but then puberty happened -- and I joined the ranks of the vocally challenged. There was a time when I shuddered at the thought of singing in front of others. I could barely bring myself to sing “Happy Birthday.” But of course, I would accompany the radio or 8-track in the car. With gusto. As long as others couldn’t listen – or judge.

Things became dire when I was a sophomore in high school. My older brother and I had auditioned for roles in a musical comedy, “The Boyfriend”, at my sisters’ high school. (Now, I should add that one younger brother and one younger sister in the family do actually sing well and had been in various musicals. But for Brian and I, this was unchartered territory.) Brian sang a unique rendition of “Octopus’s Garden” and I croaked out “With a Little Help from My Friends.” My voice was so flat and awful that I was swiftly relegated to a non-speaking/non-singing role. That experience haunted me, and I began to fall silent whenever singing was called for. Family gatherings and Christmas Carols might have been an exception.

Twice already, I have included among my Sabbatical Goals that I wanted to take voice lessons. But that hasn’t happened yet. But there have certainly been countless occasions when I could hear talented singers, whether in the congregation but also when my clergy colleagues have gathered. I think that my colleagues include some of the most talented singers I have met. Be that as it may, I have acquired 17 years of congregational singing, supplemented by extensive singing while in seminary. Somehow, unnoticed by myself, I actually began to enjoy it, no longer experiencing dread nor shame.

A few months ago, my family had gathered together and at one point we sang a familiar song. My older sister stood next to me and immediately afterwards mentioned, in amazement, “Martin, you can sing!” I muttered something about it being “an occupational hazard for ministers.”

In retrospect, I think that one’s confidence can be bolstered to do many things, when the context is within a beloved community. That, coupled with opportunity, can afford one the chance to develop aspects of their personality that may have lain dormant for a long while. I’m certain that this must apply to many aspects, not just in finding one’s voice. Perhaps it also applies to finding – or refining – one’s purpose. Perhaps these are the types of gifts that we may celebrate at the Flower Communion.

Oh, and by the way, did you know that I can dance, too?
The Art of Waiting

This morning, I sat with three siblings at the hospital while their father was having heart surgery. We passed some time reminiscing, periodically checking our phones, and responding to the updates that the nurse texted.

I reflected that a significant part of pastoral care involves waiting - with individuals or with families. I have been frequently summoned to various bedsides in ERs, ICUs, hospices and homes, etc. - and much of what I do there is to talk with the patient or perhaps their family and friends. I think that learning to wait, and to listen, are acquired skills.

I acquired some of these skills when my mom was suddenly hospitalized during the summer of 1997. My dad had taken her in for an evaluation because she was experiencing chronic headaches. After the exam, the doctor told them that surgery was immediately required – they need to bore holes into her skull to reduce the pressure on her brain. My dad asked for a second opinion, which was quickly confirmed. There was very little time to absorb what was unfolding. One or two sibs activated the phone tree, and I hurried to get there. When I arrived at the designated room, I walked inside and saw two beds but only one occupant, who was asleep. This person seemed to have a frail body, wrapped in a sheet - the head had been shaved and the face looked ashen. I studied the face and then peeked at the chart hanging by the door, looking for a name. I returned to the bedside and looked again – but did not experience even a flicker of recognition. Confused, I asked the nurse where I might find my mother. To my astonishment, I was directed back to the same patient.

In the weeks of waiting that lay ahead, my mother passed through many frightening thresholds. At one point, a priest was summoned to give her the last rites. My family gathered in the waiting room, contenting ourselves with each other’s company, playing cards or solving 1,000-piece puzzles. Those who were inclined to pray prayed. Some stepped outside and smoked. But there were also moments when one person or another gently introduced past grievances with the goal of resolving them. In the light of the circumstances, such grievances seemed petty, and moments of healing took place.

This experience served me well when I was later a hospital chaplain at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago. For three months, I met with a team of chaplains and visited floors, particularly bonding with various patients in the hospice unit. All these years later, I can distinctly remember some of those conversations as I held the hand of a patient and accompanied them on the final leg of their journey.

One tidbit of internet wisdom suggests that the problem with communication is that we do not listen to understand but only so that we can respond. This rings true to me – but most especially in the waiting room of a hospital, or by the bedside of an ill friend. Would that we could all become not just better listeners but better at waiting. There is partial truth in the words of John Milton, “they also serve who stand and wait.” I can
appreciate the reference to serving. But not all who wait experience grace and healing. I do not doubt that each of us will have future occasions to cultivate both – may we recognize the opportunities when they arrive.

August, 2018

When I am abroad, I quickly become aware of discrepancies between certain experiences there and my expectations which have been fashioned at home. These discrepancies are often subtle. For example, at any restaurant in Spain, I notice that they set out salt but never pepper. A waiter may bring water, but not ice water. That same person will act surprised if I leave a tip. And so on.

We are all of course creatures of habits, and our habits no doubt vary from one individual to another. The persons with whom we frequently associate reinforce our sense of the norm. It is when we enter a new environment that we may perceive the extent that we differ from others.

Keeping in mind that August is a month when families and individuals often look for a new faith community, imagine what it must be like for a person to join us for the first time, be it special interest function or a worship service. They may be relieved to have successfully navigated themselves to our location but they might nonetheless be a bit nervous. How will our reality mesh with their expectations? Perhaps they belonged to a different faith community years ago, or perhaps they have never been a member of one. We might wonder how such persons might differ in their expectations. Either way, they might well wonder themselves how they will be received here -- with a warm welcome, a suspicious glance, or will they be ignored?

What will be familiar and what will seem foreign to new eyes and ears? Will the invariable discrepancies be subtle, perhaps even refreshing? Will they encourage -- or discourage -- a future visit? True, we provide a "guest packet" but do we do all we can to treat them truly as our guests? What are the simple actions that we might do to transform a "stranger in a strange land" to someone who is known and appreciated? Let us be mindful of those who visit us, and ever gracious -- after all, we too were strangers once.

- Martin

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September, 2018

When I was younger, I used to enjoy reading “it pays to increase your word power” in each Reader’s Digest. In time, I invested in small desktop calendars where one could tear off a new leaf every day revealing a new word. Some years, the calendar would be in Spanish. I have to admit that I did not always keep up to date and would have to discard multiple pages, unread. Now of course, there are a plethora of memes via
social media that depict obscure words in picture as well as by definition. Much to my
delight, one is “balter” which means to dance clumsily, a descriptive verb that I could
have employed during my teen years.

Another recent newcomer is the word “coddiwomple” which is defined as “to travel
purposefully toward an as- yet-unknown destination. Apparently, this is a recent
invention masquerading as a forgotten word, deliberately slipped into the language
mainstream like “quiz” or “grotty” by some clever person. Since it does not bear an
authentic heritage, it may not take root. More’s the pity, though — it would have been
useful for many of us when we share our life journeys. There is satisfaction in thinking
that we are moving with purpose, albeit to destinations unknown.

I am fortunate to partake in so many “Pathways to Membership” sessions wherein
newcomers and some established members have an opportunity to share highlights of
their spiritual development. Such stories get to the heart of who we understand
ourselves to have been, and who we aspire yet to be. I had heard people remark after
a Celebration of Life that they had wished that they had known so much about a person
during their lifetime. Sometimes, I have felt the same way.

As the new liturgical year commences, I look forward to getting reacquainted with those
who have been active elsewhere during the summer, and with those who are just
getting involved for the first time. I trust that as we do connect our efforts and energy, it
will be with purpose — and perhaps towards a defined destination. May we hold each
other’s stories and selfhoods as the precious things they are in the coming seasons.

October, 2018

I look at the calendar and shake my head in disbelief. No, not because Christmas is a
mere twelve weeks away. Rather, I take note of the year and realize that five years ago
this very October, our town was the epicenter of the March on Springfield for Marriage
Equality.

That event was the culmination of many people, much planning, incredible energy.
Tracy Baim, the publisher of the Windy City Times, was both its brainchild and a
powerhouse. Some of the local people who helped plan the march included Buff
Carmichael, Jerry Dean Bowman, Scott Cross, Jonna Cooley, Emma Todd, and Tracy
McCaffrey, Kerry Poynter – to name but a few.

But the March in turn was itself a culmination of several years of organizing and
lobbying efforts, much of it initiated and led by the members and friends of the ALUUC
family. Looking back, it is remarkable how much was achieved – not just to promote
Marriage Equality here in Illinois, but in creating networks between so different
individuals, groups, and organizations. I recall with pride that UUANI was officially
launched at ALUUC on the day of the March and that many UUs from across the state
gathered here. I am pleased that two of our interns, Lynnda White and later Paul
Oakley, participated fully in the efforts of this congregation during their tenures and how
those experiences informed their respective ministries. We should likewise recall with
pride how we hosted Rev. Mark Kiyimba, a UU minister from Uganda, who journeyed
here to preach about the problems afflicting the LGBTQ community in Africa. His presence reminded us that our efforts were part of a global ministry.

I also recall that during the hearings, a few politicians proposed ludicrous scenarios in an effort to derail the momentum of the proceedings and how, after the legislation was passed and awaiting the Governor's signature, one prominent local faith leader spurned the LGBTQ community and conducted a public exorcism – but those memories are offset by the knowledge that we responded by hosting a festive religious celebration across town at the same hour.

How long ago it seems – and yet we recognize that the dignity accorded to same sex couples is an ongoing process, with many still seeking to turn back the tide of progress. I am grateful that one of the fruits of our actions back then was the re-establishment of a local PFLAG Chapter, hosted here, which has recently expanded its services to new individuals and families. I think that all of the above will be woven into the tapestry of our permanent legacy – something for which we should all be quite proud.

November, 2018

I probably should be dead right now, or at least terribly injured. Worse yet, others could have been severely injured. The incident took place last week – not my first brush with disaster while driving, but it left me shaking with sense of “there-but-for-the-grace-of-all-that-is-holy.”

I was on my way to church, you see. It was evening, around 5:30 and I had just turned onto Chatham Road. I’ve taken this route thousands of times. As I turned, a sign advertising firewood caught my eye. Good timing - I had been thinking about buying some firewood all week. A good thing to have around the house since the Autumn has turned so cold so quickly. My preoccupation was punctured by the sight of a solid line of cars, their brake lights clamoring for attention. I was too fast and I sensed that this would be a bad one – a sensation I had experienced decades before, immediately before a head-on collision. Spurred by a burst of instinct, perhaps adrenaline, I turned the wheel sharply and surged off the road, down the embankment. Gripping the wheeling, hitting the brakes, I expected that the car would roll over or that the axle would break. Or maybe I would hit something. Or someone. My breath caught in my throat. By some extraordinary measure of luck, the car held steady and I halted it without any apparent damage. Mortified - yet recovering my nerve - I put the car back into drive and coaxed it forward towards the line of cars. One motorist let me merge back into the flow of traffic and within two minutes, I was in ALUUC’s parking lot.

Have you ever had one of those moments, a close brush? Memories of past accidents came to mind. Of course, we have all known others who were less fortunate. It took a few minutes to process the event. and pressed home the notion that one’s life, and the lives of those connected with theirs, can turn to catastrophe in an instant. But the ramifications go much broader – in such instances, the lives of others, complete strangers, can also be wrecked.

The grooves in the grass are still present, more than a week later. Each time I pass they offer a silent admonishment and warning. Be mindful of what you’re doing, be mindful of your surroundings. And to be grateful for the chance to start again anew.
December, 2018

(This was originally published in December 2008 ... a stroll down Memory Lane)

During the past several months, Celeste has been asking probing questions about Santa Claus. Evidently, some of her peers have become “Santa apostates” while others (including Celeste) remain faithful – not to mention, grateful, to that benevolent resident of the North Pole and his cheerful company of non-union, non-human helpers.

For years now, Angela and I have encouraged her to sit on Santa’s lap and have her photo taken – she used to be somewhat frightened by the experience but no longer. Celeste is also well aware that many people wear red suits and fake beards around the holidays, ringing bells and asking for donations. Several years ago, at a Rotary function, “Santa” walked into the room and she raced forward and gave him the child’s equivalent of a bear hug. Later, though, she was positively shocked when she observed that same person changing out of (what turned out to be merely a) costume in the far corner of the room.

I have offered various explanations, relating that Santa has many helpers while he is busy at the North Pole. I suspect that she is beginning to doubt these assurances. The other week, while talking about my belated wish list for Santa, I mentioned that it would be unreasonable for Santa to give me something very expensive, e.g., like a new car. Celeste spun around and asked, somewhat incredulously, “Do you mean to say that YOU buy presents?” I realized that I may have misspoken and back-peddled as fast as the words could leave my lips. There was a small furrow on her brow for a brief moment but then it relaxed and I was off the hook. For now. Perhaps she is becoming a “Santa agnostic.”

As she continues to probe, I am reminded of the darling (and bittersweet) Christmas story by Katherine Anne Porter, in which she describes a real-life conversation with her little niece. Porter describes how the two spent an afternoon together, window shopping in December and talking about presents. At one point, the girl confides to her aunt that she no longer believes in Santa Claus – yet she also admonishes her aunt not to tell the girl’s mother “the truth” about St. Nick – because her mother “still believes.”

That little girl was wise beyond her years. When one “knows the truth” about certain topics, it is not always the kind (let alone easy) thing to redirect another’s convictions (especially when one had a hand in fashioning those convictions). One must choose one’s timing carefully, ere one receives a stocking full of coal come Christmas morning. In the meanwhile, I will read Celeste the sage response from an advice columnist, written many decades ago, to a little girl named Virginia who once entertained doubts about Santa.

Have a Merry Christmas!