

# *Newsletter Articles from the Minister*

## January 2004

As my fingers peck at various letters of the keyboard, I look out the window and see that snow has not yet fallen. I listen to a weather forecast in the background; no mention of wind chill factors. So far, so good.

I have ambiguous feelings about winter. I despise the cold. Yet, I can appreciate the inherent beauty of a landscape transformed overnight by first snow. Often, the scene evokes a sense of solitude and stillness that is absent throughout the rest of the year.

It is as though, having indulged in a nine month whirlwind of birth and bustle, Nature pauses to catch its breath. Given the flurry of activity that often marks the holiday season, perhaps the onset of winter ought to serve as a cue for us to do the same.

Things do slow down. Aside from being encumbered by layers of clothing, extra care will be required when venturing forth outside. Extra time, too, will be required – whether waiting for the car's windows to defrost or to reach our destinations.

In short, in winter we live more deliberately. And this affords an opportunity.

If we pay attention, we will appreciate some things that might have otherwise have been taken for granted. Since space here is limited, I will share but one example. I am mindful that now is the time of year when we can see our breath hanging in the air. Here is a graphic reminder that we are alive.

Such moments are so very simple, yet so very wonderful.

## February 2004

I seem to spend a lot of time on the internet. A decade or so ago, when the “information superhighway” was still a relatively novel term, I signed up with AOL, intrigued by the notion of communicating with numerous people from all over the world. I visited various chat rooms – but, just as quickly, began to lose interest. Too many conversations never progressed much beyond “small talk.” Also, new arrivals would constantly emerge on the screen and whatever conversation was in progress would stall. Ultimately, I found it frustrating and cancelled my subscription.

I still avoid chat rooms. But I do check out certain sites often, to gather news and information. Belief.net is one such favorite; there are lots of current articles on religious topics, UU forums for discussion & debate, and even several tests that will reveal one's religious orientation – and one that shows one's compatibility with about a dozen major faith traditions. According to the latter, I score a 100% compatibility with UUism – at least when I'm in a naturalistic frame of mind when I take that test.

Another site I visit regularly is Buzzflash.com – here one finds culled from various sources around the world; these articles provide a broader source of news, analysis and humor which supplements rather than usurps the local paper.

As far as political analysis, I visit the League of Women Voter's site. Also, I recently was introduced to PoliticalCompass.org, a site that like Belief.net, boasts several tests that promise to reveal one's political persuasion – and offers a comparison to where various candidates stand in relation to oneself.

I also regularly visit Iraq Coalition casualties, Cost of War, Faces of the Fallen, and Iraq Body Count (civilian casualties), to keep abreast of the War in Iraq and its hidden toll.

Then of course there are the "trade sites," a host of UU places, from Worshipweb, the UUA, the UUMA, etc. Meanwhile, I am barraged, it seems at times, by e-mails that carry message titles related to UU interims, UU humor, hUUMANISTS, etc.

One's life could easily slip into an e-existence, I think. Fortunately for me, Celeste has little appreciation for cyberspace and no patience for a "virtual father." Oh, I know that in time she too will be enthralled with the WWW – but, at least for now, she is my best reality check.

## March 2004

As an ordained member of the clergy, I am fully aware that every wedding that I conduct has both a civil and a religious dimension. The happy couple exchanges, in the name of what they hold sacred, mutual vows of love and commitment. Family, friends & I witness their pledges. Later, when I sign the license, my signature bestows legal status upon their new household.

Popular notions of marriage have evolved during the past two centuries on this continent. In a less enlightened age, when the rights of women were curtailed by law & custom, brides routinely pledged to "love, honor and obey" their husbands. Now, of course, both bride and groom are much more likely to pledge to "love, honor and cherish" one another. And let us not forget the experience of African-Americans. During the 19th century, when slavery was sanctioned by society & the Constitution, slaves were allowed to wed - however, the officiant would substitute the words, "until death or distance do you part" in lieu of the more familiar "until death do you part." This seemingly mild revision spoke volumes: to wit, the owner's property rights trumped whatever love and commitment was pledged by those men and women regarded as inferior due to the color of their skin.

In our own era, some clergy steadfastly decline to conduct weddings for interfaith couples. A few others will refuse to conduct interracial weddings. More commonly, should one (or both) of the wedding partners have been previously married and divorced without a religious annulment, many clergy will decline to officiate. I have had some such couples turn to me and I have duly pronounced them husband

and wife.

No one dictates that clergy must officiate at any wedding which his/her conscience & tradition condemns. Likewise, I would consider it dangerous - and impertinent - for anyone sect to dictate which established ceremonies I may conduct, any more than they should dictate my views of the Divine. Or vice versa.

I believe that marriage is a fine and noble institution. I believe that it is one of the important foundations of a civilized society. Consistent with my religious views, I will conduct a wedding for any two responsible and loving adults so inclined. With this said, I have conducted several "union ceremonies" for gay couples during the past decade. Some of my immediate colleagues have officiated like ceremonies for several decades. Such services do not at present confer legal status to these couples; nonetheless they do recognize that two people have found one another and are prepared to pledge love and fidelity to one another.

I do not regard myself as an activist nor as an anarchist. While I defend the right of each individual to subscribe to their own religious convictions, I hope that this debate will move into its next, logical, phase - devoid of arguments rooted in conflicting interpretations of scripture. I trust that once the debate does transcend its present charged religious rhetoric and focuses rather on the issue of equal rights for all citizens, the civil authorities will ultimately remember their charge to create a society "with liberty and justice for all" and do the proper thing. Then it will be up to each & every fellow member of the clergy to decide for him/her self whether their conscience and respective faith tradition permits one so ordained to sanction such unions. Not unlike what we already do now with respect to heterosexual unions.

## April 2004

Spring has arrived, it would seem. I saw my "first robin" this week. Daffodils are in bloom and I expect to see tulips soon.

It is only natural that one's thoughts should turn to the sun's warmth, young sprouts, robins, etc. Given the burst of new life, one can well appreciate Chaucer's long-ago declaration that "April is the sweetest month." Such a contrast to the wintry months.

Celeste had planted (with Angela's guidance) a vast number of different flower seeds during the fall and so now, every morning, she rushes about, checking on their progress. She calls them "babies." After she has completed her daily inspection, we fill up the bird feeder with various seeds.

Someone remarked to me just the other day that Celeste herself has grown some, even in the short while that we have been here. Since I am close to the source, I probably don't see it as well as others.

While I think about this, I remember the article about my installation, published the other day in the State Journal-Register. In that article, Jim Redlich is quoted as saying that he and others were pleased that I would be putting down roots in Springfield. Indeed, so I have - figuratively and literally it would seem. I have even caught myself describing me as being a "recent transplant" from Chicago.

While I, Angela & Celeste have been here for several seasons, there is much yet for us to learn about Springfield, and this community. Sometimes I will make a suggestion and be told, "Oh Martin, this isn't Chicago." Or words to that effect.

I look forward to sharing many seasons with you. I sense all the more that ours is a vibrant community, with deep roots and broad branches. I have only begun to hear some of your stories - I will seek to keep my eyes and ears open, and to seek as many opportunities for us to share. In keeping with our mutual covenant, let us walk together - enjoying one another's company - and cherishing the season of rebirth and renewal.

## May 2004

According to UU minister Roy Phillips in his book Transforming Liberal Congregations for the New Millennium (1996), congregations should examine their basic assumptions – especially those regarding membership. He quotes noted consultant Kennon Callahan, that people are "...yearning for, hoping for ... (a) sense of roots, place, belonging, sharing and caring. People come to a church in our time with a search for community not committee."

One of the central ideas advanced by Phillips is that successful 21<sup>st</sup> century congregations will be one dedicated to "abolition of the laity." By this, he suggests that *all* members should be encouraged to understand themselves as "ministers-in-training." A radical notion – but one that is consistent with the trend during these past few decades within liberal churches.

In many respects, ALUUC has been walking this path. Whether consciously aware or not, volunteers do in fact participate in ministry, be it via offering pastoral care, serving as a Director, teaching RE, leading worship, preaching, etc.

One of the exciting experiments that ALUUC has launched this year is the creation of "pastoral care associates." Members who participate in this program will be trained by me to conduct "rites of passage" such as weddings and memorial services. Already we have two members pursuing this course. In keeping with congregational polity, the Committee on Ministry and the Board will both have a role in sanctioning and supervising them. If any member would like more information, please contact me.

June 2004

In my last newsletter column, I mentioned that the ideal goal of the 21<sup>st</sup> century church is the elimination of the laity – to have all members learn that what they do here is in fact a form of ministry. We will also, I suspect begin to move towards the prophethood of all believers. Everyone here is called to serve as a priest and counselor to one another – but also to challenge things that seem wrong. Whether in the larger society, or closer to home. Again, process will be crucial.

There's an old Russian folk saying: "He who would tell the truth should have one foot in the stirrup." The assumption is that he/she is going to deliver some unpleasant news and that the audience will take out their resentment on the messenger. I have seen this happen. Perhaps you have, too.

In the coming year, we will have opportunities to be engaged more and more with the greater Springfield community. As ours is a relatively small group, it is essential that we partner with other groups. Homelessness; hunger; the war; marriage equality. I have begun to forge some contacts with various business, religious & community leaders and groups – many of you are well connected. If we pool our resources and tap into our various connections, we will undoubtedly have more of a positive impact.

There are many causes begging for attention – and money and volunteers. No one person can possibly attend to them all. Different people will be drawn to one or more causes. Some will focus more on one than another. I think that as an institution, we must be on guard against putting all of our efforts – focus – into one. There is an inherent hazard to being a single issue church. The early Universalists were very identified with a single issue – they promoted the notion that God was a loving parent & that we were all children of God – and, the argument went, there could be not eternal hell for anyone, no matter how wicked in life he/she had been. This was a powerful theology and was extremely attractive. During the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, more than 600,000 Americans were identified as Universalists. But, they were victims of their own success. Initially, mainstream churches rebuffed the notion and insisted on the Calvinist notion that God despised humanity and that eternal hell & torment was a certainty for the greater mass of humankind. Gradually, those same churches began to soften their theological stance and to admit the possibility that the chief attribute of God was love – and for them, the doctrine of hell began to recede. Within several generations, Universalists had lost their distinctiveness and people no longer flocked to their churches. Membership fell off dramatically, to the point where that movement was facing eventual extinction.

If we promote only one cause, we run the same risks as the Universalists. It is better to commit ourselves to the broad umbrella of social justice, and address specific issues as they arise. There will almost certainly be issues to be addressed.

On the other hand, it is well to remember that we are a religious institution and that when we would challenge evil in the world, we are called to offer a religious response. Humility is paramount – but also hope.

That is true insofar as the messenger delivers his/her view of the truth – too often, raw. Many of my colleagues in ministry have been taught that the goal of a minister is to “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” Too many, I fear, take too much delight in the latter – or, at any rate, have not learned how to challenge the comfortable in a tactful, gracious manner. The ends do not justify the means – how we push for change is just as important as the methods we employ.

## July 2004

Sometimes people wonder what a minister does over the summer. Many flock to Ministerial Days, a series of workshops & social gatherings that precede General Assembly & of course, GA itself. Others nestle themselves into hammocks & burrow thru periodicals and perhaps a tome or two as well.

My plans are relatively modest. I hope to finish unpacking, both here and at home. Catch up on correspondence. Daily, scour the letters to the editor and compose brilliant replies to those that I find particularly irksome – perhaps actually even submit one now and then.

I intend to finish Sandburg’s Lincoln, the Prairie Years (thank you again, Nancy!). While I generally avoid fiction, I’ll tackle The Da Vinci Code. If ambition and time permit, I’ll revisit Alex de Tocqueville’s Democracy in America. For professional reasons, I’ll study the Jewish & Christian scriptures – supplemented by selections from the Gnostic Bible.

Already, I’m looking ahead to the fall’s schedule – I’ve made a commitment to lead not only *A New to UU Class* each quarter, but to lead several extended classes. I’m inclined to do a Bible Study series and a “Building Your Own Theology” class. Naturally, I’d prefer to lead classes that others would find interesting ... so, if you have a preference for one of these, or for something quite different, please let me know.

## August 2004

*No article*

## September 2004

### **Ground Zero, Three Years After**

Certain images, now three years removed, remain haunting: office workers leaping to their death, some holding hands; a maelstrom of debris and dust spewing into the streets. Suddenly, it seemed, we were a nation at war. But against whom? In rapid succession, we struck out against the terrorists, the Taliban, and then Iraq.

Three years have now passed. We are still very much at war.

From time to time, when a media-manipulated milestone is reached, in terms of our war dead – say 250, 500, 750 – those numbers penetrate the popular stupor. As I write, our Iraqi War dead numbers 970. Some would say, that’s a low tab to pay for an operation of this scale. But let us also factor in those US soldiers slain in Afghanistan, 133. Next, the 131 UK and allied dead. Include the 129 slain “contractors.” Last and apparently least, let us include the estimated 11,000+ Iraqi slain civilians. And what of the estimated 80,000+ total wounded – again, mainly civilians? Is the tab still low?

We can focus on numbers. But what of their names, and faces? What were their stories, struggles, dreams? All shattered. Left behind are grieving survivors, and a growing bitterness.

In Sandburg’s The Prairie Years, Lincoln tells of his encounter with a seasoned congressman during the debate over war with Mexico. Lincoln, then a freshly minted representative from Illinois, was aware that the other man had, decades earlier, opposed the War of 1812. Opposed to the Mexican War then brewing, Lincoln had hoped to enlist the older man’s support. That congressman declined, remarking that he had “opposed one war; that was enough for me. I am now perpetually in favor of war, pestilence, and famine.”

No doubt he had paid dearly for his convictions; one can imagine his voice tinged with rue.

Nonetheless, that unnamed congressman’s remark does put war in its proper context. Let us not forget that.

October 2004

### **A Few Thoughts on Elections**

A long, long time ago, when the word “election” was mentioned in church, it was in reference to whether the faithful had been chosen by God to enjoy eternal Paradise. That concept has fallen into disrepute these days, at least among the liberal churches. Yet still the word is often on the tips of one’s tongue, albeit in a different, secular context.

I remember visiting a prominent church in St. Louis, years ago, during the midst of an election campaign. The speaker that day delivered a strident call to the members to vote for one particular candidate. One of my companions, a Jesuit priest, was mortified. As was I. Perhaps “furious” better describes our mood that day. We had no doubt that the speaker’s remarks had gone terribly “beyond the pale.”

The line between religion and politics has been a source of vast contention for centuries. Some have argued that there should be a firm wall that separates the two. Others have suggested that the two are separated by but a shifting line. I tend to agree with the latter view.

When does a topic become overtly political? It's a proverb among preachers that when one discusses contemporary issues from the pulpit, two reactions are typical. If a member agrees with the views expressed, he/she will describe the talk as "spiritual." If, on the other hand, a member disagrees with those same views, he/she is apt to respond that the preacher has crossed the line into politics. The ear of the listener is the arbitrator it would seem. There are extraordinary occasions, such as the one I mentioned above, where there was a clear sense of violation.

From time to time I will likely raise a contemporary issue that may seem to stir politics and religion. To avoid such issues runs the risk of becoming irrelevant. On the other hand, if ever I do assert things that stir one's ire, I hope that you will let me know. In a congregation as diverse as ours, and given our tradition of the free pew, one should never assume that the final word resides in the pulpit.

November 2004 \* (*see December 1997/January 1998*)

As the Autumn deepens, there are several major holidays that come to the fore. Thanksgiving is among these, and it happens to be among my favorites.

Thanksgivings is a time to reconnect with family members – and family rituals. There are new stories to share, family lists to distribute, photographs to take. The seating of adults at one table, children at the other. The meal itself. After dessert, coffee, cards and banter about days long gone fill the dining room.

One of the rituals I associate most with Thanksgiving is the offering of grace before the meal. To put things in perspective, you should know that as I grew up, every supper at home was preceded by these words: "Bless us, O Lord, and these Thy gifts, which we are about to receive, from Thy bounty through Christ. Amen." Usually either my dad or mom would start this grace. Occasionally, I or one of my siblings would be allowed to do the honors. But come Thanksgiving, my dad typically led a distinctive, original grace, in which he would express thankfulness while recounting various key events that had passed since our last Thanksgiving gathering. These prayers were always heartfelt, always appreciated.

Several months after I first enrolled in seminary, my dad asked me to lead the grace before the Thanksgiving meal. I had suspected, intuitively, that he was going to ask that of me. When the invitation was extended, I knew that this was no small "rite of passage." On one level, a patriarch was entrusting a son with a unique role at a cherished family occasion. I had finally graduated to the adult table. But this was also a religious role – and whereas my family's religion remained Roman Catholic, I was now a Unitarian Universalist. Years before, my parents and I had had many mutually distressing exchanges on religion. As we aged, we seem to have mutually decided that certain needs, like family, superseded the perceived need to quarrel over theological differences. So there was also a sense of further reconciliation at hand.

Although I had anticipated his request, it was still an electric moment. What words might I offer, among family who had only just begun to get comfortable with the notion that I was studying to be a minister within a different faith tradition? Whatever words I did choose needed to be generous and interfaith – best, I thought to myself, not to instigate a theological brew-ha-ha when so many knives and forks are at hand.

I was invited to begin. I stood up and said, “Let us pause and let us pray.” Parents, brothers, sisters, & nephews then blessed themselves with the sign of the cross. With folded hands, I said something very much like this: “God, you are the source of life and of love. For this, we are twice blessed and doubly thankful. Today we are also thankful for the blessings shared by this family, which has known many joys and endured its share of trials over the past forty years, but is still intact. Amen.” They then repeated the sign of the cross, and I began to sit back down.

As I was picking up my napkin, my dad growled, “What about giving thanks for the food?”

My mother rallied to my defense, “That was just fine.”

Theological lesson: thank heavens for moms.

## December 2004

Here are some of the projects that were on my wish list for ALUUC that are coming to fruition.

### **Sacred Art**

Art is one of my passions (how many of you were aware that I was originally an art major in college?). We have, at present, three prints on display in the lobby, representing three different traditions – Christian, Earth-centered and Tibetan Buddhist. Specifically, the three are:

*The Last Supper*, painted by Polish artist Bhodan Piasecki in 1998, seeks to correct some notable errors and glaring omissions in Da Vinci’s famous version of that same title.

*Sadv, the Deer Goddess* was created by Irish artist Jim FitzPatrick. His colorful artwork typically combines characters from ancient mythology with Irish calligraphy, reminiscent of Celtic illuminated manuscripts. Sadv comes from a series that the artist produced in the late 1970’s.

The original *Mandala of Padmapani* was created sometime during the 11th or 12th centuries by Tibetan Buddhist Monks. Mandalas were, and remain, a form of devotional art that explores the relationship between the self and enlightenment.

My intention is that we will periodically change the prints on display, that we may all have the opportunity to appreciate art drawn from many more of the world's religious traditions.

### ***Labyrinth Walks***

Labyrinths provide a unique walking meditation experience. Having gained an appreciation for this form of meditation, I have negotiated to privately purchase a portable canvas labyrinth that was formerly known as the Pneuma Labyrinth, a ministry conducted by Rev. Max & Kay Klinkenborg. Max and Kay provided area residents with this opportunity for several years, but have been unable to continue. It should be noted that several members of ALUUC were very involved with this project. We expect to offer this experience both to members of ALUUC & the larger community on a regular, monthly basis. To promote the use of labyrinths within the district, and to help pay for this, I intend to rent the labyrinth out to other UU congregations and kindred groups when we are not scheduled to use it here

### ***Coming of Age Program***

This is a relatively new UU initiative, intended to foster stronger ties between our youth and more seasoned members of the congregation. Youth and mentors are paired up at the beginning of the program. Once a month, beginning in January, we will all meet together to discuss contemporary issues, UU identity, hobbies, etc. Participants are encouraged to cultivate their relationship outside the setting of the congregation.

Near the end of the current church year, youth participants will be invited to share their credo (belief) statements with the congregation during a special service. If you would be interested in participating, please contact me as soon as possible.

It is my hope that all three of these projects will provide new opportunities for spiritual growth and will foster deeper connections -- with one another, with the institution, and the larger religious liberal movement.