

# *Newsletter Articles from the Minister*

## January 2007

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 2007

Four years ago this very month, I first set my eyes on ALUUC. The day as I recall was fairly overcast and the church building stood surrounded by fallow fields.

Previously, I had made contact with the members of the search committee, exchanging packets and conversing with them during a conference call. But in February 2003, I met Rachell Anderson, Beverly Charles, Wes Duiker, Debbie Hagan, Brian Otwell, Jim Redlich and Victoria Vincent in person. During our one weekend together, we endeavored to determine whether I would be a good match here.

How long ago that sometimes seems.

Much has changed during these past four years. Some of it has been uplifting: examples include: the surge in new members; the paving of the parking lot; the long range planning; the bylaw revisions; our growing presence within the Springfield community and also the denomination. To name but a few changes.

Not every congregation is open to change. In some congregations, I am told, change is met with stiff resistance. Elsewhere, one hears the mantra that “we’ve never done it that way before” or “we tried that here once but it didn’t work.” That attitude, I am happy to report, is absent here.

I am mindful that some of the people who made it possible for ALUUC to call its first full time minister are no longer with us. I think about them from time to time, and I do miss

them. Those who knew them no doubt share my feelings. I am equally mindful that serving as a minister is always a privilege. The people of this congregation have also made it a pleasure. Here, like many of you, I have found a spiritual home. For that, I remain ever grateful.

### March 2007

I enjoy taking Celeste to the cinema. Based on a dozen or so visits during the past three years, I have determined that the overwhelming majority of contemporary films for children rely on a generous dose of humor (much of which is deliberately above the heads of children – adults wrote these scripts after all) as well as fantasy and sentimentality.

Whether featuring penguins, elves, fish, mice, mermaids, cars or barnyard animals, the story line has -- more often than not -- struck me as but a variation of a theme. I am tempted to begin compiling a checklist of each protagonist's attributes and perils -- and then compare those with Joseph Campbell's brilliant study, "The Hero with a Thousand Faces." Were I to do that, I suspect that I would find that today's film writers dare not deviate from Campbell's archetype.

One notable exception would be the film we most recently saw together, "The Bridge to Terabithia." I had not read Katherine Paterson's book and knew nothing of its characters or plot. I noted in passing that the story conformed in many respects to Joseph Campbell's thesis, and then was astounded by the turn of events in the film's second half. One of the two main characters, Leslie, died. This was not a typical children's film anymore. Part of me was irritated with the author for that death -- was this necessary for the plot, I asked myself -- but also, I wondered, was it necessary for young children to be exposed to such tragedy? While quizzing Celeste after the show, it became clear that while she was saddened by that loss, she was not nearly as agitated as her father.

I have had much to muse over, more than this space allows me to relate. Let it suffice for now that "The Bridge to Terabithia" was a powerful reminder of how unpredictable life can be. In this case, it was an example of art imitating life, not archetypes.

### April 2007

Earlier this week, I checked my e-mail account only to discover that all my correspondence -- four years worth -- had evaporated into cyberspace. "Cache deleted," the monitor cheerlessly informed me. I was flabbergasted, to say the least.

After my temper subsided, I was left to ponder the significance of loss in one's life. This example was meager, say, relative to the destruction of the library at Alexandria. I was likewise reminded of the example of Mircea Eliade, who kept an office at Meadville/ Lombard (Eliade authored several classics, including *The Myth of the Eternal Return* and *The Sacred & the Profane*.) Eliade died not long after a fire gutted his office, incinerating various unpublished manuscripts which he had been laboring on. School

folklore posits that he simply lost the will to live. On a brighter note, I also recalled the story I read of an English parson whose house and library were destroyed by the Luftwaffe during WWII; as he surveyed the total material ruin, he allegedly exclaimed: "Free at last!"

These helped me place my own loss in perspective. I suppose it helps that I have experienced computers crash before; the most memorable occurred while I was in seminary and effaced years of work, on the eve of turning in a major assignment.

Change, they say, is a constant in life. How we cope with those changes (losses) are a consequence of our past and a compass for the future.

Outside, spring is in the air. Nature and religion, of course, define this season as one of loss *and* renewal/resurrection. Passover, Easter and Ostara are three expressions of these themes. Each offers its own wisdom concerning the transitions of life as well as offering hope for the day to come. Much wisdom is there.

I do not know if the computer gods will smile & permit me to retrieve that which was lost. Time will tell. In the meanwhile, I think it's time to make another backup.

May 2007

### ***On Stewardship***

Does anyone remember the time when the parking lot consisted of tons of gravel? How about a time when volunteers signed up to clean the church on Saturdays? Or when adults needed to commit to watch the young children on Sundays? Perhaps you remember when, had you missed a sermon, you had to rely on verbal reports instead of a CD recording?

Tally these changes, and dozens more that I could name, and you will know the meaning of the word transformation. Next, consider the pace of this transformation – it seems astonishing. This is all the more true because these changes were not directed by a *deus e machina*, nor by Boston. Rather, this transformation has come to pass because you have taken matters into your own hands. You have been dedicated leaders and powerful stewards.

What does powerful stewardship look like? Here's one example, reported to me this very evening. I'm told that one of our new members was excited to fill out her first pledge card, declaring "Now I feel like an official member!" Would that we all felt such enthusiasm for pledging!

How might we all feel like "official members"? Recognize that this is a purely voluntary association. Come as often as you can. Join a group. Pledge. Invite a friend. Have fun. Enjoy Bonnie's music; sing. Cultivate your spirituality, intellect and ethics. In short, to paraphrase Emerson, grow your soul.

Where will this all end? It depends, I suppose, on where we choose to stop. Stewardship offers so many opportunities for growth and transformation. As it is with individuals, so too is it with institutions – for is not the latter the sum of the former? May we be reminded of the minister, who, when asked where Universalists stood, jubilantly declared that “Universalists don't stand, they move.”

And movement, after all, is a sign of life.

## June/July 2007

As the “regular” liturgical year winds to its close, I am particularly impressed by the relationship of our youth within the larger context of the congregation.

In seminary, I was taught that one of the most important foundations of any successful congregation is its religious education program. Over the years, I have learned valuable lessons about how one might nurture a sense of “beloved community” and become a “welcoming community.” Too often, though, it seems that many churches embrace a constricted ideal of beloved community -- wherein they welcome only a particular type of person – in terms of theology, race, class – and age.

One of the things that has been brought home to me, again and again, is that children and young adults positively ache to be taken seriously by adults. Or, at the very least, to be noticed. Here, at ALUUC, we do notice them – and then some. I have seen adults take the time to listen, to encourage, to share.

A significant portion of this takes place in RE classes. Indeed, we are fortunate to have many wonderful volunteers who have taught classes, served on the RE Committee, and provided childcare in the nursery on Sundays.

Let us be mindful that Religious Education is more than the sum of what is formally presented in the classroom. There have been overnights and District CONS. Those involved with OWL have given an amazing gift. So too have those who have hosted the First Friday Kids Club and intergenerational fellowship events (e.g., kite flying, Game Night and the Open Mikes).

It is also a congregational strength that we welcome our youth in the first half of each worship service. When we greet them alongside their parents, when they collect “Change for Change” or coins for Guest at Your Table, light a chalice, distribute candles & flowers, and share their joys/concerns – our experience as a whole is enriched.

Truly, when we provide a safe, fun and above all nurturing haven for our youths to come and mature as spiritual beings, we fulfill one of the central tasks of a relevant religious community.

## August 2007

Not so long ago, many (perhaps most) UU churches were literally closed for the summer. The liturgical year effectively began after Labor Day and was complete by Father's Day. I've heard it suggested that this tradition stemmed from the close relationship enjoyed by many a liberal congregation and the major university invariably situated close by. Thus, when the academic year ended, faculty and students – these comprised the majority of parishioners and volunteers -- would disperse; few persons remained to attend or keep the organization running. Also, it is worth remembering that in the days before air conditioning, the reality of spending several hours sequestered inside a sweltering church building could dampen the ardor (not to mention clothes) of even the most devout soul. At some point during the latter half of the twentieth century, UU's experienced the equivalent of a paradigm shift with respect to summer services. Was it the proliferation of air conditioning? Did we discover that spirituality required more than the warmth of the sun and the spray of the sea? Or was it the realization that our religious neighbors somehow kept their houses of worship open throughout the year?

Regardless of the reason(s), it seems that most UU congregations made the decision to go to year round services in a relatively short span. This shift represented a substantial break with tradition and created quite a few logistical headaches, such as scheduling speakers and ushers and child care attendants and hospitality and greeters, etc. What was soon evident is that something more than a mere logistical change had occurred – in fact, congregations were envisioning a new and expanded sense of their mission.

In retrospect, the one may seem to have been a natural even inevitable progression of the other. But of course, such paradigm shifts are never truly are predetermined. It speaks volumes about the commitment of the members and their capacity that these changes were made.

What is next on our horizon? We have evolved into a fairly complex institution. Two hundred members is a significant milestone. But there are deeper changes than the mere addition of numbers. As more people have associated themselves with us, the number of tasks has multiplied, as have the number of groups. Space usage is likely to become an important topic for consideration. So too is the question of whether we should consider adding on to the present structure, or to move to two services. I anticipate that we will begin having those conversations in earnest in two years; it is not too early, therefore, to mention this.

During times of change, we do well to reflect upon our sense of mission and our vision. In recent years, members and friends of ALUUC have embraced a stronger and deeper commitment to one another and to the larger community. This is reassuring. I am impressed that during the past year, several motivated members have pressed our congregation to explore the issue of racism. This is especially relevant as we are but one year away from the centennial observance of the 1908 Springfield race riots. I believe that the next twelve months will be a significant opportunity for all citizens of Springfield to cultivate and perhaps even to model better relations with our neighbors. I hope that we all avail ourselves of this opportunity, as individuals and as a religious

institution. And who knows? Perhaps there are even more paradigm shifts to be experienced.

## September 2007

One of the things that I cherish most about living in Illinois is the cycle of distinct seasons.

Currently, summer is already visibly passing. As I skim ahead through my calendar book, I know full well that the coming autumn is more than a mere time of transition. It is truly a time to savor each day which in succession will herald cooler temperatures, fewer insects, and the first traces of red, gold and yellow upon tree branches.

I have always felt most alive during this time of year. Perhaps my seasonal enthusiasm is conditioned by the fact that for much of my lifetime, here was the signal to return to school. I welcomed each new academic year, looking forward to new teachers, new lessons, new friends, and new activities.

Perhaps too the awareness that the seasons of fertility and growth are passing, to be followed by the seasons of harvest and stillness – stirs in me the desire to make the most of the present. As a minister, I also cherish the way that we will re-gather as a community. True, many people have been present and active throughout the summer; still, it generally seems that with the stone and water communion, we gather anew with new energy, greater focus and a whole host of different activities.

It is good to be alive now; it is good to be with one another. I'll see you soon.

## October 2007

Come the afternoon of September 30<sup>th</sup>, the congregational building will witness the first stages of an amazing transformation as we begin setting up for the upcoming "Trash & Treasure" sale. The process begins shortly after the service as people begin stacking chairs and moving them to one corner, along with the piano, pulpit, etc. Within half an hour, the sanctuary will look stark and empty. But not for long – almost immediately, tables will be set up and people will begin hauling in bag after bag from their cars. The great influx will have begun.

At home, we will rummage through out respective closets, basements, and garages. Each of us will ask questions like: "Does this still fit?" or "Do I really need that anymore?" and "I wonder how much money this might bring in?"

Back at ALUUC, a steady flow of vehicles will enter the parking lot and park close to the doors; volunteers will unload countless bags, boxes and that which couldn't fit in either form of container. Drivers will then leave to collect the next load.

An unimaginable array of building materials, electronic equipment, books, toys, clothes, sporting goods, etc, will pass through the doors. Our building, which is normally quiet during the week, will be anything but, from early morning to well past sunset.

Volunteers will pick up additional tables and shelves and clothes racks from neighboring churches and synagogues. Other volunteers will sort through growing mounds of odds and ends. Still others will tackle the sorting and the pricing. As the week progresses, the list of tasks will multiply, and the need for more hands will climb proportionately.

Having had a modest hand in the past four "Trash & Treasure" events, I can appreciate the high degree of commitment involved. It is a lot of work. Yet somehow, there is a sense of direction and purpose and even fun amidst the flurry of activity. On such an occasion, we should remind ourselves that many hands do make the load lighter. Please do join in. This really is a community-building exercise at its best.

## November 2007

Much of what passes for pastoral care by a minister is listening and then naming the stress experienced by the person seeking counsel. My experience, both in my own life and gleaned from others, is that stress tends to breed anxiety and is a more tenacious hobgoblin than even foolish consistencies. Anxious thoughts have a way of haunting the imagination and thereby affecting one's mindset and actions. Which leads, of course, to more stress.

I have noticed that people who suffer from stress generally do not hear the counsel offered by the "better angels of their nature." Instead, an oversight can become a slight; an unexplained action becomes an affront.

Once a person can perceive their stress in its proper context, both in terms of oneself and others, most people may then wrestle with it, not unlike Jacob wrestling with his angel. If one is victorious in this match, one may even perceive that he/she has been blessed by the encounter. And, like Jacob, there may be a wound. But I think that the blessing outweighs any injury.

In this season, as the shadows of autumn extend more and more, it is well to become aware of the sources of stress in one's own life. Some are self-evident; others may be quite subtle. Such factors are all the more important to consider as the major religious & cultural holidays approach; stress factors tend to multiply. Let us confront and dispel them, either individually or with people we love and trust. The blessing that will surely follow will benefit oneself, one's household, and one's religious community.

## December 2007

In early November, I was asked by a UUA officer to attend the annual shareholders' meeting of the Archer Daniels Midland Corporation as a proxy representative for the State of Connecticut and for the City of New York. In the days leading up to that scheduled meeting, I received materials from both parties, detailing the issues involved. My role was simply to read several statements in support of proposals submitted to ADM; one proposal concerned "Say on Pay" whereas the other involved the implementation of fair labor standards.

On November 8, I arrived early at ADM in Decatur, aware that there would be activists on hand who were protesting the destruction of the rain forests. Even so, I was taken aback by the large number of police and security personnel present, both on the grounds and within the building itself. After my credentials were inspected, I was escorted inside and seated next to two Dominican nuns who were present to address another social justice concern. Several protestors were allowed entrance to the main room while others were ushered into an “overflow room.”

When I delivered my prepared remarks, a member of the security team stood by my side. I will admit that I was a bit nervous. Afterwards, the votes were tallied for both proposals and both were soundly defeated.

The agenda then allowed individual speakers to address the shareholders for two minutes. Three activists walked to the microphone with their ADM escort.

One of these speakers was especially memorable. He presented himself as a Xavante warrior with face painted in red and black. I learned that his name is Hiparidi. He addressed the shareholders in Spanish; his remarks were translated by the next speaker.

This man lamented that with the destruction of the rainforests, his people’s traditional way of life was being destroyed. Worse, children were being born with birth defects and others were developing cancer. He blamed the company for these curses. He concluded by issuing a threat to the company to stop their activities or face attack from his people.

It was a powerful moment.

I wish that I could say that the officials and shareholders there present took him seriously and voted to consider how the corporation might accommodate his people. But that did not happen. Rather, the meeting was drawn to a speedy conclusion. Afterwards, a company official cheerfully invited Hiparidi to try some of their soy products. He reacted with a look of disgust.

Not long after, company people were inside a large tent eating their lunches while the activists resumed their protest, out of sight and earshot.

I learned a few lessons about power that morning. In particular, it was impressed upon me that when one side is well organized and assured of its own power, it can act very civil – while at the same time, either intimidating or ignoring “the other” as it sees fit.

I have to wonder what the eventual consequences will be, for all involved.