

ALUUC Newsletter Articles from the Minister

January 2009

I often feel that after the candles of December have been extinguished, the weeks that immediately follow are the bleakest. Those weeks are often marked by a bitter cold and a relative silence in nature -- a sharp contrast to the bustle that filled the final weeks of the preceding year. Those weeks invariably arrive and keep pace, according to their own terms, almost insisting that our actions slow down as well. One's outlook -- and use -- of that time varies according to one's temperament, I suppose.

How quickly has our time together flown? Is it possible that we have already shared five and a half years together? I page through my appointment books for the years 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008 and see that it has been so. Is it possible too that with the arrival of February, I begin a four month sabbatical? Part of me whispers that I had best make the most of this month, to ensure that everything is in order before I officially step away from most of my ministerial duties. Common sense, I suppose. So, there is still work to be done.

I have shared what plans I have envisioned for myself during this coming sabbatical period - take a class in Spanish and another in art; visit UU churches in other cities on various weekends, and read, read, read. On the one hand, I will not be in the office every day and will seldom be seen at meetings -- on the other hand, I will be "on call" for major pastoral care issues and am in fact scheduled to preach twice here. I expect that I will still be involved with the labyrinth walk, once a month and will submit a column to the newsletter. Will my sabbatical have an impact on ALUUC? No doubt, there will be some adjustments as other people step up to fill some of the roles which I have been accustomed to fill. Naturally, different people have differing styles of listening and acting -- I trust that you will be as patient with them as you have been with me, and I trust equally that they care about you and this institution as much as you -- and I -- do.

In short, a sabbatical is a time of growth -- both for the minister and for the congregation. When this sabbatical concludes, at the end of May, I suspect that we all shall marvel at how much we have grown.

February 2009

Yesterday, I picked up Celeste from school and drove to a local car dealership. Although I had taken the precaution of explaining this trip to her earlier, she rode in silence and her eyes teared up a little. She had acted much the same when we traded in our previous car, five years ago. I was further reminded how she had also shed tears at the tender age of four when we said goodbye to our former residence in Park Forest, which she still refers to as the "green and white house."

Even after being coaxed to sit in the prospective new vehicle, Celeste was still visibly upset. Wise enough not to try to supplant Celeste's notion of "OUR car" with my notion of "THE trade-in," I prompted the salesman, and he in turn assured her that "our" car would go to a good family and be loved by other children. (I had told her the same, but such assurances generally seem to be more convincing when the source is a stranger.) He let her keep one of the spare keys and also suggested that she give the new car a name. These steps cheered her up somewhat, and thus began the transfer of her attachment to our "new" car.

I mention this episode because I have noticed of late how emotions run strong in people, regardless of age. People tend to become readily attached to “facts,” people and things. At times, there are serious repercussions when those facts, people and things change or fail to meet expectations. Yes, of course, we all know that in time, all must change. Likewise, we know that change may offer either relief or pause.

But how do we feel about change? Do we not often resist the inevitable changes in our lives? At such moments, our emotions may well run strong. This is true regardless of one’s age. Over the years, I have known more than a few adults and even children whose emotions weighed so heavily on them stemming from a disappointment in a given fact, person or thing that they have contemplated suicide. Mercifully, most chose not to act.

Regardless of the depth of emotions involved, others are in effect outsiders. Those who possess the gifts of objectivity and reason will discover that those qualities are not readily transferable. In fact, objective assurances may not be welcome. I do not believe that there are “right” or “wrong” emotions per se. Granted, religious liberals sometimes talk as though we were entirely rational beings, but a study of our actions reveals a deeper truth – namely, that each and every one of us, myself included, is a mixture of both the rational and the irrational -- those who scoff at the notion do so at their own peril. One former congregant had a favorite saying, “The heart has reasons which reason does not understand.” Those are wise words. Such words remind us to practice patience and loving kindness. Sometimes time, coupled with the knowledge that we genuinely care about one another, will prove the healthiest balm for those in pain. I think you will find this in the teachings of Jesus, Buddha, Confucius, and the Dali Lama – to name but a few. Even Plato, nearly two and a half millennia ago is reported to have urged, “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.” Everything else in religion, I strongly believe, is commentary.

March, April, May, June, July 2009

Rev. Martin Woulfe was on sabbatical during the spring of 2009.

August 2009

I recently had the opportunity to attend “Ministry Days” and “General Assembly,” both of which were held in Salt Lake City this past June. Both events afford myriad opportunities to see old friends and classmates, congregants, and even former mentors. And more: one may attend workshops, plenaries, meals and meetings. In fact, one of the joys of attending GA is just to be part of the “larger UU experience,” i.e., sharing the better part of one week with thousands of fellow UUs. Often, many UUs lose sight of the larger picture, that we are members of a religious movement, and not merely of one congregation. General Assembly reminds us that UUism contains a rich diversity and a tremendous energy. The experience spawns a deep appreciation for all the individuals and institutions that stay committed to our ideals. It is also an opportunity to observe important milestones, such as the welcoming, or loss, of colleagues.

Several years ago, when GA was held in St. Louis, nearly ten percent of our congregation was able to attend. Those who did, came back energized, and several important changes were implemented, such as the pre-service singing on Sundays. Next year, the annual convention will be held in Minneapolis; I hope that others from here will be able to go.

One of the notable things announced during this GA is a new national campaign entitled “Standing on the Side of Love.” In brief, this campaign is a response to the murders that occurred one year ago at the Tennessee Valley UU congregation. In the year since that attack, that congregation and the denomination as a whole have lifted up our message of prophetic love and justice on behalf of those who are marginalized in today’s society. One way that we can participate in this campaign locally is to march under that banner during the State Fair parade. Given that the theme of this year’s parade is “An All American Fair,” we hope to publicly affirm “Fairness for All Americans.” For more details, please visit the UUA’s website, www.uua.org and check out the information on “Standing on the Side of Love.”

In the meanwhile, it is important to remember that there are other UU congregations planted in central Illinois - it would mutually benefit us all to communicate and even collaborate with these fellow UUs. Our mission in life is to transform ourselves, our communities and by extension, the world - we need not strive to carry the burden ourselves, nor should we. There is strength as well as wisdom in numbers. My hope for this coming liturgical year is that we will participate fully with one another, both here and in the larger community, to further the blessings of creation.

September 2009

Ministry is a somewhat vague term, one that might encompass many actions in the world. Note that I use the word “actions” rather than, say, “thoughts” or “intentions.” Ministry is necessarily a public phenomenon, rooted in real time, focused on touching the lives of others (which incidentally cannot but affect one’s own life as well).

In practice, there are many ministries. Some people minister to the homeless, those in hospice, those who are poor, those who have addictions, those who are lonely or lost, etc. In truth, most people could benefit from several ministries. Equally true, most people are more than capable of offering several ministries to others. One sees a need and responds, according to one’s own gifts. One most certainly does not need a professional degree to get started.

Members of ALUUC have contributed to several notable ministries during the years, such as Peace Camp and the Springfield Overflow Shelter. The Small Group Ministries is another example of a relatively new yet powerful ministry, one that offers support and inspiration to those involved. I have had a hand in a few ministries myself, as one might expect, such as the monthly labyrinth walk.

One of my lesser known endeavors is what I call my “umbrella ministry.” I regularly purchase umbrellas at thrift stores & stow them in my car. Eventually, a rainy day will arrive and I will spy hapless individuals, most often students, trudging along, getting soaked. In a different era, one might have offered a lift in one’s car, but those days are long past. Still, I do what I can. When I have stopped and offered them an umbrella, it cheers them up considerably. It’s a small act, consistent with the notion that we should “practice random acts of kindness.” Well, one might argue that my actions have been conceived well in advance of the actual event, but the occasions and persons affected are random enough. In any event, it is a small ministry, the type that any one might do, yet which promises to make a difference to the persons encountered.

October 2009

At the present moment, my fingers peck at the keyboard. A deadline approaches, relentless. This is a precise moment in time, one that I can either savor or curse; undoubtedly, in some distant future, this will be a moment to cherish. We are always on the threshold of the next incessant & insistent moment, leading ever forward – leading to an indeterminate future. Until, of course, we run out of time.

Often I fret about writing a column for the newsletter and so I typically set it aside as the final task. There are many things that might be addressed – what is actually relevant? I have discovered that looming deadlines help me sort out the pressing issues from the trivial.

People who know that I was a creative writing major often assume that writing comes easily for me. True, there are moments when the words flow freely, but usually I am beset by the desire to craft the right words in a sublime sequence. Perfectionism strangles the flow.

I know that in seasons past, I have written about the advent of the Autumn. In brief, this is the time of year I love most, when I feel most alive. The transition of yet another season is vividly evident and this realization spurs me to try to be more productive – not to mention, grateful .

Naturally, I have also written about imminent church events, notably the Trash & Treasure sale. This is important this year, not unlike years past, and I hope that we all will strive mightily to support this particular event, not only for obvious budgetary reasons, but because the T&T is also a crucial exercise in creating community amongst ourselves.

As I try to sift through what is most on my mind at this particular moment, though, my thoughts turn to two people who passed away, suddenly and tragically, during the past month. Andy was an older friend who had moved to the Florida Keys about seven years ago; he was a successful businessman, married, a father and a skirmishing buddy. Alex was a youth whom Angela & I had looked after in the group home we used to supervise; he could be amusing and annoying in rapid succession. Both relished life and struggled to seize as much happiness and success as their individual talents and opportunities allowed. They ran out of time. Both are mourned by their respective cluster of friends and family; Angela & I are probably the only people in common between them. Keeping both Andy & Alex in mind, I will try to cherish this moment as it is, right now, rather than delaying that appreciation for another distant hour, which may or may not come.

November 2009

As some of you may have heard, our family has been casually house-hunting. In fact, this has been true for several years now. Of late, though, we have been looking in earnest at one possibility, located not far from our present home. It's too early to say that we will reach a satisfactory settlement with the owner, but this experience brings several thoughts into focus.

Roots are an offshoot of relationships, and the latter are the heart and soul of ministry. Ministry, like any other enterprise is particular, in this instance inherently connected to specific people within this definite community. With every passing day, the “this” in the preceding sentence becomes more an “our.” We have no desire to move away from this community.

The other thing that I wanted to address – no pun intended – is how we (I) make our homes. Some people have shared that although they moved into Springfield many years ago, they never quite got around to unpacking. I certainly have things stored in boxes, things that I evidently have not missed. Then why keep them, you might ask? Nostalgia, perhaps. I doubt that I will win any feng shui awards.

One of the great ironies in terms of timing is that we have completed several of our long term goals for our current house, including most of the landscaping. We have added a new roof, heat pump, new windows - and now we want to let it go? I have known others who painted & plastered & rewired their houses in their final weeks. Why is it that people often are pressed to improve their habitations when their time therein starts to draw to a close? Wouldn't it make more sense if such things were undertaken earlier? Instead, we seek to make life better for those strangers who are to follow rather than for ourselves ...

December 2009

As most of you are aware, the Westboro Baptist Church had announced that it intended to picket the play “The Laramie Project” at the Hoogland Theater on Friday, November 13. I tend to take their threats seriously, even though I know from personal experience that they sometimes bluster without substance. Had they actually fulfilled their threat, the counterdemonstrators who had gathered that evening might well have been put to a dreadful test. I do not doubt that those who attended the workshop of peaceful counter-demonstration tactics would have conducted themselves admirably, but it was obvious, as I walked through the throngs assembled outside the Hoogland, that some people had come, itching for the chance to confront the WBC face to face.

Such is the risk when a loose coalition is quickly formed to confront a serious challenge. The word gets out and anyone who has their own private agenda is apt to show up; at times, their behavior can derail the best efforts of everyone else. Fortunately, they did not get the chance to “prove themselves” that particular Friday night.

I was appreciative of the police who were on duty that evening outside the Hoogland. Not only did they conduct themselves professionally, but I noted that some, perhaps all, signed the petition for “Standing on the Side of Love” which our members circulated.

Since the WBC did not appear, it would perhaps be correct to describe the gathering of 300 or so local residents as a “pro-diversity demonstration.” I gathered, from reading the published accounts, that the turnout for this event surprised many. Perhaps it is a sign that the mood of “Middle America” has shifted, after all. One hopes so. If this is a genuine trend then perhaps the murder of Matthew Sheperd, though tragic, will not have been entirely in vain.