

From the Minister ... 2013

January, 2013

As the current year recedes and another seeps into consciousness, I am mindful of the many transitions that I and others have weathered these past twelve months. I am grateful that I keep a regular spiritual practice; it helps me center when I need it most. My most regular practice is walking the labyrinth once a month. As you may know, I purchased a large canvass labyrinth about nine years ago, and walks have been regularly scheduled during the liturgical year. For several years, the date chosen has been the third Friday of each month, September – June. All those who wish may come to ALUUC, receive a Oneness Blessing, walk the labyrinth, and, if they desire, stay afterward for a UU communion. Taken together, these form for me – and some others – an important monthly ritual. When I finish each walk, I feel at peace, thankful, and focused.

Not surprisingly, others in our community have different regular rituals. There are of course many possible paths, and some may follow more than one. Some incorporate yoga, nature walks, prayer, meditative sittings, retreats, conversations, exercise, painting, writing, etc., into their lives. I am impressed with the dedication of those who do these things and astonished at the diversity.

As we embark upon another calendar year together, I would invite everyone to consider the ways in which they nurture their own spiritual development. Regardless of your method, I believe the important thing is to be engaged with something that furthers your sense of health, growth, and interconnectedness. I learn new things all the time. The longest journey, as we all have heard, begins with a single step – why not take a step toward a happier and healthier future?

February, 2013

Thus far, we have walked together for ten out of the congregation's collective sixty years which amounts to sixteen per cent of the congregation's lifetime, and nineteen percent of mine. Time flies, not only when you're having fun but keeping busy!

As I look back, I am impressed with the legacy of commitment that spans generations a legacy that includes promoting equality, justice and toleration; feeding the hungry; championing the separation of church & state, etc. To name but a few of the ways we & our forebears have lived out this faith in real time.

During the past six decades, local UUs have gathered at parks, several rented locations and three permanent homes. Each transition led to a larger, more inclusive community.

These places have, in succession, gained significance as they became associated with worship, fantasy auctions, potlucks, weddings, memorial services, T&T sales, social gatherings, vigils, RE classes, etc. But we know that it has been the people involved who have been the heart and soul of the experience.

I have asked myself, what would Springfield look like if this congregation had not been founded back in 1953? I frame my answer with the short story *The Butterfly Effect* in mind; I have to believe that the presence of this liberal religious congregation has been significant to the life and texture of the larger community, and that it has been, ultimately, for the greater good of all. I trust that it will continue to be so in the decades yet to unfold. I look forward to extending our legacy with each of you and with all of you.

March, 2013

One of the themes I've intentionally explored in my past few sermons is "reinventing oneself." This reflects my fascination with how some individuals –and even institutions – have successfully redefined themselves – by choice. Recent sermon subjects George Harrison and Paul Simon are two examples of musical artists who repeatedly chose new directions in their music, pushing themselves to master new genres and messages; likewise, I am fascinated by the evolution of Malcolm X – an activist who became known by a succession of different names as he moved from one spiritual identity to another. Closer to home, ALUUC is an excellent example of an institution that passed through a series of corporate identities, as well as name changes, as its understanding has evolved from Unitarian to UU and from fellowship to Congregation – but also as its emphasis has shifted between the foci of Religious Education, Social Justice, free thought and religious toleration.

I wonder what future milestones await us. What will ALUUC look like when it celebrates its 75th anniversary – 15 years from now? I think it's safe to say that I will not then be playing an active role in the congregation (if nothing else, I hope to retire before then!). Who will be the leaders? Will they be some of the newer members who arrived just recently? Perhaps somehow who arrived this very month as a curious but tentative visitor? Will they have been mentored by the current members? What will they have learned from us – will they cherish ALUUC for the same reasons? Will there be a new sanctuary, will the membership exceed 500 members? Will Royce Hill be the minister?

As I prepared for our Diamond Jubilee celebration, I read how many denominations have declined during the past fifty years. It is a rare congregation that not only marks its century anniversary but still thrives. Orthodox denominations are struggling; by comparison, UUism continues to hold its own. But could we do more? My focus is more with our congregation than the denomination as a whole. One thing that impressed me

recently is the suggestion "that people are not looking for a friendly church – they are looking for a church where they can make a friend. " When I read this, it was like an epiphany. I had recently reviewed the number of new members over the past ten and twenty years, and the "attrition rate" is nearly 50% overall; this statistic matches the advice that if a person does not make 1-2 friends within 2 years, they will leave. If we were more intentional about creating opportunities for newer and more seasoned members to get acquainted and to foster friendships, how much more vibrant might we become! This is a task for all seasons – and not just for the clergy! Let us all ask how we might reinvent ALUUC & infuse it with new vitality. I invite you to suggest ways that we might achieve this. Please send me a message or share your thoughts in person. Imagine what a vibrant future we can create together, and ensure the future of our liberal movement on the Illinois Prairie!

April, 2013

In a little while, I'll be going on-line at www.uua.org to register for both Ministry Days and the UUA General Assembly. Both will be held in Lexington, KY during the latter part of June. Ministry Days is a series of worship services, meetings and workshops for clergy colleagues to hone their professional skills, rekindle their devotion and renew old friendships; GA is a series of plenary sessions, worship, workshops and celebrations intended to do the same for UUs in general -- not to mention providing a space to peruse the latest UU friendly books, posters, and art!

Those of you who attended the GA which was held in St. Louis in 2006 will recall how exciting it was to participate in a convention that included thousands of UUs from all over the United States & overseas. One of the thrilling moments will be when several members carry our congregation's banner during the opening ceremonies – perhaps it will be you this time? Or perhaps you will attend as an official delegate of ALUUC – debating and voting on issues ranging from social justice to governance (if you are interested, please alert Phil Anderson or a member of the Board of Directors.)

May, 2013

There's a lot of discussion about the changing nature of religion in American society. Articles and features abound. What is especially interesting is the estimated number of younger people who do not belong to a traditional faith. According to an October 2012 Pew report, "One fifth of the U.S. public — and a third of adults under 30 are religiously unaffiliated today." I have certainly met quite a few. I suspect that many younger people embrace a practical approach to spirituality – the evidence can be found on-line. For

example, when I visit Facebook, I notice a plethora of “spiritual but not religious“ memes – I have to ask, is there a common thread?

There is certainly a hunger for spirituality – in essence, although the name might vary. What I often encounter is a tacit endorsement that each and every person must ultimately assume responsibility for his/her actions ... and happiness. Indeed, happiness is central to the spiritual journey. As is kindness. Not surprisingly, then, the prevailing advice is that anger and hatred eventually hurt oneself. One should look to many guides for advice – no one tradition can serve as the sole authority. In fact, be open, for many sage insights come from unexpected sources. Humor is vital to one’s spiritual journey. Apparently, so are cats.

Stepping back from the social media, I have gathered from many, many conversations over many, many years is that youth and young adults want to be taken seriously. Stepping back from the social media, I have gathered from many, many conversations over many, many years is that youth and young adults want to be taken seriously. They want us to appreciate that the pressure resulting from the cost of living and the dwindling supply of decent jobs is almost unbearable. Thus, they yearn for fairness, which in turn leads to a discussion of social justice. In short, they yearn to feel that their lives & loves are authentic and meaningful. Not so different than other generations, I suppose.

A congregation can be a workshop for our ideals and the presence of different generations affords us real opportunities. I encourage us to seek healthy dialogue & interactions between the generations; let us listen respectfully and consider their words of wisdom. Maybe we shall all learn something in the process.

June, 2013

“Don’t blink!” is the watchword of the fictional Dr. Who when confronted by the Weeping Angels. “Don’t blink” seems to be good advice in the real world too – tempus fugit. Here it is, June – this new year is nearly half over – how did that happen? As we look back over the liturgical year that is drawing to a close, let us pause and reflect on some of the more important milestones:

Promoting Marriage Equality and rededicating ourselves as a Welcoming Congregation;

Celebrating our Diamond Jubilee in February;

Serving as a teaching congregation for Lynnda White and attending her recent graduation from my alma mater, Meadville/Lombard Theological School (fifteen years after my own);

Completing a decade of ministry here (a dozen years overall);

Our second Habitat for Humanity project in ten years;

The influx of 30 new members this liturgical year (this has to be a record), eighteen during this calendar year alone;

Launching Eco Camp/Earth University;

Cultivating the native prairie restoration project; and

Saying goodbye to Yvonne Salay-Tyson, Erica Cody and Jim Beaumont.

It has been a wonderful journey – I marvel at how people I first encountered as children are now young adults, some with children of their own. I must have blinked! In any event, I look forward to reflecting during the coming summer on the lessons I've learned from you, both face to face and from the recent survey. It is my fondest hope that we will continue to walk together and that together our efforts will continue to shine as a beacon—not only of liberal religion, but also as a beloved community.

July, 2013

Unlike many summers, when the activity level of most UU congregation seems to ebb, our summer is off to an exciting start! Today, The Supreme Court issued its decisions regarding the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) as well as California's Proposition 8; as a result, Peggy Patty & I have been representing our UU values in media and I expect that all of us will have ample opportunities to offer witness to our core values – even at the State Fair on Aug 15th!

It is also noteworthy that the UUA recently held its annual General Assembly. Kurt DeWeese, Diana DeWeese, Jan Droegkamp, Pat Goller, Randy Pratt and Lynnda White joined Celeste & me in Louisville, KY for several days filled with worship, workshops and plenary sessions (accompanied by perhaps 5,000 other UUs). For me, it was exhilarating – I re-connected with many former classmates and colleagues, as well as UUs that I have known for decades. I voted in the election of the new moderator and chatted briefly with some of the denomination's leaders. I bought a few books. But even more importantly, I was inspired to envision ways that we could expand some of the current aspects of congregational life– ways to strengthen our presence on the campuses of UIS & LLCC; ways to support the Young Adult group and the Senior High Group; ideas for adult RE classes, etc. GA has suggested some tantalizing scenarios: What if I periodically held worship services in the homes of members? What if a new member was paired with a mentor? What if members were encouraged to explore their

spiritual journey more – and to share that journey? What if we re-cast the “Blessing of the Animals” and connected it with Albert Schweitzer? What if we support the formation of a local PFLAG group? In short, I believe that this will be an amazing year for me and for ALUUC.

One incident from GA is worth sharing: I was having breakfast alone (not atypical for an introvert) at a table that was adjacent with one featuring various UUs, including former UUA President William Schultz (who later served as head of Amnesty International). Bill was relating how, years ago, he had helped affect change with respect to the sale of “blood diamonds” in the US. He organized pairs of young couples to visit jewelry stores across the nation, looking at engagement & wedding rings. Early on, they asked the sales reps if the jewels were “blood diamonds.” At the time, that term was unknown; the couples then described the conditions under which many labored to extract those diamonds and insisted that they needed assurances that the diamonds in their rings would not be of that type. Almost immediately, the jewelers were in contact with their suppliers, insisting that they did not want to stock & sell blood diamonds; this tactic, worthy of the mind of Gandhi or Dr. King, soon made a definite impact. I share this story as a reminder that the work of a few determined individuals can yield impressive results.

August, 2013

Those who pursue formal ministry are familiar with its various aspects, which may conveniently be listed by words beginning with the letter "P" -- he/she is expected to be a Preacher, Prophetic Voice, Pastor and Priest. One or more of these roles are never absent and indeed, sometimes they overlap. I have learned that one might add more to this list: Poet, Publicist, Pundit, and Policy & Process guru. One could conceivably further add: Psychologist and Peace Maker. Add all these together, include a salary, and you have a working description for this strange professional hybrid - the local congregational minister! Regardless of which mode I might be in, always know that I am mindful of yet another "P" word that goes to the heart of ministry: it carries with it a sense of Privilege -- i.e., the minister, by virtue of his/her office, is invited into the most profound moments of peoples' lives -- one has extraordinary access into others' lives and that must never be taken lightly. For all of this, I am profoundly grateful.

September, 2013

I ran over a kitten yesterday. At the time, I was accelerating to reach the speed limit on an entrance ramp feeding into I-55 when a black oval object seemed to fly off the wheels of the car ahead and into the path of my car. I maneuvered, but felt it strike the

undercarriage. My first thought was that it was a piece of rubber or plastic. When I glanced in the rear view mirror, however, I was horrified to see the broken form of a black kitten frantically clawing its way off the road into the bushes, its rear legs dangling uselessly behind it. A moment later I was in traffic and with each instant the kitten was physically further away. But the realization of what had just happened grew.

I became immediately nauseous. I don't recall ever striking an animal before. I then remembered an incident from many years ago: I was traveling with a friend in Ireland, heading to Glen de Lough. Brendan was driving when a bird smacked into the windshield. He pulled the car over, found the bird; finding it dead, he wept. At the time, I thought it was an overreaction, but as the years have increased, I can empathize more.

I was further distressed by the idea that the cat may have been thrown from the car ahead of me. But who would do such a thing? Could it have strayed into traffic on its own?

Not long after, I was reminded of a poem by Thomas Hardy, "The Convergence of the Twain." The lesson of that poem, which relates the fateful collision of the Titanic and the iceberg, is that the universe is cold and deterministic. In such a universe, to address the matter of that poor kitten, it was inevitable that it and I would cross paths on that very day, and that it would be maimed or killed as a result of the encounter. But I don't believe in a mechanistic universe, any more than I believe that there are an infinity of universes occurring simultaneously. The sad fact is that in this particular universe, on a hot day on August, I ran over a kitten. I wish it had been otherwise.

October, 2013

Pumpkins are abundant at this time of year, both in fields, on porches, and in store displays. When I see them, my thoughts naturally turn to Hallowe'en and to what I like to call —Pumpkin Spirituality. II

What is that, you may ask? I will tell you – first let me add that the idea came to me many years ago when a colleague talked about the need to deliberately "carve out sacred space" for meditation.

Begin by holding a pumpkin in your hands – feel how its exterior is smooth & cool – and know it is complete as is. But if you want something more – to transform it, some effort is required. So insert a knife and remove the top; next. Pull it off and look inside. There's quite a mess in there. To make something more, one must first scoop out the pulp and seeds and then smooth the inside walls. But that is not enough. One could insert a candle, but once the lid is replaced, the candle will soon be snuffed out –

therefore, one must carve holes for eyes and a mouth, and next add a lit candle inside. Now, the candle can breathe, and its flame will both warm the interior and shine over a distance.

In the same way, we are complete as is, but sometimes we yearn for something more in our lives. For those seekers, one must first recognize and distance – perhaps remove – the business and distractions of his/her life. Mind you, it's an intimate and challenging process. The more one removes, the emptier our consciousness becomes – creating a clean, empty space. This is in sync with the teachings of various faiths, that one needs to empty one's ego or self before the Holy may enter – but let us not quibble over language. Rather, let us ensure that this is not merely an interior journey but has authentic connections with people and the outside world; once that is achieved, then meditate on some poetry, or scripture, or whatever image/word presents itself. The more you focus, the more your conscious mind can seize on it & be illuminated.

And there you have it: how to make a Jack-o-Lantern, and how to carve out “sacred space” for yourself.

November, 2013

I have been reflecting on the Dalai Lama's admission that he is a —Professional Laugher.∥ Laughter is, so it is claimed, the best medicine – perhaps even for sick souls. I can attest that ministers often tell jokes, often at their own expense – or to poke fun at those who are exceedingly serious. I know of one colleague who was inspired to parody songs based on —Hymns for the Celebration of Lifell but rendered as —Hymns for the Celebration of Strife.∥ Another colleague demonstrated that one could sing —Amazing Gracell to the tune from —Gilligan's Island;∥ yet another shared a little ditty called —The Very Model of a Model Unitarian,∥ the tune of which is borrowed liberally from Gilbert & Sullivan (a version of which one can now find on YouTube). As I skim various Facebook postings by my colleagues, I note that humor is alive and well. Here is one —oldie but goodie,∥ supposedly a chain letter sent among congregations:

THE PERFECT PASTOR

....The perfect pastor preaches exactly 10 minutes. The perfect pastor condemns sin roundly, but never hurts anyone's feelings.

....The perfect pastor works from 8 a.m. until midnight, and is also the church janitor

....The perfect pastor makes \$100 a week, wears stylish clothes, drives a new car that reflects well on your church, buys ten excellent books each week, and donates \$80 a week to the parish.

....The perfect pastor is 29 years old and has 40 years' worth of experience.

....The perfect pastor has a burning desire to work with teen-agers, and he/she spends most of his/her time with the senior citizens.

....The perfect pastor smiles all the time with a straight face because she has a sense of humor that keeps him/her seriously dedicated to the parish.

....The perfect pastor makes 15 home visits a day and is always in the office to be handy when needed.The perfect pastor always has time for parish council and all of its committees. He/ she never misses the meeting of any parish organization, and is always busy evangelizing the unchurched.

....The perfect pastor is broken enough to understand all people, but perfect in mental, emotional and physical health.

....The perfect pastor is always in the next parish over where your friend attends church.

If your pastor does not measure up, simply send this notice to six other parishes that are tired of their pastor too. Then bundle up your pastor and send him/her to the parish at the top of your list. If everyone cooperates, in one week you will receive 1,643 pastors from which to choose. One of them should be perfect. Have faith in this letter – it works. But beware! One parish broke the chain and got its old pastor back in less than three months

December, 2013

I enjoy an old-fashioned Christmas Eve service, one when I can imagine a simpler time, before iphones, ipads, nooks & kindles. Granted, my memory can at times play tricks on me, but I seem to recall one in particular, maybe ten years ago, when the stockings had been hung with care at home, a modest tree bedecked with thrift store ornaments held a prominent place in our house and I actually had had Christmas cards printed up and mailed via snail mail – can you imagine that?

When December 24th arrived, there may have been a strong winter's storm and I fretted that no one would be able to make it here. I dimly recall that people did arrive – in the final minutes before the service was scheduled to commence.

As far as the service itself, the program not only included three people reading St. Luke's nativity narrative but also included Oscar Wilde's "The Happy Prince", O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi" and Mike Royko's "Mary & Joe." Did I include Katherine Anne Porter's "Christmas Story" as well, or perhaps a chapter from "A Christmas Carol"? Was it then that Missy Thibodeaux- Thompson first recited "A Cajun Night Before Christmas"

-- to the delight of all? Surely I said something about a Yule Log, holly & ivy, Chanukah and Kwanzaa? We certainly sang carols – lots of them -- but wasn't it the case that some sang the versions they remembered from childhood, while others sang those newfangled UU versions? Wasn't it then that little Joey Anderson first singed his hand with hot wax -- for the first of three consecutive Christmas Eves? I think that in the frenzy leading up to the service, I overlooked the little matter of preparing a homily, so I took a healthy swig of eggnog & launched into an extemporaneous five minute talk about what the season meant to me (the pulpit still has imprints from my tight grip that night.) Was that also the time when, after the food and eggnog, I showed "A Christmas Carol" on VHS to the few who stayed late? (I can explain later to the younger generation what —VHSII means.) When we turned off the lights to sing "Silent Night," I discovered in a heartbeat that candlelight alone did not lend itself to reading hymnals. At any rate, it was a splendid time ... at least as my memory recorded it. And, if it didn't exactly happen that way, it must have been something very much like it. In any event, here's wishing everyone a happy and safe holiday season!

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