

From the Minister ... 2014

January, 2014

As I reflect upon the twelve months that have just passed, I am impressed with how our congregation became a local —hubll for the statewide battle for Marriage Equality. One year ago, Marriage Equality in Illinois seemed like a distant, unrealistic goal. An enormous amount of energy was invested to support this effort, focused on the larger picture. There were successes and setbacks, but ultimately, we won this battle for human dignity. The momentum from our efforts helped launch UUANI, the UU Advocacy Network of Illinois, which in turn will channel the energy of the many UU congregations in our state, to represent our point of view on vital issues.

In January, I am pleased to know that ALUUC will host a training for OWL leaders. Marla Johnson, Pat Goller and Paul Oakley worked diligently to make this a reality. After our leaders are trained, we will be able to offer Our Whole Lives to our 7th- 8th and 9th grade students, so that they will be able to make informed choices about their sexuality and sexual expression. As the father of one of those students, I make a special appeal to all parents of children in this age range to enroll their children as well.

For the moment at least, as I consider the many activities that are just over the horizon, ranging from Paul Oakley's leadership for small groups exploring prayer to Susan Solon's sessions on the Common Read, from Game Nights to the Fantasy Auction, I am delighted. We really do have something special here. I hope that all of us will continue to invent new venues of fellowship, education, worship and stewardship while we also invest with the current ways and means. On that note, I wish you all a happy and healthy new year!

February, 2014

This morning I learned that Pete Seeger had passed away. The Social Media is already jammed with memes, quotes and tributes to his indomitable spirit and music. As well it should. Back in November, I led a presentation focused on —Assessing the Spirituality of the '60's. You may recall that we sang two songs that captured, in my estimation, the spirit of that decade — they formed —bookendsll to the service: "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" and "We Shall Overcome." Appropriately enough, Pete Seeger wrote the former (among many others) and improved the latter. He used the stage as a means to galvanize us to participate, thereby leaving an indelible mark on our culture, consciousness and collective conscience — for the better.

We owe it to the young to make sure that they are aware of his life and music. I dread the day when a child will hear a recording of “If I had a Hammer” but mistake it for “If I Had a Hummer.”

I never met him personally, but I met his sister, Peggy – a singer-songwriter in her own right. When I think about the influence that this brother and sister have had on our culture, it amazes me. Together, their combined works are a testament to faith in People (writ large) and the ideals of this nation. He stood by those ideals for many decades, and was even pilloried as being anti-American, when all he did was stubbornly cling to his vision of an America that was guided by the better angels of our nature. He will be sorely missed.

March, 2014

I am yearning for the spring. Perhaps we all are. One seasonal ritual that I have adopted is to wear one or more item of clothing that shows at least a dash of green. This has become my personal symbol of hope.

On the other hand, I have been wearing a small green ribbon pinned to my overcoat since December. Many people have asked what it signifies. I respond that I was given that ribbon at a service to remember the victims of the Newtown massacre, more than a year ago. You are probably aware that I am deeply concerned about gun violence in our culture. You may recall that the UUA’s “Standing on the Side of Love” initiative was launched following the murders of several UUs at the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church in Knoxville back in July, 2008. Sadly, the murders at Newtown and the TVUU are far from unique. I’ve recently become aware of a graph that reveals that more Americans have died from gun violence since 1968 than in all US wars combined. That’s a horrifying – and shameful - statistic. The current issue of the UIS’s Illinois Issues includes my views on the proliferation of gun violence (see <http://illinoisissues.uis.edu/archives/2014/02/guns.html>). Perhaps the symbolism of the green ribbon will, in time, evolve into one of hope for a future where gun violence has dramatically subsided. On a different topic, please mark your calendars for two special events that are scheduled in March: the Fantasy Auction on March 15th and a Circle Supper on March 29. Both are evenings of fellowship, food and fun, welcome reminders that the spring has arrived. I hope to see you there!

April, 2014

Our words are far reaching This past Sunday, I preached in Urbana on the theme —The Spirituality of Carl Sagan— afterwards, I was greeted by a man who regularly attends there but previously had been a member of the UU Congregation of Park Forest, where I served as an interim minister. Some twelve years ago, we had had a conversation about whether he should pursue an advanced degree in music and I encouraged him. As a result of that conversation, he felt empowered to apply -- now, all those years later, he is poised to receive his Ph.D. this summer. He brought a copy of his dissertation to the service and showed it to me, as proud, I suppose, as a new parent might show his child. He then gave me the first part of the manuscript that included a dedication page, upon which he had typed: —For the Rev. Martin Woulfe, who several years ago told me that, “There is no unrealistic goal ... take that first step.”

On another occasion, I was being interviewed by a member of the First Unitarian Society of Chicago, for a room to rent in her house. As I stood in her kitchen, I noticed a piece of paper held by a magnet to her refrigerator: the quotation was by me, describing the difference between vocation and avocation, from a sermon I had given several years before. What were the odds of that happening?

Those encounters remind me of the power of our words – they can encourage or degrade, heal or harm – and their influence continues long after they are uttered, in ways that we perhaps can barely imagine. That fact reminds me of some advice I first heard from my parents when I was young – “Be careful of your thoughts because they influence your words; be careful of your words, because they influence your actions, be careful of your actions because they determine your character, and that in turn determines your destiny.”

In my studies of various traditions, I have found that advice repeated often, across the ages and various hemispheres of the Earth. There must be something to it.

Another recent reminder of the power of words: this example was shared during the first episode of the new Cosmos series. Acclaimed astrophysicist Neil de Grasse-Tyson showed a page from Carl Sagan’s calendar book from several decades ago – upon one date, Sagan had written Neil’s name. It turns out that while in high school, de Grasse-Tyson had written to Dr. Sagan at Cornell and shared that he hoped that one day he himself would become an astrophysicist. Upon receiving that letter, Carl Sagan invited the young man to Cornell – the result of that encounter was not only to solidify de Grasse-Tyson’s desire, but it taught him what kind of person he wanted to be when he grew up.

I shared that anecdote during my sermon. Afterwards, as I relate above, I met the man who had remembered my encouragement. I would call this a happy coincidence –

nonetheless, it is a reminder that we should choose our words carefully, and err on the side of kindness and compassion whenever possible, for they spread as wide in the seeds adrift on the wind and may eventually take root and bear fruit.

May, 2014

Twenty five years ago, I received a letter that changed my life: it was a letter of acceptance to Meadville/Lombard Theological School. It was one of the most exhilarating moments of my life; needless to say, I did not fully comprehend all that I would endure as I pursued my Masters degree of Divinity, nor how many paths I would explore, including false starts, nor the quantity and quality of relationships that would result. As Jerry Garcia sang, "What a long, strange trip it's been."

One change that has come about as a result of being a minister is that I look ahead as well as behind. There was a time when I lived paycheck to paycheck and only made short term plans. Now, I keep track of distant reservations and events in my planner – sometimes, a year or more in advance!

I am mindful that come January, 2015, I will begin a six month sabbatical. Conventional wisdom says that a minister reinvents him/her self every six or seven years – if one compares my first incarnation as your minister (2003-2009) with my second (2009-2015), what would the differences be? Perhaps the difference lies in emphasis. My sense is that I grew in confidence as a parish minister through the years, as well as striving more for interfaith and interracial connections, and social justice, especially Marriage Equality. I would be interested in hearing what the members of ALUUC have perceived.

During the sabbatical, I intend to visit a number of congregations, UU and otherwise, throughout the region. I hope to resume my study of Spanish, and maybe try my hand with a musical instrument. I also intend to finish a practitioner's guidebook to creating weddings and officiating. I will be on the road during the weekend, so I will not be as present as I was during the previous sabbatical. There is a possibility, if the pledge drive is successful, that someone with UU credentials could be engaged to preach sermons on a regular basis. Likewise, another person could theoretically be engaged to offer pastoral care. We should have a sufficient number of trained Officiants to conduct whatever weddings arise. The Committee on Ministry and Personnel Committee have already agreed to pick up some of the work load. But who will look after the Labyrinth Walk? Who will fill orders of CDs and UU posters? And this is just the tip of the iceberg – will there be a regular movie Night, a Spanish Club, Adult RE classes, etc? In short, I am inviting members of the congregation to step up and begin assuming responsibility for various facets of ministry here. I hope to hear from some of you soon – if past

experience has taught me anything, it is that January will be here before you know it. As one with a quarter century of ministry formation under my belt, I assure you that you will find it well worth the investment on your part.

June, 2014

It all started with my older sister, really. Many years ago, we were talking about personal correspondence, and I had mentioned that I didn't receive letters. She told me, "If you want letters, you have to write some first."

I thought about that sage advice several months ago, as Spring was slowly creeping into the backyard. I could hear birds overhead, but none came into the yard. We had some decrepit bird feeders that neither human nor bird had touched in ages. I decided to take the initiative and bought a new bird feeder and some seed. This was going to be my welcome letter to Nature.

I posted the new bird feeder from a pole in the back yard. Some birds did stop by. I noticed a squirrel scavenging in the grass for stray seeds that might have fallen. That made me happy as well. Within several days, though, the feeder was on the grass, torn apart, its precious cargo spilled across the lawn. I put it back together, added more seeds and hung it back. Again, within a day it had been overwhelmed by brute force. I put it back together a third time, and not long afterwards watched a squirrel leap onto the pole, grab hold of the feeder and wrench it apart. Clearly, squirrels were pests. I then bought an anti-squirrel cone and a second squirrel-resistant feeder. I placed both up and very soon the original feeder was once again in pieces. I retired that feeder and bought a second squirrel resistant feeder.

The squirrels returned to scavenging through the grass and occasionally glanced upwards. I saw them do that, and made a decision to put out several metal bowls with birdseed on the back patio. The squirrels ceased their scavenging and now come every morning to eat their breakfast. Sometimes I put water out for them too.

We didn't have much wildlife in the south suburbs of Chicago when I was growing up – there were all kinds of pets, but aside from that, mostly birds. I really didn't think that much about it. When I was on vacation as a boy, I carried a BB gun and took pot shots at whatever I came across in the woods. I didn't think much of them, sad to say. Decades later, when I attended classes at the University of Chicago, I was amazed to see people feeding peanuts by hand to seemingly tame squirrels. I remembered those squirrels and wondered whether the ones in my backyard might eventually become that tame.

It wasn't long before the raccoons came in the evening, also to scavenge through the leftovers. I also initially viewed them as pests. Sufficient proof had come several years before when one had rifled through our garbage, strewing the contents over the street. Fast forward a few weeks: four to five raccoons regularly visit our patio in the evening and I feed them. When I lift a tasty morsel and say "Up!" two will stand on their hind legs "begging." I have had several people warn me about rabies, raccoons in the attic, etc., so I don't let them eat out of my hand and am mindful of the attic – but I am gratified beyond words to see how several squirrels and two raccoons are no longer terrified of me. I have also learned that when one sends out an open invitation to Nature, be it literal or figurative – one cannot predict who or what will show up for dinner. Our backyard is now teeming with furry critters along with Cardinals, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, and Goldfinches -- I feel like we have begun to learn how to share the same eco-space. And that makes me happy.

July, 2014

Where does one get ideas for sermons? If there is a Muse for ministers, I haven't yet made her acquaintance. For most of my career, I planned 1-2 months ahead, but last summer, I mapped out the entire liturgical year, from late August until mid June. I decided that doing so would be a form of spiritual discipline.

Some of my colleagues organize sermons according to monthly themes, like gratitude or prayer. All speakers during that month, whether she/he be the regular preacher or a guest, are expected to conform to that theme. Honestly, that model has not really appealed to me. On the other hand, I have been known to offer "sermon series," looking at the Seven Principles or the different Sources, over the course of 5-7 weeks.

When I look at the graphs listing the themes that I have selected since 2003, several patterns do emerge. I tend to preach general UU themes in late August, just in case any people are "church shopping" then, while the water/stone communion plus the flower communion are the unofficial bookends of the liturgical year. Within that space, I am mindful of major civil and religious holidays – if the sermon topic does not address the holiday in question, invariably, there will be something within the service, perhaps a dedicated chalice lighting, to acknowledge it.

I am mindful that All Souls Day used to be a revered day for Universalists and thus it frequently makes the list (another was Christmas Eve). I also like to annually frame a service around a poet, preferably in the autumn. The theme of Prairie Group usually provides good fodder for a sermon. And of course, there are those sermons whose themes are chosen by the winner of the "name that sermon" at the Fantasy Auction.

I am also mindful of the anniversaries of significant events – e.g., the upcoming 50th anniversaries of the death of Malcolm X, the death of James Reeb, etc., and tend to talk about their ideas and what we might learn from them today. This past year, I revisited various ideas and thinkers that I had to tackle in theological school.

This year, though, people have made some suggestions. As I begin my twelfth year with you, I invite you to send me a line with a topic and perhaps a date suitable for that topic. Let's see what we can construct together.

August, 2014

I see the doctor for a complete “physical” every August, coinciding with my birthday. Best not to be cavalier with one's health, especially at this age! I also check in with the dentist to see if any teeth need to be filled or pulled. August will be no different, as far as my routine – it's a baseline of health and fitness that I use to compare with previous years.

I suspect that many people do this.

What if people undertook a “spiritual” with the same regularity & thoroughness? What if one set aside some time, possibly alone or even better, with a spiritual director, to evaluate one's beliefs, ethics and practices? I suspect that we would discover how often we navigate daily challenges via an auto-pilot/GPS that was installed long ago that came with but a few updates. I wonder to what extent I myself curtailed my theological voyage of discovery – have I become yet another living embodiment of Channing's admonishment that “the heresies of our youth become the orthodoxies of our old age?”

As Channing reminds us all, one of the unique hallmarks of liberal religion is that one ought to ever be willing to reexamine his/her faith. This is not an easy task, nor is it comfortable. How well do our beliefs and ethics embody new revelations in science, psychology and spirituality? Do our beliefs and ethics prepare us to respond appropriately towards the crises of the moment and those that loom on the horizon? Do they increase compassion?

As I say what I propose is not an easy task – it may seem unrealistic that any one of us could carve out enough sacred space for oneself to accomplish an extensive “spiritual,” especially in a world in which we are so connected to cyberspace and to our own busyness. But if we neglect our spiritual growth and health, what are the risks? Might there not be spiritual risks commensurate with those that result from ignoring the warning signs of failing health?

If it is true that our lives are a path and that we are all pilgrims, I hope that we will pay better attention not only to the milestones along the way but to the spiritual health of ourselves and our fellow journeyers.

September, 2014

If you can believe it, this month will be the first September since 2010 that we will not have had an intern. I truly enjoyed working with Lynnda White and Paul Oakley – each presented new and exciting ideas in their sermons, workshops and interactions. Both are scheduled to meet with the Ministerial Fellowship Committee later this month – I trust that we will all wish them well.

As many of you are aware, I will be taking a five month sabbatical, beginning January First. Between now and then, we will have many opportunities to worship and work together. The organizing for one of our biggest fund raisers, the Trash & Treasure Sale, is already in progress ... I expect to pitch in with the labor, and to donate lots of items from around my house (look for various camping gear this year from me!). I hope to see you there as well.

I will be leading an Adult RE session this Autumn – featuring the various episodes of COSMOS (without commercial interruption) and leading discussions afterwards. Please consider signing up for this – or one of the other educational series or covenant circles that others will be leading. And let's not forget the social events, like Bonnie's Bistro or Game Nights. Furthermore, look for me one Sunday to be the Kitchen Coordinator – as Randy would say, even the minister can do this – so maybe, you'll give it a try as well?

Trust me, the next few months will be a whirlwind of activity. I look forward to so many opportunities for us to nurture beloved community and to foster liberal religion here on the Prairie.

October, 2014

The current issue of the Windy City Times features a brief announcement concerning the nuptials of two of ALUUC's members, Buff Carmichael & Jerry Bowman. You may know that Buff & Jerry have dedicated much of their lives towards advancing the inherent worth and dignity of the LGBTQ community here. What makes this notice especially noteworthy is that the legality of their wedding became established only several months ago.

How quickly has this revolution become the “new normal.” By the time that you read this, I & ALUUC’s Officiants will have conducted six such weddings, plus I have facilitated one “upgrade” from civil union to marriage for another couple. More ceremonies are on the horizon. Members & friends of ALUUC who lobbied for Marriage Equality share the honors for making this possible.

One year ago, several hundred Unitarian Universalists from across the state gathered at ALUUC to launch UUANI (the UU Advocacy Network of Illinois) and then join the “March on Springfield.” As one of the early supporters of the March, I was invited to speak to the thousands gathered there. The day was cool and wet. I saw many members of ALUUC there, along with many well known local LGBTQ leaders and supporters.

You may recall that Rev. Mark Kiyimba, who had traveled to Springfield, had also been invited to speak, but his health prevented him from joining me at the podium. You may also recall that opponents were prophesying all sorts of dire consequences if marriage equality passed, but none have come to pass. The only significant outcome is that people who were previously denied equal dignity under the law are finally getting married.

As a UU minister, it is especially gratifying to conduct legal same sex ceremonies in Central Illinois. A highlight occurs when I bless the hands of the couple before their ring exchange; I wrap a special cloth (created by Tina Bennett) around the hands of the couple — I notice that during that particular ritual, the beloveds’ hands tremble ever so slightly. It’s a powerful moment, one that brings home the privilege of sharing that ritual with them. Crucially, the reaction is the same for all couples, regardless of whether the ceremony is for same sex or heterosexual couples. Love is love. Not everyone embraces this yet, and many still cite religious objections. Happily, the future promises wider acceptance. I trust that the movement to recognize Marriage Equality will continue to gain momentum across the nation, until wedding notices & anniversary notices for same sex couples are as celebrated as those that have populated the local papers for generations.

November, 2014

Disclaimer: In the spirit of enjoying Thanksgiving leftovers, Martin has submitted one of his favorite articles from the past: ****

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, 2014

Happy Holidays – easier said than done, right? And yet, ready or not, here come the Chanukah-Yule-Christmas-Kwanzaa-New Year's ensemble ... all conveniently presaged by "Black Friday." This year, of course, I might add the word "sabbatical" to the admixture above.

Let me begin by stating how extremely grateful I am to this community for granting me time for rest and renewal. I will be focusing on self-improvement but also looking into ways that will hopefully yield a positive impact on ALUUC both as a community and as an institution.

When I step back, a host of people will assume the many things that I have handled – not only my regular responsibilities, but also those that I affectionately refer to as, "other duties as assigned." I suspect that one result will be that we will all appreciate how ALUUC has changed and grown during the past dozen years. This is a different institution than the one that called me back in 2003 – and I have become a different – hopefully, better – minister as a result.

One bit of conventional wisdom among ministers is that we re-invent ourselves every seven years or so – I think that this has been true for me. When I first arrived, my previous experience had been as an interim and I needed to assume the mantle of a parish minister. I was very mindful that I was going to be ALUUC's first full-time settled minister. Members were quite patient with me as I learned the ropes, and together we began to change the liturgy, the physical premises, the activities & programs, etc. From the very beginning, I appreciated the talents of Bonnie Ettinger and Beverly Holmes – both of whom who elevated the spiritual quality of every service. I benefited greatly from the wisdom & guidance offered by many, especially from Berkley Moore – but there were many, many, many others. I gained final fellowship as a UU minister. I still relied heavily on passages from the gray hymnal. I also began to get involved in the larger community – in particular, with Rotary and the Greater Springfield Association. My family began to put down roots, and Celeste began school.

During my second tenure, we all began to dedicate more energy towards social justice activities in the larger community: Immigration Reform, Marriage Equality, Conversations on Race, Planned Parenthood; PFLAG; worker's rights, the ERA, etc. I joined the boards of even more local groups. In terms of Sunday services, I nudged myself to utilize the teal as well as the gray hymnal, and to speak more extemporaneously. We added staff that made things work so much smoother. We

became a teaching congregation, and several members became Wedding Officiants. Meanwhile, my family's roots went deeper, and Angela changed careers, and Celeste learned to ride a bike, and reached high school. We moved into a new house.

What will happen during the third incarnation of my ministry? Here I am, twelve years older than when I first arrived. In fact, we all are. I have learned to depend on so many people who have done the unsung work that makes me and the congregation as a whole look good – ranging from Fellowship to Facilities to Finance – and everything in between – I look forward to joining the task of looking ahead. Perhaps we will have a long range plan – if it happens to be a five year plan, maybe the catchphrase “Envisioning 20/20” would fit. But plans alone cannot carry us forward – it takes commitment, energy, and follow-through. When I consider who and what we have at hand, I am encouraged. For, with our dedicated volunteers and staff, I know that the goal of beloved community is within reach – I trust that we will continue to strive to increase membership in terms of depth, to continue to renew and rededicate ourselves as a powerful presence of a liberal faith community here on the Prairie. On that note, I wish you all a wonderful holiday season, a happy new year, and I look forward to re-connecting with you as a whole in June. In the meanwhile, remember to help one another as much as possible – especially those who pitch in during worship, host fellowship events, and clean the dishes.