

From the Minister ... 2016

January, 2016

Another January, another new year – everything old is new again! I imagine that many people will be revisiting their resolutions from last year and composing new ones. Sometimes the new ones are based upon the former, but with a larger pinch of realism. Or perhaps one succeeded in meeting all those resolutions, and is ready to explore new avenues for growth.

What is true for individuals is true for institutions, including ALUUC. I am excited that we are embarking on a Long Range Planning process. In a very real sense, these are akin to resolutions writ large. Over the next few months, we will have multiple opportunities to review our Mission and discuss our priorities for the coming years. This is more than just an intellectual exercise – this will touch both heart and soul of who we are to be as a faith community. I encourage everyone to participate as fully as possible.

In the coming year, we will continue to promote social justice within the larger community; to offer support to our Muslim neighbors; to promote greater diversity and acceptance within our own community and the greater Springfield community; to encourage members & friends to add depth to their spiritual practice; to seek further Conversations on Race; and to encourage the better angels of everyone's nature as the national election campaign takes off in earnest.

I encourage you to sign up for Circle Suppers, pitch in as Kitchen Coordinators & helpers, teach a Religious Education class, help with the Fantasy Auction and the Pledge Drive, and take full advantage of the many opportunities to explore your faith and make new friends. And don't forget the Fellowship Activities!

As you will read elsewhere in this newsletter, ALUUC will be welcoming Paula Brayden as our intern for 2016-17. She will start in the summer. Paula brings many gifts which will no doubt be much appreciated. Since we have served as a teaching congregation before, we can help her to refine her gifts, just as we did for Lynnda White and Paul Oakley. I trust that we will be very hospitable to her and her family.

And so, I wish all of you a very Happy New Year – may it be filled with joy, good health, friendship and faith.

February, 2016

When I go abroad to visit my Spanish family, my daily habits are turned on their head – not just sleeping patterns, but how I move through a particular day. In a heartbeat, I need to adopt a different schedule, language, cuisine, and the nature of my family role. Fortunately, I have grown accustomed to crossing this threshold: I am less a stranger in a strange land than I used to be.

Ralph Waldo Emerson famously wrote: “a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds....” I have encountered that over the years, in reference towards one’s daily habits. In this respect, I have had multiple occasions to review the nature of my daily habits, to identify the benign, the healthy, and the harmful.

But this is not what Emerson had in mind. The full quotation is more revealing: “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He (sic) may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words, and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said today. — ‘Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood.’ — Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood.”

This changes one’s focus, yes? I am reminded that one of the basic teachings I received as a youth is that “one needs to be mindful of one’s thoughts, as they lead to actions, which then leads to habits, which next leads to character, which ultimately leads to destiny.” Perhaps this is the real reason we make resolutions with each new year – to stop for a moment & observe the path upon which we have found ourselves, and its probable destination. If we can discern these things, then we have the chance to consciously affirm it, or perhaps choose another, more meaningful pathway – perhaps even one that leads through the forest of contradictions and greatness.

March, 2016

Nearly a decade ago, various local men and women created a new group, COGS - the Conscientious Objector Group of Springfield. At the time, motivated by wars, and rumors of more wars, I began to advise young people, mostly UU teenagers, about the process of gaining recognition as a conscientious objector. In the event of a military draft, I learned that one does not satisfy the federal standards merely by declaring oneself to be a CO. There has to be a paper trail that demonstrates that one's faith prevents the taking of another human life, preferably bolstered by reflective

essays/articles written by the person and witnesses who will attest to his commitment to pacifism.

The wars have dragged on, but no drafts were forthcoming and interest faded. I probably last initiated paperwork for a teen five years ago. My activism was motivated by my personal history — there was a time when I yearned for a military career. My interest began as a boy and continued after the Vietnam War had ended. I went so far as to seek a congressional appointment to Annapolis. I still have the letters from various politicians congratulating me for that appointment. With that acceptance in hand, I embarked upon a lot of soul-searching and ultimately decided to seek a different path. I dismissed the matter from my thoughts until around 1980, when young men were required to register with the SSS. At the time, I wrestled to reach a decision — it was agonizing — but I did register.

I was reminded of both COGS and my own brush with the Selective Service last week. I was attending a Frontiers International luncheon and the guest speaker was there to speak about his role as a local representative of the Selective Service System. We were advised that it was within the realm of possibility that the draft could be reactivated within 2-3 years. According to present law, only men would face the draft, although we were also advised that that too could change in 2-3 years. If the draft boards were to be brought back, there will be no exemptions, except for disabilities. In this scenario, if someone is in college, they will be allowed to finish his/(her) semester but would then have to appear before the draft board. Again, there will be no exemptions - not if one is an only child, not if the family has others in the service. Should a young person want to discuss with me what it means to be a conscientious objector, I will definitely make the time for that conversation. Please note that one does not need to be an absolute pacifist to qualify. At the luncheon, the example was raised of Muhammad Ali who declared that he was willing "to beat someone up, but not willing to kill him" and we were told that a person with this view could still be classified as a CO.

If the draft is reactivated, those who are granted CO status will still be required to perform alternative service — if one is inclined, he/(she) can seek alternative service as a medic or chaplain in a battle zone. If not, you will be presented with a list of alternatives that include working at a hospital or shelter.

Yes, there are always wars and rumors of wars. The meeting ended with the SSS representative distributing forms for the members to apply to sit on draft boards. Perhaps someone reading this would like to follow up with that prospect -- you too may call me.

April, 2016

You may have noticed that ALUUC's monthly "Game Night" is one of my favorite monthly events—in fact, I have a life-long connection with board & card games. When I was a child, I played a wide range of games with parents, siblings, and neighbors—progressing from *Candy Land*, *Sorry*, *Trouble*, *Clue*, *Scrabble*, *Chess*, *Life*, and ultimately, to *Risk*. Here was an entertaining way to create a social niche, especially if one had limited athletic prowess, which was true for me. One shining moment came when I was crowned the checkers champion of my junior high. Family & friends also spent many a happy hour playing card games such as *21*, *Gin Rummy*, *Spades*, *Hearts*, *Euchre* and *Poker*. Summer evenings were often dominated by *UNO*. Did I come from a competitive family, you ask? Let's just say that even now, my dad will organize a spirited marathon session of *UNO* - for money. Celeste was recently indoctrinated into this ritual, and she won her first tournament. She might be hooked.

Around the age of twelve, I began to collect Avalon Hill "bookcase games," which often featured a specific military battle or campaign, ranging from the Age of Alexander to the Second World War. Friends visited one another and played for hours. These interactions resulted in becoming acquainted with many families—in one instance, I learned a little Polish so I could offer a proper greeting to our hosts. Now, to give you a sense of the scale of these strategy games, some of the grander versions required sixty hours to complete. I painted miniatures and even designed my own board game once. By the time I reached college (in the later 1970's), I had added *Go*, *Backgammon* and *Acey-Deucey* to my repertoire. Maybe you did too. I continued to play these even as my immediate circle of friends was drawn into *D&D*, which stretched my understanding of gaming. But then I went to Ireland for a year, and I entrusted my collection with a friend for safe keeping. When I returned, I was dismayed to learn that he had traded them all away.

After college, many of us stopped board gaming, save for the occasional weekends of role-playing or a game that featured trains. I know, it sounds like the "Big Bang Theory," right? But in time, I stored any remaining games in my parents' basement. I probably had too much on my plate anyway. And then Trivial Pursuit arrived, which was a game-changer (my older brother was a formidable opponent, but I suspect that he memorized every answer on every card). Overnight, it was fashionable again to sit down with family and friends around a board game.

From time to time, I have met someone who shared my enthusiasm for board games, and our friendship was quickly cemented while rolling dice or laying down cards. Have I ever mentioned before that when Angela & I were first dating, we played *Hearts* with several of her roommates? I must have kept my competitive streak in check.

I have noticed that gaming has been enjoying a renaissance for a few years. As a result, I have learned to play *Settlers of Catan*, *Ticket to Ride*, *Mexican Train*, and *Wizards*—to name a few. I have also noted that there are many new game stores in town – one great advantage over the former stores is that the newer ones often include a separate room where friends can meet and play. I suspect that many people favor passing their time in the company of others rather than with an Artificial Intelligence, however cunning. I am certainly one of those people myself. But I recognize now that this hobby does more than just instill competitiveness. With the right mentors, it encourages bonding between generations and teaches graciousness in victory and defeat. One learns that success may or may not be in the cards. Such lessons have broader applications in life. Perhaps I will see you at some future Game Night? Bring your dice, bring your cards, and let us pass a pleasant evening together.

May, 2016

For the past sixty years, the UUA's Principles and Purposes have expressed a constellation of values that were decidedly humanistic. But that may be about to change. At the annual General Assembly next month, members of the Unitarian Universalist Association will begin the process of altering the language of the "First Principle." (The process to amend or revise the Principles and Sources take several years, and will be voted on by congregational delegates in Columbus and New Orleans.)

This of course is not the first time that the P&Ps have been discussed—the original six principles, adopted in 1961, were the culmination of the humanist era:

1. To strengthen one another in a free and disciplined search for truth as the foundation of our religious fellowship;
2. To cherish and spread the universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition, immemorially summarized in the Judeo-Christian heritage as love to God and love to man;
3. To affirm, defend and promote the supreme worth of every human personality, the dignity of man, and the use of the democratic method in human relationships;
4. To implement our vision of one world by striving for a world community founded on ideals of brotherhood, justice and peace;
5. To serve the needs of member churches and fellowships, to organize new churches and fellowships, and to extend and strengthen liberal religion;

6. To encourage cooperation with men of good will in every land.

Not surprisingly, UUs in the 1980's advocated for a very different compilation, which reflected our changing values and aspirations. The adoption of the Seven Principles represented a new and much more inclusive era, which in turn paved the way for a new Source, i.e., "Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature," added in 1995.

The process continues. Just a few years ago, there was a serious effort to rewrite the Principles. I felt that the proposed revisions were prosaic, almost legalistic. Personally, I believe that poetry creates greater avenues for spiritual freedom.

The coming discussion will be fascinating, and reveal much about who we are and who we are becoming. The main discussion will focus on whether to change the language from "The inherent worth and dignity of every person" to "The inherent worth and dignity of every being." That one word could make a tremendous difference!

I am looking forward to participating in this great debate: I sense that our liberal religious movement may be on the edge of a major paradigm shift with respect to our theology of relationships, especially as we connect the first Principle with "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part."

I hope that all of us will consider the relative merits and challenges of this proposal, and add our voices to the discussion.

June, 2016

No article

July, 2016

In the early morning hours of Sunday, June 12, I went online and became aware of reports about the massive shooting incident at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Florida. The early reports did not name the shooter nor include much in the way of speculation as to the motive. I followed the story as more details emerged and the toll climbed, learning later that the victims were LGBTQ persons. By 10 am, it was clear that something truly horrific had taken place and I asked Buffy Lael, who was the Sunday morning worship leader, to dedicate the chalice lighting to those victims. I later referred to the attack during my Flower Communion remarks. When we spoke of this, I noticed

that some members looked surprised by the report and I realized that we were in fact breaking the news to them.

Later that afternoon, someone asked if we were going to hold a vigil and that prompted me to respond “Yes.” My thoughts immediately drifted back fifteen years to the September 11th vigil that I had hastily organized on that occasion. It made sense that we should do something right away and so, with only three hours’ notice, I began to circulate word of the vigil via social media — something that had not been available back then. Buff Carmichael and Jerry Bowman were helpful in getting things organized. On Sunday evening, nearly thirty people attended, including several faith leaders from the Catholic and Methodist traditions. I spoke first, trying to offer a framework for people to acknowledge their pain, grief and anger. Everyone was invited to light 1-2 candles for each of the victims and to share their thoughts. Some of the reflections were quite moving, such as one man who shared his experience of coming out to his father, who was a Christian pastor. Two reporters joined us, and an article appeared on-line later that evening. By Monday afternoon, though, the SJ-R had removed the thread containing comments by the public due to some vicious posts directed towards the LGBTQ community and some snarky comments directed at ALUUC. I was appalled that people were using this massacre as an excuse to cite Biblical passages and to gloat over the death of so many people. But it really did happen.

By midday, I met with Jonna Cooley of the Phoenix Center, Ryan Bandy of the Station House, and Rabbi Michael Datz of Temple B’rith Sholom to plan a larger vigil. Each of us made suggestions and Jonna took the lead and brought all the ideas and participants together, including Driss El-Akrich who was asked to speak on behalf of the Islamic Community. On Wednesday — a very warm day — about three hundred people of all ages and backgrounds gathered outside the Phoenix Center, and a vigil began to unfold that include prayers and meditations and music and the roll call of the dead. Some moments were unbelievably sad, such as when several people began to cry as they read the names and ages of the slain. Various members of ALUUC and PFLAG were present, and I was proud to see Kurt, Tracy, Susan & Diana displaying our “Standing on the Side of Love” banner and to see Jerry and Ken carrying the Pride Flag and Old Glory. It was an inspiring hour, and the final song, “God Bless America,” was offered with a depth that I have rarely heard.

On Thursday, in response to the report of this event, some people resumed their on-line attacks against the LGBTQ community. Such callousness, dressed in religious language, is despicable.

More and more, my thoughts return to the vigils of 9/11, and the anniversaries of the same, of the vigil following Columbine, Sandy Hook, and other massacres. I have participated in so many that I really don’t have to search for references on how to lead

them. How have we reached such a point when this could have become almost normal? I am grateful that some members of Congress have expressed outrage and vowed to enact a change in our gun laws, but my faith in such action suffered a terrible setback in the aftermath of Sandy Hook. I don't know what will come next. Regardless, given our current climate, I trust that we will offer our voices and support to the members of the LGBTQ Community and the Muslim Community, both of which continue to be the targets of religious and political bigotry.

August, 2016

I have lost count of the various tragedies that have infested the new reports this summer. Racism and violence and terrorism all seem to be rampant. So many violent acts across the globe, so many victims of all ages, and families torn apart. They begin to blur into one another. I dread to imagine what the coming months will spawn.

I have also seen how the political frenzy has stung some people to snarl and curse each other. So awful to witness, especially in people I know personally. I dread to imagine how far we shall stoop during the next few months.

And that unnerves me.

How do we respond, how to recover a sense of interconnectedness and hope? I remind myself that compassion will be a guide through these awful days. And that we are not alone. Furthermore, I turn to music and poetry. "Beware of Darkness" by George Harrison is a personal favorite in such times, and it redirects my thoughts. So too does the poem "The Peace of Wild Things" by Wendell Berry:

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

(1968)

And then there is the ancient tale of the monarch who had the phrase, “this too shall pass” inscribed upon a ring – words to offer a pinch of reality when all seemed eternally delightful or when all seemed interminably tragic. Those words are always true. Perhaps, they will be enough for now. This too shall pass. Yes, of course. And we are not alone.

September, 2016

In 2015, Black Lives Matter activist Shaun King wrote, “If you ever wondered who you would be or what you would do if you lived during the Civil Rights Movement, stop. You are living in that time, *right now*.” No one I’ve spoken with has doubted the disparities that exist in our society, in particular those that stem from Racism. And yet, a number of individuals from various faith traditions have continued to wrestle with how to stand against Racism. Some congregations have organized regular vigils; others have raised banners; others have launched programs to explore privilege, prejudice and racism. In our own congregation, members have participated in the Racial Taboo initiative, Conversations on Race and Sacred Conversations on Race + Action. We have begun to participate in Faith Coalition for the Common Good, a local chapter of the social justice network known as Gamaliel. In fact, Jan Droegkamp, Laura Thomas-Marlow and I recently participated in a weeklong training session hosted by Gamaliel.

For its part, the Unitarian Universalist Association has firmly endorsed the effort to address and eradicate racism; likewise, the UU Minister’s Association recently revised its mission statement to include the following declaration:

“The UUMA functions with an anti-racist, anti-oppressive, multicultural world-view and practice. UUMA members support each other and are engaged in the work of antiracism, anti-oppression and multiculturalism. In UUMA collegial gatherings, continuing education, and governance, dominant cultural assumptions no longer prevail; shared meaning is discovered rather than assumed.”

It seems that history is repeating itself for Unitarian Universalism. This movement, which was formed in 1961 through the merger of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America, was immediately confronted with the role of this faith during the Civil Rights movement. In 1965, when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr made a national call for clergy from every faith tradition to join him in Selma, approximately 50% of the UU ministers responded – along with many lay persons. Many of us know of the martyrdom of the Rev. James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo. During my years at Meadville/ Lombard Theological School, these two individuals were lifted up as exemplars of people willing to put their faith on the line. Several of my professors in fact had been close friends of Jim Reeb, and when they spoke of his life and death, they were choked

by emotion. Another minister told me that he had just begun to serve a suburban congregation when King issued his plea. He admitted that he debated whether or not to go – he had a young family, a new career, and he was anxious about taking a leave of absence from his new settlement. But then something extraordinary happened – when he showed up for the Sunday service, he was met by a delegation of members who gave him a bus ticket to Selma and they issued him a charge to go there and represent them and the larger UU community. He remembered how unexpected this was, and he was grateful to serve such a committed group of individuals, who understood that the role of the church is not to build ivory towers but to seek engagement in the real world.

Fast forward to 2016. Most of us would agree that we are not living in a post-racial, color-blind society. I have been in conversation with civic and faith leaders who hope to advance not only the conversations about race, but to create positive actions that will move us closer to a transformation of the larger culture. One upcoming event, scheduled for September 12, will be the “Higher Ground Day of Moral Action.” This event is directly related to the series of “Moral Mondays,” created by the Rev. William Barber, and promises to bring together people from diverse faith traditions in various state capitols, including Springfield. We are expecting Unitarian Universalists from various Illinois congregations to join in this event – there are details elsewhere in this month’s newsletter. I hope that you will join with us as well – this may be the defining social justice work of our lifetime. But as has become apparent to me, this is not the work of one individual or group or even of one generation – it is the work of the generations, to further the arc of the moral universe, as it bends towards justice.

October, 2016

At times, the distinctive threads of church & state seem to be hopelessly intertwined. This is all the more so when major election cycles arrive — a spate of conversations crop up concerning what is appropriate to say from different venues — most particularly when the pulpit is involved. This is a perennial conversation and the internet seems to amplify its tenor. But so too do current events; occasionally, a candidate will court endorsements from prominent faith leaders, speak in churches, or even announce that “God” told them to run in the first place. More recently, the issue gained heightened scrutiny when, during one of the recent political conventions, some advocated that the “Johnson Amendment” ought to be repealed.

A letter received this very morning from a group called “Americans United for Separation of Church and State” addresses that issue: *Claims have been made that the Johnson Amendment prohibits clergy from discussing political issues in the pulpit. This is not true. The Johnson Amendment...is an amendment to the federal tax code that*

makes it illegal for houses of worship and other 501 (c)(3) non-profits to endorse or oppose candidates for public office (their italics).

Their website (www.au.org) elaborates further, “Religious groups have the right to speak out on political and social issues. Federal law, however, prohibits most tax-exempt bodies, including houses of worship, from intervening in elections by endorsing or opposing candidates for public office. Churches are not political action committees and should not act like them. Religious leaders should abide by the law and refrain from turning their congregations into cogs in a political machine.”

Such conversations are dominating collegial on-line groups. Today I read a post from a minister who says that several lawyers in her congregation have warned her that it is illegal to denounce any particular candidate from the pulpit. Another describes “getting pressure to speak directly on the election.” The comment section sprawls on and on.

The basic issue involves the IRS code as it pertains to tax exempt groups. I have always understood that a minister, priest, imam or rabbi must refrain from publicly endorsing/denouncing a particular candidate in our capacity as a faith leader. We may endorse voter registration on the premises. We may even address issues and values from the pulpit. Sometimes, our words and phrases do no doubt betray a bias. But my training is that we must never be explicit towards the candidates themselves or their political affiliations. You can imagine how taken aback I am when other faith leaders brazenly ignore “the rules.” How can one leader, for example, assert that the immortal souls of any followers would be eternally jeopardized should they vote for a particular party? How is it that some televangelists publicly turn a worship service into a partisan bully pulpit, seemingly without fear of consequence?

Blatant examples abound every election season, but many matters are more subtle. For example, I have also understood that any clergy may openly support one or another candidate as a private citizen, e.g., by the displaying of yard signs, volunteering for a campaign, etc. But when we do that, we must set aside the title “Reverend.” That’s not always easy to do. Still, I endeavor to maintain a difference between my public and personal personas. Imagine the message I would send if my car carried multiple political bumper stickers, or if I wore a candidate’s button on my preaching robe. Personally, I would be offended if a colleague crossed that line — maybe that line between church and state must truly be, as one of the founders argued, a shifting line, rather than a wall. And now, if you’ll excuse me, today is the first day for early voting, and I have a civic duty to perform.

November, 2016

I grew up in a very full house – two parents, seven siblings, and the occasional furry pet. At certain times of the day, there would be a predictable surge of activity – most especially in the morning. Things could get noisy and personal space could get cramped. The bathroom was suddenly in high demand, so no one loitered unnecessarily. I don't think that I looked very deeply into the mirror save for a passing glance, perhaps to check a worrisome pimple.

In contrast, I spent more uninterrupted time facing a mirror when I was marched off to the local barbershop with my brothers to get our hair trimmed. On those occasions, we would take a turn, in chronological order, oldest going first. While we waited, I would skim through the pages of some derelict sports magazine waiting for my name to be called. When the time came, I would be obliged to clamber into a hydraulic chair and to sit without squirming for ten minutes. As was the custom, my upper body was mostly covered in a large bib, so that my reflection was the prominent item on display. I learned to tune out the conversations around me, and to focus on the face that peered back, freckles and all. Given all the commotion throughout the rest of my day, it was a welcome opportunity of self discovery – I became aware of successive changes over the course of my visits. Even though I have not visited a licensed barber or stylist in years – Angela cuts my hair -- I still retain some of those images to this day.

This image comes to mind as I try to articulate what it's like to go through a Long Range Planning Process with all of you. So much of what we do is familiar, and how we do it is often a matter of routine. By participating in this process, we have all been given that rare privilege of stepping back from the busyness and to intentionally imagine what we might yet become. I know that my job expectations and understanding of ministry have evolved since I first arrived in 2003. So too has the congregation changed – experts like Alice Mann teach that for a congregation to stay healthy as it grows numerically, there must be a deeper sense of connectedness, more specialized programming, evolution in terms of liturgy, and more tasks delegated to professional staff. To be sure, this has been happening over the past decade, but now we as a whole will move the conversation forward on November 13, with greater focus and intentionality. I do not doubt that ALUUC will not only continue to expand its circles of ministry, inspiration and fellowship, but will also assume a much larger role among the local coalitions of faith communities that clamor for social justice.

December, 2016

Fast away the current year passes! If you're like me, it often seems that busyness reaches a crescendo during the period spanning late November to January. Along with the usual liturgical expectations come many a holiday and holy day for many faith traditions. How to keep oneself on track?

Just recently, I attended a planning meeting with my interfaith colleagues. Our January 3rd meeting will focus on the theme "the Calendars by Which We All Live." Those who hail from the Protestant and Catholic traditions have begun to observe Advent, the season of preparation which culminates with Christmas. They, along with our Jewish, Buddhist and Muslim neighbors have a series of festivals and religious seasons by which to map out the course of a year. But what can be said about Unitarian Universalists – where do we find inspiration?

Some UUs are mindful of the major holiday seasons of the larger culture of which we are a part; some, especially those who were raised in a different tradition, are mindful of those roots – especially if we share celebrations with our families. Others may choose to honor them in private while still others may choose not to keep them at all.

I know that in my own journey through life, both approaches have been true at one time or another. While I personally no longer adhere to the traditional holiday seasons, I am quite mindful of particular secular and religious holidays. These are one of the ways that I organize my life. But in addition to taking note of those special dates on the calendar, I am attuned to other annual thresholds. For example, I am very attuned to the transitions of the seasons themselves – Autumn in particular fills me with a sense of urgency; Winter, on the other hand, often fills me a deep sense of detachment. But I don't necessarily frame my sermon themes in response to those emotional responses.

Some UU Congregations have adopted the practice of choosing themes to punctuate the calendar year: Gratitude, Awareness and Simplicity are typical examples, or the pre-selected themes might reflect the Seven Principles. Proponents believe that structuring multiple services in succession on the same theme would allow for greater depth and exploration. I have resisted using that framework because it feels a bit artificial but also because I like the flexibility of addressing different concerns that can arise quite unexpectedly. However, I do choose topics at least a month in advance – I regard that as a form of spiritual discipline. (As an aside, some may wonder whether a minister ever runs out of ideas for preaching topics – one mentor advised that if that ever proved to be the case, to go on a pastoral visit and multiple themes would instantly present themselves.)