

From the Minister ... 2017

January, 2017

Dear Friends, There can be no mistake: Twenty seventeen draws nigh. Who could have predicted the events of the past year? But now, duty calls, and my first duty is to write an article for FOCUS. Writing a piece that one hopes will accurately foreshadow the coming year is an exercise in unbridled faith (some might say futility). But faith is part of that memorable trinity, inseparable from Hope and Love. Today, I was browsing through articles which I've submitted to January editions of FOCUS over the past fourteen years, looking for inspiration on what to express to you; this one from 2007 caught my interest — further evidence that everything old will eventually be new again. Here, then, are my thoughts from ten years ago, which seem just as appropriate in our current world as a decade ago.

An old adage claims that “Change alone is unchanging.” These words come to mind as another year passes and yet another commences. It is easy to say and comprehend, but difficult at times to accept.

We measure the years of our lives by the time it takes the earth to circumnavigate the sun — but also in terms of key events. We are the sum of those events, whether they be tinged with sorrow or with joy. During the past twelve months, some have been blessed with new love, new children, new friends, new jobs. Others have been less fortunate.

Abraham Lincoln once related the story of a monarch who challenged his advisors to find one phrase that was always true, regardless of circumstances. After much deliberation, they offered the words, “This too shall pass.” They also suggested that such words would offer a measure of consolation in times of distress and a measure of prudent pause. Whatever this New Year brings, let us embrace the changes through which we pass, and may we continue to join together in the spirit of fellowship, hope, and reverence.

February, 2017

I find the political rhetoric about building a great wall on our Southern border to be very troubling. Perhaps you do too. It turns out that my thoughts have grappled with this theme before – in fact, my 1998 sermon to the UUA Ministerial Fellowship Committee (MFC) was entitled, “Theology of Walls (& Bridges).” Here are a few excerpts:

“Walls, as you know, are commonplace – they stretch across most landscapes. Some walls – as in Berlin, or across China –assume an importance that transcends their stone and mortar....Generations transmit more than positive passwords...more often than not, we inherit bricks. So we do what comes natural – we build walls. You may recall that Sophia Lyon Fahs likened some beliefs to a walled garden. She could well have extended the metaphor...to fortresses, or prisons. In any event, all walls are a tangible statement that I belong here, you, there.”

“I witnessed one such divide...the last time I joined a protest...in 1991, while the clouds of war were brooding over Kuwait...When I arrived (at Chicago’s civic center) an enormous crowd was already on hand....I was struck by the complete absence of US flags. Meanwhile, across the street, a smaller counter demonstration had formed...waving the stars & stripes. It was clear that an invisible wall divided them as effectively as any erected by human hands....I left, bought a US flag, donned a suit – and returned downtown.”

What happened next became the crux of my MFC sermon. The counter-protestors were initially incredulous that someone could oppose the war yet appear patriotic. One assumed that I was going to burn it. My response was, “*Are you kidding? I just paid \$60 for this flag!*” That moment of levity opened a door to a conversation. We did not convert the other, but we heard each other’s concerns, and achieved a sense of awareness that was absent before.

In that sermon, I quoted Gerda Klein, who had survived a Nazi death camp and later moved to Chicago: “*I’ve always felt that if people can understand what connects us, not what separates us, it would be a better world.*”

I think that that is profound advice, and very applicable to the realities of the present. My summation in 1998 could have been written today, “*Perhaps, to return to the metaphor used earlier, walls are inherent to human nature and will endure forever. But, however complex may be the process of transforming walls to bridges, it remains one of our most pressing tasks...It is my hope, indeed my prayer, that our own endeavors help us to transcend that which divides, so that we may further the blessings of creation.*”

March, 2017

While skimming through past FOCUS articles, I came upon this memory from eleven years ago, written in the aftermath of the tornadoes of March, 2006. It still resonates with me today. All of us have experienced loss, and many of us are left with questions that go unanswered.

On Saturday, March 11, Celeste found an egg on our front lawn. She gleefully picked it up and showed it first to Angela and then to me. It was very small and slightly blue – a robin's egg, I suppose. Celeste gushed about how her teacher had set up an incubator, with chicken eggs, in her classroom. We let her bring her discovery into the house; she placed it in a doll crib, tucked under a tiny blanket.

The next evening, the sirens sang. I studied the sky from the front porch, listening for hail and gauging the force of the wind. By the time the electricity was knocked out, I had located flashlights, batteries, candles, etc., and began to explain to Celeste why we were going to move to the basement, Celeste insisted on bringing the egg along. In truth, I would not have remembered it myself.

The storm came, and then passed over us. We cautiously left the basement and sat around the kitchen table, the three of us and one egg. The room itself was illuminated by a mixture of flashlight and candlelight. At one point she positioned one flashlight so that it bathed the egg in light & warmth. But then, while I fiddled with the radio, disaster struck. Celeste had removed the egg from its crib and was cradling it in her hand. But something went wrong. She noticed that the egg now had a fatal crack, slightly seeping. In rapid succession, dread rushed over her, then grief, and finally guilt. All other fears that night were forgotten.

What to tell her? Compared to what Springfield had just suffered, this was a minute loss. Yet to a six year old girl, that egg possessed enormous significance. As you might suppose, we assured her that the crack had probably started when the egg first fell out of the tree. It may well have. At any rate, our adult explanation proved satisfactory, and she was eventually able to fall asleep, safe, sound – and exhausted.

I, on the other hand, stayed awake for quite some time. One wishes that the world was completely tidy, utterly safe, and that one's own assurances brought complete peace. But it is not to be, evidently. And so it must be that we will look for, and hopefully find, comfort from one another.

April, 2017

Public prayer became a local newsworthy issue in December, when a member of the Sangamon County Board offered the following opening prayer:

“Lord in Heaven during this Christmas season as we celebrate the birth of Your Son, Jesus Christ, we are reminded that our country, the United States of America, was founded on Godly principles, by God fearing men and women who believed in the Holy Bible and thereby set up a form of government for a God fearing populace. So on this day Lord we humbly pray for the forgiveness of our sins and that our fellow countrymen will unite with us in inviting You into their hearts and souls making us one nation under God thereby allowing the God of the Universe to bless our country so it will be truly great again.”

Some objected because its language was reminiscent of the partisan rhetoric of the recent national election, whereas others denounced it as exclusionary, while still others questioned the appropriateness of having prayers included during any governmental function.

We are, as Sidney Mead wrote, “the Nation with the Soul of a Church.” But the central issues are as old as the Republic and will probably always persist. I am reminded that some debate the tradition of chaplains in the military, the phrase “under God” in the *Pledge of Allegiance*, religious symbols or references in public centers, etc. As recently as 2014, the Supreme Court ruled that it was not a violation of Church & State for official meetings to include public invocations. More recently, there has been a larger public debate on whether specific religious groups can be banned from the country. And who can forget the controversy stemming from the President’s remarks during the recent Prayer Breakfast?

I am no stranger to this public aspect of ministry, having offered opening prayers before many civic groups and both the Illinois Senate and the House of Representatives (including the first session following the impeachment of Gov. Blagojevich). (By the way, it is customary that the prayer-giver afterwards leads the elected officials in the Pledge of Allegiance. One of my favorite memories is when a rather young Celeste recited the Pledge from the podium in unison with a roomful of Senators.)

How different it is when religious colleagues worship together. In my experience, when representatives from different faith traditions plan an interfaith ceremony, we often confer beforehand whether all prayers should be inclusive, or whether they may be specific to one’s own tradition. In practice, inclusive language means that Theists typically refer to “God”, “Creator,” and/or “Father” whereas UUs may refer to “Spirit of Life,” “Holy One,” or, as is my wont, “Eternal Heart.”

As it happens, I have been asked to offer the opening invocation at the April 10th meeting of the Sangamon County Board. I intend to craft an inclusive prayer, honoring

the religious pluralism of our modern society. Let us see how well it is received by the Board Members and the public.

May, 2017

A wise woman, Helen Keller, once wrote:

“We bereaved are not alone. We belong to the largest company in all the world – the company who has known suffering. When it seems that sorrow is too great to be borne, let us think of the great family of the heavy hearted into which are grief has given us entrance, and inevitably we will feel about us then, their arms, their sympathy, their understanding.”

Those words have been on my mind lately. So too, the idea from Martin Buber that the Holy is to be discovered in our relationships. I am humbled by the outpouring of support from many friends, especially within our ALUUC family, upon my brother's death. During the past two weeks, we have received many cards, messages, calls and even a gorgeous bouquet of flowers from members and friends. I thank you all.

Of course, there have been other deaths within our community, including Dave Braddock most recently. As I reflect on how the members here create a sense of beloved community, I must confess my sense of awe at the generous responses that so many offer to those families that experience profound loss. So much goes into creating a Celebration of Life – and quite often, the same individuals step forward to donate their services as a matter of course. Bonnie Ettinger's musical ministry is a testament of dedication as well as beauty; so too, those who prepare the receptions, arrange the flowers, serve the food, and clean up. So too, are those who set up the projector for the slide show and record the service and then create a DVD for the family, usually while the reception is in progress. How remarkable are all these things, yet so easy to take for granted!

As Helen Keller reminds us, our losses make us kin – but as we all know, that doesn't necessary motivate all to respond in kind. Here, though, we are mindful of one another's losses and seek to console – some through words, others through actions. Buber was right: it is through such relationships – our connectedness - that we became acquainted with the holy, and participate therein. A prophet of old might exclaim, —Surely, the Holy is present in this place, yet I was unaware until now!!

June, 2017

As we approach the summer, many UU congregations will offer a “Flower Communion.” This is a lovely ceremony often used to close a liturgical year that began with a Water & Stone Communion. Many will remember that the Czech-born Rev. Norbert Čapek and his wife Maja popularized this ritual which has become synonymous with celebrating the gifts of community.

When I was a student, I learned about Rev. Čapek and his pilgrimage from orthodox bishop to Unitarian clergy, and how his resistance to the Nazis resulted in his murder in a concentration camp. At the time, I had supposed that he had single-handedly invented this celebration. I was therefore surprised to learn that Flower Communion existed in the Midwestern Unitarian churches as early as the 1880's.

Among the books which I've acquired are two hymn and service books – one published by the Western Unitarian Conference in 1888 and another published in 1895 by the Unitarian Sunday School Association. Both include a “Service for Flower or Children's Sunday.” The two services are distinct from one another in terms of liturgy but they are alike in that they celebrate the end of the regular church year and religious education classes. They are charming in their own right, but oh so very different from what Rev. Čapek created.

I suspect that during his residency in the United States, Rev. and Mrs. Čapek became familiar with these services and blended them with similar services from his native Roman Catholic and subsequent Baptist traditions into something unique and enduring. What is often overlooked is the role played by Maja Čapek. When her husband died, she continued to be active in Unitarian congregations and she enthusiastically promoted this ritual. In time, it gained a solid foothold on these shores and was in turn heavily encouraged by the UUA.

I think that most rituals, from many different traditions have similar pedigrees. In the same way, a prayer or a song may be created, and it becomes popular in one locale and then takes on a life of its own. Like seeds sown in the wind, they become inseparable from the tradition. No doubt, many of the most cherished religious traditions owe their existence to the love and devotion of certain inspired individuals across the ages, most of whose names are probably forgotten except in archaic footnotes. Be that as it may, I trust that the Flower Communion will continue to be a vital, if not essential, ritual in our house of worship and a thousand more like it, for many generations yet to come – and will be remembered as a tribute to a husband and wife who both cherished their church community.

July, 2017

My thoughts today are in response to the news item that the local Catholic bishop has announced that LGBTQ people may not receive either Communion or Funeral Rites:

On June 3, I was called to the bedside of a congregant, Jerry Bowman, as he lay dying in the ER at Memorial Hospital. When I arrived, I met several of the staff who had been caring for him and his spouse. As it became clear that Jerry's time on Earth was growing short, I continued to talk to him while his spouse held his hand. It was a very tender time, and I must commend the staff for their high degree of professionalism and empathy. It did not matter that his spouse was also a man – we honored their bond and their humanity. Several days later, I conducted a funeral service for Jerry and he was laid to rest not far from the Lincoln Tomb. All those who knew Jerry and his husband recognized full well that theirs was a true marriage of hearts and minds and that nothing less than a dignified and reverent service was warranted.

I am so proud of my church, the Abraham Lincoln UU Congregation – which, along with other local faith communities, welcomed and affirmed this couple along with so many others. The hymnal lyrics, “How could anyone ever tell you, you were anything less than beautiful?/How could anyone ever tell you, you were less than whole?” have been on my mind this past week as I read the local news. I pray that eventually others will open their hearts and doors to the LGBTQ community, especially in their hours of need.

August, 2017

I must have looked like an easy target. There I was on a subway, wearing a touristy shirt and shorts, my pale legs advertising the fact that I was a relative newcomer to this sunny clime. As I was leaving the station, I felt a light brush against my pants. I stopped, turned around and looked at the person behind me — he was a man maybe late 20s facial hair and a backpack. Something seemed wrong but I resumed walking. Several steps later, I froze, patted my pockets, instantly knew that my wallet was gone. Along with my passport. And various IDs.

We've all read about these things happening to other people. But today, it was my turn. What to do?

A younger version of me might have been beset by either rage or panic. Perhaps because of my age, or perhaps because of my vocation, I managed a different response. I still had access to a cell phone, so I was able to immediately call and cancel my credit cards. Everything else in my wallet could be replaced. But it was relatively easy to minimize the damage. That makes me one of the fortunate ones, I guess. Calls

completed, I was faced with the choice. Do I continue with this excursion into the city with Angela, or cancel our plans and return home?

It took me several minutes to decide. Oh, yes, I was agitated by the incident, and was equally annoyed with myself for being careless while out and about in Madrid. We discussed our options, and decided to go forward. In retrospect, I'm glad that we did.

I offer this as a brief primer on a spirituality in progress. I make mistakes. I do not always have a handle on my emotions. But through my years of being with others who were in deep crisis, coupled with grace and reflection, I keep steering myself towards a better path.

As I often say during a wedding, "we cannot choose which changes and chances will befall us, but we can choose the spirit with which we will meet them." Those words actually came to mind, and I'm grateful for that. In that spirit, I recognized that this incident had created more of a nuisance than a catastrophe. It could have been worse, much worse.

I am suddenly reminded of the recurring refrain from the veteran police sergeant on the old TV series "Hill Street Blue," — "Be careful out there." In our world, that's sage advice. But that's only half of it. Let us be careful, true, but may we never permit apprehension to stifle our senses of wonder or gratitude.

September, 2017

Many of us are aware of the surge in hate crimes and white supremacist rallies across the land. While such incidents in themselves are not new, the response has been powerful. Almost immediately following the murder of Heather Heyer in Charlottesville, VA, many communities came together to denounce these awful crimes and rallies. Springfield, Illinois was one such community. With very little advance notice, a call went out via social media for a vigil against hate on Sunday August 13. I arrived and was invited by organizer Debbie Bandy to share a few words. In all, nearly 300 residents of Springfield showed up including many members of ALUUC. Members of the clergy were asked to form a backdrop for the speakers. Standing there, I was moved by the powerful witness of people I've known for a long time, including: Sara Isbell, Silas Johnson, Shatriya Smith, Sunshine Clemons, and Teresa Haley. As I listened intently to the prayers and songs shared by friends and colleagues, an idea formed of what to say:

"Namaste.

"For nearly fifteen years, I have lived amongst you. I have many friends here, many peers, many colleagues. Race does not divide us. Religion does not divide us. How we identify ourselves does not divide us. We choose to celebrate one another. We choose to affirm and to bless one another. Now, not far from here, Mr. Lincoln gave an immortal

speech and he said, 'A house divided against itself cannot stand.' Those words still ring true today, as they did so many decades ago.

"I have stood with my friends and colleagues in various circles of prayer, mourning, and grief — after the murders in Charleston. After the murders at the Pulse Night Club. Again and again, tragedy has brought us together. And we have reminded ourselves that we are one people, and that a spark of the holy resides in all of us. But, as various signs remind us here today, silence cripples us. It brings further division. It enhances the sense that we are not one people, not all children of the one Holy Spirit. And so, we come again, following a tragedy, to reach across whatever divisions others may want to impose upon us. To remind us that whatever faith tradition, however we celebrate the Holy, however we claim for ourselves a particular party, a particular tradition, different languages, that there is something much stronger. And we must not let those who seek to separate and divide, they must not shout us down. Long, long ago, the poet Walt Whitman sang, "I hear America singing." There is not one song that we sing. There are in fact, many songs. And they blend together into a chorus that is a blessing, that speaks of something new, born upon this continent, something which is available to all generations. Something good. Something holy. Something that we are all a part of. Regardless of who we are, and then our children, and our children's children, will continue to sing this song, and it uplifts us all. We must not give in to hatred. We who...have many privileges, as my peers have already spoken of, we must use our privileges, we must use our life, we must exert more and more, pray more and more, sing more and more, so that the dream of America will continue to flourish. (May) the beacon of the Statue of Liberty — and all it stands for — burn brighter in the night, (more so than any) beacons or torches of Nazis or the children who serve evil can ever hope to blot out. Amen, amen and blessed be."

October, 2017

This article was originally published in Focus in November, 2005. It seems just as relevant today as it did back then. – Martin

An elderly neighbor of mine held a substantial sale today; she is giving up her house and moving into a retirement home. A stream of strangers rummaged through her dwindling possessions, handling one item after another and asking "how much?"

That scene reminded me of the time when Angela and I were house hunting here in Springfield; we were shown one home that belonged to another elderly widow. She and her late husband had built their house themselves after WWII. But she too was being forced by circumstances to give up that home. As the realtor led us through the house, she followed, like a frail shadow, sharing bittersweet details about the life she had known there.

I can think of several persons in our own congregation who have likewise had to surrender their homes and move forward into the unknown.

In the news of late one sees many people on the move, refugees from one enormous hurricane after another. Many of us are equally aware of the rising tide of homeless people in our midst, some of whom do have jobs but cannot afford a place to stay.

It is evident that many individuals, agencies and corporations are anxious to help, and have been generous in their responses when a severe crisis occurs. But how well do we as a society and as individuals respond to calamities that are less dramatic?

There is a popular saying, "It takes a village to raise a child." If true, then surely it also takes a village to care for the infirm, the widowed, the orphaned and the aged.

I read recently that the price of heating fuel is expected to shoot up soon. Which begs the question: how will those on fixed incomes manage?

Angela has ruefully remarked to me that this is a harsh country to live in if you're old and poor. Of course, there are poor people throughout the world, and the measure of poverty is relative. And yet, some countries do seem to extend more assistance, and compassion, to their old, infirm and poor.

Could our village do more?

November, 2017

This Thanksgiving season, I find myself reflecting on these lyrics from the hymn Every Night and Every Morn:

*Joy and Woe are woven fine / clothing for the soul divine:
under every grief and pine / runs a joy with silk entwine*

I am struck by how often we encounter curious juxtapositions in worship and in life. Some sages encourage us to hold both in tension as they become evident. When I hear this advice, I interpret it as an invitation to carve out sacred space. It can be a most difficult thing to do, especially during the rapid flow of one's life, unless one is intentional. But it can also be one of the greatest gifts we can offer to one another.

Sometimes, we invoke a ritual form for achieving this sacred space, especially during rites of passage. At weddings, for example, we often set aside a few minutes to remember those who are absent, either due to distance or death; at Celebrations of Life, we encourage people to share a balance of poignant memories and light-hearted anecdotes.

And then there are the causal occasions when people who are in vastly different emotional places are pulled together, by accident or by design. Holiday gatherings are a

classic example. While often we associate holidays with joy and reunion, I'm mindful that for others, such occasions can be a burden, especially when they have suffered a major illness or loss.

In the past, I have seen adults bowed with grief after their parents had died yet performing the duties of host and hostess, and I myself have been caught in a similar disconnect — times when I sat silent and brooding at family gatherings while around me swirled all sorts of fun and frolic.

I know that there are many ways to move through grief, some in private while others are more social in nature. Thank goodness for these various avenues, and for friends and family attuned enough to discern which one offers the best balm in a given moment.

During the coming Thanksgiving, I will carry with me many precious memories of Thanksgivings past as I drive north on I-55. Upon arrival at my sister's house, I will rejoice in seeing so many dear ones present. Nestled by the TV, nephews and nieces will be playing a game and pets will pouncing on couches. The noise level will ebb and flow from room to room, decreasing as the mealtime approaches. I love those moments. But I'm also grateful for special touches that call into memory those who are absent, e.g., several variations of my late grandmother's venerable recipe for spinach casserole. This year, I know that our family will also carve out a sacred space for my brother, who passed away last spring. However we do this, I know that we will be holding one another close, while at the same time, offering to the younger generation an insight into how certain family traditions arise and why they endure. In time, it will be their turn to create sacred spaces and to cherish what for us now is the present.

December, 2017

*They told me that when Jesus was born a star appeared
above the place where the young child lay.*

*When I was very young I had no trouble believing wondrous things;
I believed in the star ...*

... Some bright star shines in the heavens each time a child is born.

Who knows what it may foretell?

*Who knows what uncommon life may yet again unfold,
if we but give it a chance?*

These words, written by my dear mentor Rev. Margaret Gooding are fresh every Christmas season, as it weaves together the gospel narratives that describe the birth of Jesus and the revelations of science and other faith traditions. Indeed, as I wrestle for words right now, various strands of memory conflate: Peg Gooding's insights of Universalism; the Chicago Children's Choir singing during a candle light service; a Franciscan giving a humorous homily about the Holy Family; stories about that same

family fleeing to Egypt; Mike Royko's classic "Mary & Joe" column; our own Christmas Eve services wherein we honor multiple faith traditions, and the recent local Welcoming City initiative. In my younger years, I imagined that one weary family as they were turned away repeatedly in Bethlehem, finding no respite save a manger. But the gospel further declares that an impending calamity became known, forcing them to flee to Egypt, away from a tyrannical ruler.

How is it, I wonder, that so many can so eagerly celebrate the notion that all humanity is one extended family — and yet close their hearts as firmly as doors to modern day refugees and immigrants? Does not Christmas embrace the vulnerable and the meek, and should its spirit extend throughout the year?

Perhaps the Rev. Howard Thurman gave the best answer, to every generation, when he wrote:

*When the song of angels is stilled
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins;
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the brothers,
to make music in the heart.*