

From the Minister ... 2018

January, 2018

As ALUUC nears the anniversary of its 65th birthday, and I approach my 15th year in your service, I wanted to share an article that I contributed to FOCUS exactly ten years ago. I think that this message is still quite relevant. - Martin

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, 2018

In January, the world’s media reported that the President had made horrible comments about the nations of Africa and elsewhere, including Haiti. At the time, I happened to be in Madrid. To me, this was as much an affront spiritually as it was political. Subsequent to that report, various people confided that they no longer felt safe vacationing in the USA. Only a few years ago, these same people had been enthusiastic supporters about the nation of which I am a citizen. No more, at least for the foreseeable future. These conversations called to mind recent reports that the number of foreign exchange students enrolled in US institutions of higher learning has plummeted during the past year. (I expect that the reaction has been similar in our nation’s high schools.) Meanwhile, Spain jumped ahead of the US in 2017 in terms of tourists for the very first time. Simple cause and effect at work, it would seem.

As I absorbed all this, my thoughts turned to two 19th century Unitarians - firstly, Abraham Lincoln and then to Walt Whitman. Lincoln was a friend of the immigrants of

his era – for example, he sponsored a German language newspaper in St. Louis. His enthusiasm was infectious to his generation - and perhaps no one caught the spirit as thoroughly as Walt Whitman.

Whitman was the quintessential voice of the American ideal - during a time when America was emerging as the leading Western Democracy. Many of his poems are infused with optimism as well as gratitude; his poetry incarnated equality between men and women, between native-born and foreign born. Truly, he affirmed the “inherent sense of worth and dignity for all people,” regardless of race, religion, or ethnicity. I vaguely recalled one such poem and quickly located it on the internet. I promptly created a simple meme and posted it on social media - it featured a photograph of Whitman and the poem "You, Whoever You Are." Almost immediately, this meme began to receive multiple likes, and assumed a virtual life of its own, well beyond the immediate circle of “my friends.” I was astonished to see it go “viral” (perhaps not of the same magnitude of a post by George Takei, but more popular than anything I had ever posted before!) as of today, this Whitman post has received 467 reactions and 452 shares – many by people whom I’ve never met, nor are likely to meet.

Here is the poem, which in my estimation which sings across the centuries and still captures the spiritual essence of America (and Unitarian Universalism):

You, whoever you are!...
All you continentals of Asia, Africa, Europe, Australia, indifferent of place!
All you on the numberless islands of the archipelagoes of the sea!
All you of centuries hence when you listen to me!
All you each and everywhere whom I specify not, but include just the same!
Health to you! good will to you all, from me and America sent!
Each of us is inevitable,
Each of us is limitless—each of us with his or her right upon the earth,
Each of us allow'd the eternal purports of the earth,
Each of us here as divinely as any is here.

March, 2018

(no article)

April, 2018

I used to call it Holy Week. I remember well some of the practices, which included walking the Stations of the Cross. To my young mind, it was natural to confuse the notions of Rebirth, Regeneration and Resurrection. But of course, while similar in certain respects, they are quite distinct from one another.

When I moved out of the mainstream of that faith, I deliberately retired certain theological rituals and constructs from my lexicon and practice. I remember how one gifted mentor wondered how much of my evolving faith was merely reactionary. It gave me pause, and eventually, I reexamined some ideas and rituals which I had left behind.

Within the liberal tradition, I have sometimes noted that it is natural to cherish Christmas, and to celebrate the promise that the spirit of hope and goodness will be infused throughout humanity. Easter, however, is something altogether different. This holy day is founded on the notion that one who was dead was resurrected. Not sleeping, not in a coma. As such, its adherents believe that Easter testifies to a unique supernatural event.

By now, many of you will have noticed that Easter falls on April Fool's Day. No doubt, many a Christian colleague is already preparing a sermon based in part upon several lines from St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians:

*We have become a spectacle to the whole world, to angels as well as to men.
We are fools for Christ, but you are wise in Christ.*

While I personally do not subscribe to the supernatural essence of a traditional Easter, I am mindful that small "miracles" can and do arrive unexpectedly. Some of you may recall that it was a year ago that my older brother passed away. One of his treatments involved a bone marrow transplant. I and my siblings were all tested to see who would be the best match to be a donor. Even though we understood that the procedure could be painful, none of us shirked the opportunity. The optimum choice was my younger sister Colleen or myself. In the end, Colleen was chosen to donate her bone marrow. Brian endured yet another round of radiation, killing off all the blood-producing cells in his body. And then, these new cells were introduced. We all trusted in the miracles of modern science, and I can assure you, that we all also prayed for his recovery. And he did recover - and a strange thing had happened. Originally, Brian's blood type was A+; now, he was type O - the same as Colleen. I was impressed enough to note that transformation as the seed of an Easter story about death and resurrection. Does it satisfy all the theological criteria of an Easter story? Perhaps not, But sometimes the personal stories that are woven into our own lives carry the most meaning.

And so, I commend to you this time of awakening and rebirth, in Nature writ large and in our own lives. At the least, may this season be one of spiritual blossoming and renewal for us all.

May, 2018

Ministry by the numbers, 2017-18

As we approach the annual meeting, I start to review the year and sift through mounds of data to account for my activities. In addition, I have been reviewing my personal

timeline as part of the “Writing Your Spiritual Autobiography” RE Class. Some things I keep track of are “Life Events,” and others relate directly to ALUUC. Examples include the following:

A few, select Life Events & data:

57 trips around the sun: 21,078 days – and counting.

Distinctive nicknames acquired throughout life: 20

Met Angela on June 17, 1997 – approaching 21 years.

Became a father when Celeste was born on May 29, 1999 – almost 19 years.

Ordained on April 27, 2003 by UUCG – nearly 15 years ago.

ALUUC voted to call me on May 11, 2003 – almost 15 years ago.

Snapshot of this liturgical Year:

Preached at 24 Sunday services thus far. 6 more scheduled. Does not include Christmas Eve.

Preached at other UU Congregations: 2 (Decatur, Park Forest).

Weddings officiated: 2 + 3 additional by other Officiants

Celebrations of Life conducted: 5

Child Dedications: 2

How many Geneva robes owned: 2

How many stoles owned: 9 (3 new ones this year)

Attended regional UUMA gatherings in Bloomington: 7

Actual Labyrinth Walks conducted: 5

Pot Lucks attended: 4

Organized Holiday Open House/food drive at home: 1

Held Fantasy Auction Spanish Dinner at home: 1

Attended Committee meetings (ALUUC, FCCG, MAR-UUA, PFLAG, etc.): lots!

Number of Facebook pages I administer: 8

Attended Board meetings (including retreat): 8/10

Attended public vigils, rallies and marches: 6

Adult RE Classes: 2, UU History & Writing Your Spiritual Autobiography

ALUUC formally established: February 11, 1953: 65 years – and counting

Number of founding members in 1953: 19

Current Members of ALUUC: 258

New members welcomed into ALUUC: 22

Returning Members to ALUUC: 3

Just as one person will emphasize particular moments of their own lives, so too will we remember special moments and events around ALUUC. Did you help erect the Garage? Help create the Fantasy Auction? Win the Mexican Train Tournament? Did you meet new friends at the Weingardt Farm, or at a Circle Supper? Really, when one stops to think about it, this year has been filled with a flurry of activities, of which this list barely scratches the surface – when you reflect upon this year, I hope that your memories thus far have been rich and rewarding. At any event, we do well to remember that with respect to any person, or of any institution, the whole exceeds the sum of all parts.

June, 2018

Did you know that I can sing? You know – carry a tune in a bucket. In fact, I've been told several times in the past decade that I have a fine tenor voice. If so, it is an acquired trait, not a natural gift. Still, I typically don't sing by myself in public. Rather, I find it much more comfortable singing during a service, with a hundred other voices blending together.

As a child, I enjoyed singing with my classmates but then puberty happened -- and I joined the ranks of the vocally challenged. There was a time when I shuddered at the thought of singing in front of others. I could barely bring myself to sing "Happy Birthday." But of course, I would accompany the radio or 8-track in the car. With gusto. As long as others couldn't listen – or judge.

Things became dire when I was a sophomore in high school. My older brother and I had auditioned for roles in a musical comedy, "The Boyfriend", at my sisters' high school. (Now, I should add that one younger brother and one younger sister in the family do actually sing well and had been in various musicals. But for Brian and I, this was uncharted territory.) Brian sang a unique rendition of "Octopus's Garden" and I croaked out "With a Little Help from My Friends." My voice was so flat and awful that I was swiftly relegated to a non-speaking/non-singing role. That experience haunted me,

and I began to fall silent whenever singing was called for. Family gatherings and Christmas Carols might have been an exception.

Twice already, I have included among my Sabbatical Goals that I wanted to take voice lessons. But that hasn't happened yet. But there have certainly been countless occasions when I could hear talented singers, whether in the congregation but also when my clergy colleagues have gathered. I think that my colleagues include some of the most talented singers I have met. Be that as it may, I have acquired 17 years of congregational singing, supplemented by extensive singing while in seminary. Somehow, unnoticed by myself, I actually began to enjoy it, no longer experiencing dread nor shame.

A few months ago, my family had gathered together and at one point we sang a familiar song. My older sister stood next to me and immediately afterwards mentioned, in amazement, "Martin, you can sing!" I muttered something about it being "an occupational hazard for ministers."

In retrospect, I think that one's confidence can be bolstered to do many things, when the context is within a beloved community. That, coupled with opportunity, can afford one the chance to develop aspects of their personality that may have lain dormant for a long while. I'm certain that this must apply to many aspects, not just in finding one's voice. Perhaps it also applies to finding – or refining – one's purpose. Perhaps these are the types of gifts that we may celebrate at the Flower Communion.

Oh, and by the way, did you know that I can dance, too?