

"The Days Are Long, The Years Are Short"

April 28, 2019

for the Unitarian Society of Hartford
Rev. Heather Rion Starr, Co-Minister
Worship Associate: Lisa Galinski

"Reach, and do not forget to reach.

Let one forget their reason for being, they'd all droop like tulips in a glass."

--Sandra Cisneros, "Four Skinny Trees"

"We pledge to work with you to uphold the great gifts of our tradition: its deep trust and faith in the human spirit...its reverence for life...its pursuit of justice and compassion...and its recognition of the mystery and wonder of the universe."--from the Members of the Congregation portion of the April 2015 Installation service words

"All of those root systems entangled with one another are precisely why this place is so important. Our job is to put up that canopy that can save another person, to reach out and never forget to reach out." --Rev. Meg Riley, from her sermon at the April 2015 Installation service of the Revs. Rion Starr

"If we are ever going to dwell in the house of the Lord, I believe, we do so now. If any house is divinely made, it is this one here, this great whirling mansion of planets and stars."

— Scott Russell Sanders, *Staying Put: Making a Home in a Restless World*

"I follow various and sometimes crooked paths, yet I am always driven by a single desire, that of learning to be at home." —Scott Russell Sanders, *Staying Put: Making a Home in a Restless World*

PRELUDE

Thanks for the Memory
Rainger/Robin

Sam Moffett

*GATHERING SONG #188

"Come, Come, Whoever You Are"

OPENING WORDS

Revs. Cathy & Heather Rion Starr

Rev. Cathy: Good morning. It is good to be with you for this service marking 5 years since we were called by this congregation to be your Co-Ministers! "The days are long and the years are short," indeed. Some days all our hours are so full with trying to get things done it can be hard to pause and get a sense of the big picture, the arc of our lives amid the pell-mell of all our pursuits. Let this be a time for all of us to pause and reflect together today. Where were you five years ago? What has grown and changed in you, these past five years? What do you hope to be a part of five years from now? Come, let us reflect, remember, recommit, and reenergize ourselves, together.

Rev. Heather: Gretchen and Ella Spector will come up and light our chalice this morning. I so clearly remember certain significant moments of our first year here with you, and just one of those is that Ella came home to the Spector family from her birthplace in South Korea after so much waiting and anticipation and hope--in

November of 2014, our first fall with you. In that way that we look around and see that years have passed by looking in the eyes of one another, I look at Ella and Sage and so many of the younger ones here and see how they have grown--and know that Cathy and I have, too, that hopefully we here have *all* grown within as much as these beautiful children among us have visibly blossomed.

Will you please join with Ella, Gretchen and me in our chalice lighting words, printed in your Order of Service?

CHALICE LIGHTING

*"We light this chalice for the warmth of love,
for the light of truth, for the energy of action, and for the harmony of peace;
peace in our hearts, peace in our community, and peace in our world."*

WELCOME & RECOGNITION OF VISITORS

Worship Associate Lisa Galinski

GREAT COVENANT

*Love is the spirit of this church and service is its law.
This is our great covenant: to dwell together in peace,
to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.*

SONG #1

"May Nothing Evil Cross This Door"

TIME FOR ALL AGES & NEW MEMBER CEREMONY

Rayla Mattson, Director of Religious Education

OFFERING

TURNING INWARD

As we move towards our time of silence and meditation this morning, here is a poem by Muscogee (Creek) Nation poet Joy Harjo, "Eagle Poem":

"To pray, you open your whole self
To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon
To one whole voice that is you.
And know there is more
That you can't see, can't hear
Can't know except in moments
Steadily growing, and in languages
That aren't always sound but other
Circles of motion.
Like eagle that Sunday morning
Over Salt River. Circled in blue sky
In wind, swept our hearts clean
With sacred wings.
We see you, see ourselves and know

That we must take the utmost care
And kindness in all things.
Breathe in, knowing we are made of
All this, and breathe, knowing
We are truly blessed because we
Were born, and die soon, within a
True circle of motion.
Like eagle rounding out the morning
Inside us.
We pray that it will be done
In beauty
In beauty."

Like us co-create a time of meditative silence together now, listening for the beauty stirring in our lives, the beauty *of* our lives, waiting to be noticed, waiting to be loved.

CANDLES OF MEMORY AND HOPE [...#123 Spirit of Life]

SERMON

"The Days Are Long, the Years Are Short"
Rev. Heather Rion Starr

"The Days Are Long, the Years Are Short" is a favorite--and very true! saying about parenting. I've been thinking this month about all the ways that this saying applies to parish ministry, too. It seems like just yesterday that I noted that the Unitarian Society of Hartford was in search for a settled minister and mentioned it to my spouse, Cathy, in the front room of our tiny D.C. apartment. "Maybe we should put our names in?," I recall saying into the room. We moved forward into the process in fits-and-starts, creating a website, updating our online Ministerial Records, and setting up babysitting and a space in a colleague's basement den for the phone interview.

Our first face-to-face interaction with the Search Committee, the "Pre-Candidating Weekend," was scheduled for February 14 through 16th. Of course I noted that February 14 is a certain *holiday* and packed little individually-wrapped chocolate bars for each Committee member--(So often, if you ask me, *chocolate* is The Reason for The Season!) But as the actual *day* of our trip from D.C. to Bradley airport approached, so did news of an incoming Nor'easter. We were packed up with our 1-year-old buckled into her carseat, in a taxi, willing ourselves along through D.C. traffic to Reagan National Airport, when we began to get airline texts that our flight was being delayed and then...cancelled. Cancelled *entirely*. We lugged ourselves into the airport anyway to find out more and the best the attendant could offer us was a ticket for just one of us to...Pittsburgh. Now, geography is not my strong-suit but I'm certain that Pittsburgh is west of D.C. and Connecticut is northeast. "That's the best you can do?!" I remember stammering.

So we lugged our kid and all our stuff to a rental car company, rented a car, and spent the day driving north, in order to beat the storm that hadn't even made itself real with a single flake of snow yet. The next day, from Cathy's parents' West Hartford

home, we watched the snow fall all day while going over our notes and thoughts before that evening's first gathering with the Search Committee and the pre-candidate weekend began. We couldn't help but wonder what would've happened if we'd been scheduled to come from further away--if, for whatever reason, we hadn't been able to make it. What did overcoming this almost-Herculean hurdle portend? --That we would need to be resilient, resourceful and determined in this ministry? Or that once we got here, it would all be beautiful and quiet, like the snow falling equally upon all of the visible earth?

...Five years later, there is perceptible and imperceptible evidence of our having made it through the inevitable storms. We have welcomed many new members, returning former members, and have regained a year-to-year stability as a congregation that had come into question during troubling times of conflict and transition. We have a sturdy year-round playground, and swings! We have carried on with and encouraged the maintenance of this Meeting House such that it is in better condition than when we arrived; that is a wonderful thing to witness, and along the way there has been greater clarity achieved about people's love of and commitment to this very unique sacred space.

We streamlined 6 categories of membership into 1, clarified some policies and procedures, worked with 5 different Boards now, and handled staff transitions too numerous to count, bringing us to a stable staff and Board leadership that keeps this place humming. I have written, astonishingly even to me, somewhere in the ballpark of 1500 winter cards (in total!) over these 5 winters--and in commemoration of that annual tradition and so that they don't all get forgotten in our earnest recycling, those past 5 Winter Cards are here in this frame for us all to remember and to visually mark these past 5 Years--come take a look after the service if you'd like.

Sadly, RevCathy and I have led over 2 dozen memorial services here--and that's just counting the ones held here in this Meeting House; that's a lot, and each one stands out in my memory in some vivid way. We have also dedicated children, officiated at weddings, honored graduating high school seniors as they bridge to young adulthood, welcomed over 75 members as we've done here today, supported the Coming of Age and Our Whole Lives sexuality education journeys with our children, youth, and mentors. We've been a part of a significant shift in the cohesiveness and support of summer services and along with that, a distinct increase in attendance during the summer months.

There have been drumming circles and labyrinth walks, gardening and a recent visit to the Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, Saturday mornings delving into the "What Moves Us" curriculum and, this year, the Beloved Conversations program, collaborations with numerous community organizations such as Knox Hartford, our neighbor the Village for Families and Children, interfaith partners in the Muslim, Jewish, and Christian Greater-Hartford communities, Hartford Stage, Moral Monday CT, the Interreligious Eco-Justice and Hartford Deportation Defense networks.

There is plenty more I haven't mentioned here.

And I know there have been disagreements, frustrations and disappointments over these years; that is the nature of human communities: we have a great tendency to exasperate one another on the regular. We also have the ability to give one another fresh starts, generous understanding, and new invitations into deeper connection over

the course of time. Anniversaries give us a chance to reflect on *what abides* even with all the unexpected turbulence of time. It's been fun to hear stories of UUS:E, our neighboring congregation in Manchester, celebrating its 50th Anniversary this year. The congregation in Danbury where I am half-time Consulting Minister is just beginning to talk about how it will acknowledge its 200th Anniversary in 2022. In that light it might seem like 5 years is an inconsequential drop-in-the-bucket, except that for this congregation it's an important milestone and sign of stability--a minister has not stayed here at this congregation for longer than 5 years since Rev. Jon Luopa left in 1999, 20 years ago now. And you have not 1, but 2! ministers staying, already making plans for our 6th and 7th years with you.

Given all the challenges we have weathered together, it is clear to me, from where I'm looking out from this pulpit and every time I enter these Meeting House Doors, that this steadfastness is itself a spiritual practice.

--To *continue* in striving to be in good relationship with one another.

--To *continue* to be opening our hearts and minds up to one another's ways of being and thinking and evolving needs and concerns.

--To *continue* to show up for and beside one another as new issues and challenges inevitably arise.

There is deep spiritual work to be done when choosing to stay put.

I know from what I speak--when I started high school way back in the 1980's, that high school was my 6th school in 6 years. It was embarrassingly easy to avoid having to deal with certain challenges when I got the mixed blessing of getting to reinvent myself each year. I also never learned anything about the Civil War in school and never mastered trigonometry--I just missed those units altogether. By keeping ourselves on the move, "on a journey" as we sometimes say in Unitarian Universalism, we can keep ourselves at the surface level of things and never go deeper into the stillness of staying in place. We are good at going wide and shallow, some of my colleagues observe, not deep and focused. So what does it mean to stay in place, together? What abides, what rises up in us that is challenging and that is joyful only when we root deeper into the place, people, and community right here around us?

Scott Russell Sanders has a whole book on this topic published by Unitarian Universalism's own Beacon Press, a book aptly called *Staying Put: Making a Home in a Restless World*. In it he writes: "I follow various and sometimes crooked paths, yet I am always driven by a single desire, that of learning to be at home." I think about how many people I've heard over my now 15 years of parish ministry coming into a Unitarian Universalist congregation saying: "I'm looking for a spiritual home." We all have this hunger, this longing, to feel at home in a place and among a community. As Harjo writes: "We see you, see ourselves, and know

That we must take the utmost care
And kindness in all things."

Yet there is something intrinsic in Unitarian Universalism, the shadow side of our healthy skepticism, that lends itself to an overdeveloped muscle of critique. We are so adept at articulating how things *ought* to be, how we *wish* they *could* be, how they could be *better*, how everyone around us could *do better*. If only we weren't so human.

"Breathe in, knowing we are made of
All this, and breathe, knowing

We are truly blessed because we
Were born, and die soon, within a
True circle of motion...."

I came into this ministry here in Hartford with a degree of optimism and confidence in my own abilities that has worn away somewhat--perhaps that's just maturing in my old age (smile). Perhaps it's due to confronting the demographic realities: Connecticut is one of only 9 U.S. states and territories in this country that saw a *decrease* in population again this past year. The vast majority of Unitarian Universalist congregations in New England date back to a time when people didn't drive and so there was, then, a Unitarian or Universalist church--or both!--in every town. One-by-one, some of our New England congregations are having to look at combining resources, sharing ministry, selling off large and expensive property, facing the reality that the core demographic population of years past is no longer showing up in the present, and is no longer enough to sustain all these congregations. Meanwhile, there is always a steady trickle of people quietly visiting, arriving, church-shopping, moving away, ailing, dying. You all experience this ebb-and-flow in your personal lives as well. Mindful of its cumulative impact, I wonder again: what abides? What will last, beyond this particular congregation, beyond these walls?

There are many possible answers to this question. One answer may be determined by our collective ability to be a resource, not just for one another but for the neighbors and surrounding community, in increasingly challenging times. Another answer may be contingent upon our relationships with one another and with the nearest UU congregations in our vicinity--can we find ways to work together well, to share resources and to support one another thoughtfully, constructively, compassionately, mindfully, in ways that honor each congregation's individual characters but also practically address the realities of the present and the future?

There are also times when I reflect on Parish Ministry in the 21st Century and what I feel most acutely is our insufficient-ness. As many of you can remember, it used to be that "most people around here" were expected to go to church; it wasn't a matter of *where* you went so much as that you went *somewhere*. In those days, there were many pledging members of congregations who didn't expect much in return. That is one of the vectors I see changing as I look ahead to the future. I am more-and-more aware of the increasing needs that people come with when they come seeking community. The balance is tilting towards more people needing more than just this one community of mostly volunteers can provide. Even as we struggle to maintain and grow our membership, we are already aware of our insufficiency to do enough, to do as much as we wish we could--to find affordable housing, to help cover rent and mortgage and grocery bills, to help cover the ever-growing cost of the increasingly-necessary car in order to make a living in Connecticut, and so on.¹ We are constantly reminded of our limitations while wondering how long the current financial structure of running a congregation will hold, especially at this pledge drive and budgeting time of year. It is sobering, to say the least. It forces me into a place of gratitude for all that we have now, for what has survived and thrived for this long.

¹ "Capitalism is killing the small church," https://www.faithandleadership.com/melissa-florer-bixler-capitalism-killing-small-church?fbclid=IwAR29JYMdFowagAqVZ85XhP6Je-YSDkVftz_6enT1CGd1_hHDU1sBowK3J5w

Writers bell hooks and P. Travis Krocke observe together that "as we dedicate ourselves to one another, and thus experience daily and directly the diverse array of gifts that contribute to our living, gratitude [takes] its rightful place as the fundamental disposition that guides and forms our ways.' Gratitude allows us to receive blessings; it prepares the ground of our being for love. And it is good to see that in the end," concludes hooks in her book on *belonging: a culture of place*, "in the end, when all is said and done--love prevails."

And so I too return with these reflections on 5 years here with you to what is of central importance, our core reasons for being:

to know one another well,
to gather together in multigenerational, caring, consistent community
with shared values,
to do what we can with the resources we have to nourish one another's
spirits,
to care for one another, and
to work together towards greater justice
in our towns, cities, country and world.

I have a deep faith in Unitarian Universalism, in our *necessary-ness* in this increasingly-secular and religiously-polarized world as a community of communities that can be bridge-building, that can generate greater respect for different viewpoints, that can guide all of us back to the values that we want to be central in our lives. And at the same time, the pragmatic middle-aged pastor in me looks around and says: We will see. We will see. The days are long--there is so *much* work to do, always more to be done, all our thought and energy can easily be taken up just trying to keep up--and meanwhile, the years do fly by. Will we find ways to adapt to the changing times, the evolving needs of the communities around us? Will we find new ways to be compelling and necessary in the lives of people who do choose to come live--or stay put--in Connecticut? Will we continue to be able to find places of overall agreement even as we disagree on particular matters, to stay in covenant and healthy relationship with one another as we sort out together the decisions and challenges and Herculean-hurdles of the future? The years are short. We will see. If we are lucky, we will be a part of, and live to see, ways that we can be a part of the future that is already emerging, even now.

May we live to see this living tradition, this evolving Unitarian Universalism, continue to be both transformed and transforming.

"Like eagle rounding out the morning...
We pray that it will be done
In beauty.
In beauty."

May it be so.

MUSICAL INTERLUDE

Time After Time
Cahn/Styne

Sam Moffett

*CHALICE EXTINGUISHING

*"We extinguish this flame, but not the light of truth,
the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment.*

These we carry in our hearts until we are together again."

*CLOSING SONG #1074

"Turn the World Around"

*BENEDICTION

May you reach out to one another in spirit as well as in body. What a blessing that our paths have intersected here. What a gift that we have this day, this life, this opportunity to think and marvel and make more meaning out of our lives, together. Notice and celebrate all the ordinary beauty around and among and within you, for that is what adds up to an extraordinary life, a life well-lived, a life of purpose and of purposeful love. And no matter what challenges may feel overwhelming to you, keep on keeping on: resolutely in peace, sharing your love, and creating justice.