

Recovery and Discovery of Us(H)

Sermon, Oct 16, 2022

Pulpit Guest: Rick Tsukada

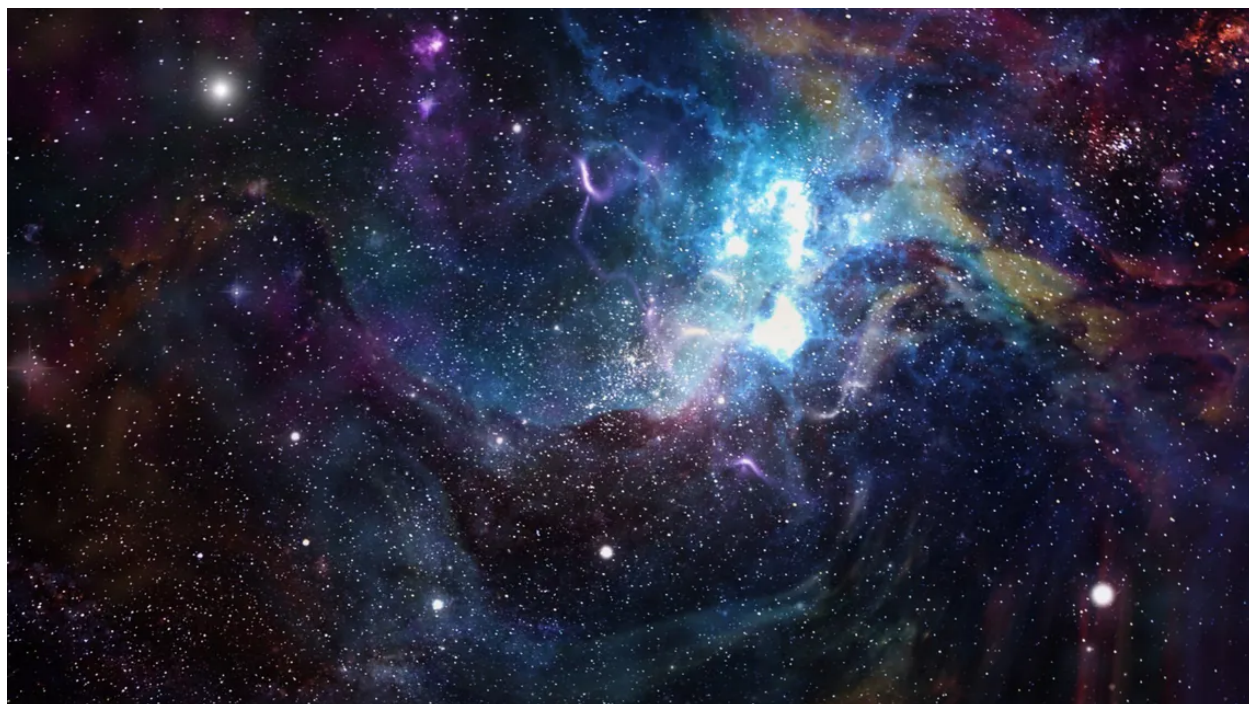


Image: James Webb Space Telescope

Take a look at the cover image of today's service. We earthlings received this picture this past July -- one of the first images transmitted from the James Webb Space Telescope. James Webb was the director of NASA from 1961-1968 during the Mercury, Gemini and Apollo programs. The telescope named after him is the largest optical telescope in space. Its high resolution and sensitivity especially in the infrared frequencies allow it to view objects too old, too distant or too faint for the Hubble Telescope to see. Incredibly this telescope may allow us to see the first stars and the formation of the first galaxies.

What the Webb telescope is seeing originated many millenia ago, perhaps some of it even at the beginning of our galaxy. I can wrap my mind around centuries but before geological time? ...that eludes me. What you see in that starry, black, deep image happened already, long ago, light years ago yet it is absolutely new to us "now" as that light is just now reaching us. We are in fact recovering and discovering simultaneously...we are learning something new from something that has already happened...that is the subject of today's sermon... what can we learn by recovering our history...what has happened to us? And how might that inform us about our future.

As Unitarian Universalists, we abide by our sixth principle: *Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.* We are well aware that we live in a shared world...a world in which all of us...all living things, along with the weather, the earth, the sky...are part of our interdependent community on this small, blue planet. We get that we have an existential

bond to all that exists and we are touched by the *all* of it. Sometimes it is too much to appreciate... sometimes we don't even have words for it...sometimes it simply makes it hard to fall asleep...such is the range of our spiritual entanglement.

The Webb telescope brings the incomprehensible “out there” close enough to touch my sense of “in here,” of being so finite. But with climate change, a pandemic, political chaos, and social norms being so shattered today, feeling powerless and vulnerable are familiar emotional companions these days.

One of the things that makes it easier to be in touch with that “out there” simultaneously with the “in here” (gesture to my heart) **is this church**...our society.

I need this church to be a sanctuary of peace, sanity, goodness, generosity, and love, a place where I can, we *all* can safely contemplate both our outside world and our internal world at the same time...all in a place where I am not alone. This requires a very deep and dependable sense of trust. enough trust so that I can relax enough to be with all that “out there” stuff.

However just when I was beginning to get an emotional toe-hold on much needed trust and dependability, we were hit with the sudden, most recent ministerial departure. I thought: Oh No...So Soon Again!... We are all adults, we know that nothing remains the same. We tell ourselves that it is childish to believe that things would remain the same. Yet, somehow that longing for stability, dependability and consistency persists. When we can't seem to find a stable place to put our feet when we can't trust the things that feel most basic to us...it sets off a chain reaction of doubt. What else can't I trust? Can I even still believe that all people are good? That good **will** triumph always? It's gotten harder for me to believe these things lately...and I admit to being a social romantic, a spiritual optimist and I am blessed with a little naivete... like cake frosting.

I think that our emotional and mental realities here at church are in many ways a micro reflection of so much that is happening in our country. The shift in the notion of law, of freedom, of what is right and wrong. Even our own denomination is shifting its focus. In short it feels like a mess ...our world gone crazy...it makes it harder to, well, ...Right the Ship...put things back into balance.

But in order to get back into balance, remember the Webb telescope, we need to look backwards and forwards at the same time. We need to see what we are bringing from our past into our Now...to recover and discover our “us.” We are not immune to shifts.

The insert in your Order of Service has list of “A Century of Ministers.” For the first 80 years of the last 100, we had 4 just ministers....it's a sharp contrast to the last 20 years when we have had 9 ministers...REALLY? go ahead count them... Yup...some of them were interims, but still, anyway you slice it, it's a revolving pulpit.

We can't change the happenings of history... but we do need to take a good and far-reaching look at what happened in the last 20 years, there is something to learn there. When you look at this list of ministers pay attention to what thoughts you are having. Are there feelings attached to those thoughts...?

Some useful “out there” wonderings about the Unitarian Universalist Ministry might be: has something changed in what ministers are looking for in congregations? The profession of ministry seems to have shifted from long-term to short-term, is that true? What do ministers see as their jobs these days? As the Unitarian Universalist Association points the denomination toward more “out there” social action, will new ministers still prioritize care of the congregation? And what about us? Has the “personality” of this congregation changed over these last 20 years? If so, how? We know that religious life in the United States is different across all faiths with much lower church attendance. How much does that larger picture affect us? How much does it reflect us?

To bring us back into balance, it seems important to look at all these things and more. To say the obvious, the last couple of decades have been more stressful here than we would like. Some of you have been here for this whole time...some more...some less... but even if you have just joined us recently...the pressure of these stressors are part of your experience at USH because of that interdependent web. Knowing that nothing remains the same has its pitfalls.

My wife keeps up with the psychological literature and she handed me a study that concluded that the winners of the top four most stressful stimuli awards were: **uncertainty, conflict, lack of control and lack of information**. Those may feel familiar. Let me repeat. The four most stressful stimuli are: **uncertainty, conflict, lack of control and lack of information**.

And what do humans do when they are in an ongoing stressful environment? We make personal adjustments in order to better survive the harmful environment. Typically it's fight or flight and some have done just that. We might act out or opt out or both. Perhaps we engage aggressively or we space out. These are some survival mechanisms...some other examples are...denial...rationalization...departmentalizing...we human beings are really good at protecting ourselves...and we should be grateful that we are good at it. But it would be unwise to carry these adaptive cautions forward into our search for a new minister. So in recovering this emotional history we might be able to discover what we want or need so as to not reinforce those survival adaptive behaviors. You know...less stress.

The lay-led services, including the forums, are helping us to set aside our survival mechanisms and re-engage with each other in healthy ways. I am hopeful that we are learning to trust again. As I said earlier, I need this church to be a sanctuary of peace, sanity, goodness, generosity and love. Without trust none of that is possible. We need to trust in order to be open to the world and flow with the shifts.

We have taken some steps to do that...the listening sessions. the Board Messages...the nature of the lay led services and forums. One of big steps forward is to remember that we really are good at listening to one another...to feel that we are being heard. I find the immortal words of Mick Jagger in my head: *You can't always get what you want but if you try sometimes, you just might find you get what you need.*

I do trust that this congregation will keep affirming each other, keep decreasing our stress and building our trust through mutual experiences.

If we don't find a minister who is a good fit for a long time, we will continue to evolve. Left to our own devices, we are finding that we are a church with a very independent, self reliant, self actualizing personality and a skill set filled with mastery of self governance. Even as we become more transparent and authentic to each other, let us have faith that there is a minister out there that wants to belong to a family like ours. Until then, we need to continue to see what rises out of our own life force.

What kind of family are we? Two weeks ago...as the forum unfolded...we got a glimpse of who we are in our hearts. I felt that we were remembering ourselves as a congregation. Many of you shared heartfelt and deeply honest reflections on why you keep coming to this church and we were all listening...really listening to each other and that that felt good.

Maybe we are like a family that is realizing that despite going through years of disruption we are, nevertheless a family and we are still here...together...in this home...warts and all. You know those Hallmark movies that show a Thanksgiving dinner where the wayward son has shown up after 18 years of disappearance, the ranch is saved for now, the unwed daughter announces she is pregnant and the turkey has been dropped on the kitchen floor. The camera pans to the giant picture window and you can see the Grand Tetons rising over the grassy pasture with two horses grazing peacefully so we can appreciate the immensity of the background. Then the grandpa at the head of the beautifully-set table reaches out to the family to clasp hands...and the prayer is one of gratitude and mutual appreciation...AMEN and the chatter around the table starts along with music...fade to credits.

We are kinda like that movie, it hasn't been all bad, not by a long shot. What came out in the forum was that this is a church that values relationships above all else; that we thrive here, despite our problems, because we have an unusual ability to accept each other, combined with genuine caring. We treasure the community we have here. You can be yourself here. You can bring your joys and concerns, your happiness and your pain and it's all good...it all lifeand...when things get hard, we hold on. We are good stuff and we want these same characteristics in our minister.

Now to the second part of that insert. I asked a number of our long-time congregational members to recall some good things over the years and if possible associate those with a particular minister. Their edited replies are on the same insert with the list of ministers.

Most importantly I'd like to restore our historical memories in a balanced way of both good and not-so-good so that we have a reality based memory to build our next steps on. This is a partial list...what are the things you forgot and enjoyed, missed and would like to do, what you would like more of or would change? This is a time for sorting out.

This remembered list is important to our search for a minister in that it highlights the things that stand out in our memory like: in-home visits especially in times of illness or loss; deeply valued activities; creative, smart and inspiring worship services, opportunities to get together in small groups for meaningful discussions; listening and speaking sessions for the airing of church issues; social gatherings. We know we value these things because we carry on many of them as part of our church life, even without ministerial support.

We are now having moments together that are uplifting...moments together when our spirits are feeling good. We're having more moments of laughter, relaxed breathing ...moments with we are once again experiencing the familiarity of our intimacy with one another...moments of daring to trust again. I am actually feeling excited and hopeful.

I have to acknowledge that if you are a visitor, if you are new to our church, we might seem to be, well as one person described us, "too full of drama" but I would share with you that this is a church, a congregation that is a family and as a family we do our life together as openly as we can...with respect, appreciation and an understanding of our mutuality, our interdependency. And we are a resilient bunch.

Like the Webb telescope, we have the courage to look both backward and forward at the same time. And the future looks curiously beautiful. I often find myself lifting my eyes skyward, somewhere up there is the Webb telescope, and it is looking out there too. They say that God is up, but for me...the blue, the clouds, the breeze...the sense of being human and being part of it all, lifts me up. It's incomprehensible yet so full of beauty, wonderment and awe. At the same time I stand in my community, my family. **This** is what I've got. And it is more than good enough.

###

[The following is the insert in the Order of Service referred to in the sermon.]

A Century of Ministers

1918-1941	Charles Graves	2005-2006	Arline Sutherland
1941-1962	Payson Miller	2006-2011	Barbara Jamestone (B.J.)
1962-1985	Nat Lauriat	2011-2012	Katie Lee Crane
1986-1999	Jon Luopa	2012-2014	David Johnson
1999-2000	Joan Kahn Schneider	2014-2021	Heather and Cathy Rion Starr
2000-2005	Terasa Cooley	2021-2022	Terry Cummings

Good Things Remembered

Rev. "BJ" Jamestone

Education series on Worship and creation of Worship Associates; Beautifully crafted coherent services; Small group ministry; LGBT presence

Rev. Dave Johnson

Process Theology; Newcomers Tracking; Pastoral Care; Transition process; Increased congregational empowerment

Revs. Cathy and Heather

On line worship calendar; brought in Diane Daniels, Ministerial Intern; embracing Arts and History of Hartford; allowing for worship leadership; Solar Panel Array; Sermon Writing

Workshop; Attending Artist way gathering; Social Justice work; participation in Social Justice Protest; Social Justice outreach to community; New Member Classes; Sanctuary Roof Fix; 75 new members; 20s & 30s Group; 1619 Discussion; Pi-shun Shih Piano; Sam's Musicianship; Cello; Caring Network

Rev. Terry Cummings

In depth worship services and restoration of Readings; Creation of template for worship; online participants; big screen TVs coupled with Audio/Visual On Line production; Reinstated and attended month Worship Associate Meetings; Listening Circles; Pastoral Care engagement; home visits; Authenticity, especially regarding the gender related universe; academically interesting

Church Activities:

Annual Picnic with games that included the Village; Dinner and a Movie; Non-Violent Communication Workshops and Meetings; Meetinghouse Presents Concert Series; Coffee Hour; Small Group Dinners; Small Group Ministry; First Sunday Connections for Newcomers; Memorial Services; Build Your Own Theology; Youth Group Soup; "Homeless" Sleep Out; Green Sanctuary; Religious Education; Building and Grounds Projects; Stewardship and Fundraiser, Auctions; Regifting Sales; Lunch Bunch; Music Sundays; Weddings; SpiritLife Discussions

-end -