

“A Brand New Day”
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Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
Meriden, CT

New Member Sunday
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It's almost time, almost time for my favorite flower of spring. Lilacs! I adore them. I inhale them so intensely, it's some kind of miracle that I don't drain the scent right out of those tiny clusters that make up a full-bodied blossom. They're hearty and fragile. They blossom with abandon from the most modest bushes to robust caravans of white, lavender and purple along country roads and across backyards. Each emotes fragrance that lingers. Each stirs a yearning for their beauty and scent to last across seasons. So you can imagine my dismay when many autumns ago my otherwise wonderful husband Dan pruned our backyard lilac bushes to something just shy of underground. I was mortified.

We made it through the winter. So did the roots of the lilacs.

One April morning Dan hollered from the backyard, “Jan, come on out and take a look at this!” Had that dead limb finally fallen on the garage? I stepped out the back door and into the yard to find out. There, flush with the ground was a hearty lilac blossom—no leaves, no branches, just a full-blown aromatic blossom. If a voice had come out of that blossom with a confident, “Hah, told you so!” I could not have been more astonished. So much for my trust in the resilience of roots, not to mention the pruning wisdom of my husband; for the forces of resilience and regeneration had conspired toward this wholly unanticipated sight and scent.

“A new day dawns, once more the gift is giv'n.
Wonder fills this moment shared together.”

we sang just moments ago.

“Open our eyes to see that life abounds;
open hearts to welcome it among us.”

So it is with the phenomenon that we call a church. Over the many centuries of this faith that we now call Unitarian Universalism, we have known so many prunings followed by buddings and flowerings, so many near-deaths followed by stirrings of strength and vitality. Over the lifespan of this congregation, founded as a Universalist Church in 1854, we have known full sanctuaries in a sprawling brownstone church, and we have known congregations spare in numbers but generous in spirit. We have known our own near-deaths, followed by stirrings of strength and vitality.

Just five weeks from today I will be installed as your minister in the sanctuary that some of you knew and loved as your spiritual home, “the old brownstone church” as you still call it. It’s now the home of Holy Word Foundation Ministries. In the spirit of neighborliness and a contractual arrangement we will be in that space once again, but it will no longer be our home, rather a space large enough to accommodate the anticipated congregation that will gather for this milestone in our unfolding history. Once that space was filled Sunday after Sunday with two to three hundred congregants. Numbers dwindled and with them, the means to maintain such a space.

What compels any among us to seek paths different than those on which we first embarked? Such is a segment of the history of this church.

Not quite ten years ago this congregation realized that you were co-creators with the forces that shaped your history. Those hundreds of square feet that you once occupied, that sanctuary with the filtered light pouring in through those stained glass windows, that organ that pumped out songs familiar and preludes pounding were simply unsustainable. You decided to let go. You decided to move through the grief of letting go of the familiar and sell your home.

Over the past ten years, Dan and I have moved three times. This is not descriptive of our lives, before or after we married. We had both lived in the same town for close to thirty years. But in the spirit of promise and possibility, we let go of a much loved home to embark on another path. It wasn’t easy. We both shed tears when we left Montclair, New Jersey, where as a blended family we had seen our three daughters grow from little girls into young women. We sold our home in Montclair and found home in another space. What had been our home became in retrospect a house. What we found as a house became a home. Once again, we have found a home—this time, in your midst; and last August we moved into a house that has become our home. It is a new day, a brand new day for us.

It is a new day, a brand new day for you who have joined this church.

It is a new day, a brand new day for you who have found in this church a home for your spirit of hope and promise and possibility.

It doesn’t happen instantaneously. The prospect of change commonly evokes denial, tears, and grief. The process of change holds decision, exploration, and option weighing. The promise of change is grounded in hope and sometimes in *chutzpah*.

For each of you who have joined this church this morning, your decision to do so didn’t happen instantaneously. Perhaps it held some denial—that is, “No, I’m not ready”—or a move from some remnant of your past that felt not completely comfortable, even some grief acknowledged or unconscious about letting go of whatever. Then came a decision to find out more, to explore, to weigh your options. Then came the moment of decision, perhaps not quite *chutzpah*, but surely hope.

“A new day dawns, once more the gift is giv’n.”

Yesterday, four of us from this church headed to Worcester, Massachusetts for the Annual meeting of our Clara Barton and Mass Bay Districts, the regional clusters into which we organize ourselves as the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. In the early hours of the afternoon we sat with perhaps 300 other Unitarian Universalists from congregations so distinct you'd think we were some kind of interfaith gathering. Yet we shared the commonalities of this faith grounded in a covenant with the root-strength of love. Does that mean we're in agreement about what it is to be faithful, about what it is we believe, about some of the big questions that religion evokes? You know the answer to that. The tie that binds us is not opinion, but love that calls us to affirm the worth of each of us and the connectedness of all life. So we sat faithfully and patiently through a business meeting that turned my monkey mind to the hardness of the chairs, the pace of the agenda, and whether a tad of caffeine just might be waiting in the next room.

Then came the worship. It was multi-media and multi-modal. Matt Meyer was there with his drum, beating out the rhythm of what would or might happen. The strains of a double bass crafted in the mid-19th century rose at moments unanticipated but poignant. The sounds of a choir garnered from Unitarian Universalist congregations spanning eastern to western New England rose as if in counterpoint with the words from a pulpit shared by John Gibbon and Carolyn Patierno, respected colleagues and gifted preachers. Worship rocked and resonated. Then Carolyn's words brought it all home: "Churches seldom die from taking risks," words that echoed the wisdom of another colleague, Michael Durall. Michael's observation bears repeating: "Churches seldom die from taking risks."

This multi-media, multi-modal gathering of Unitarian Universalists across the theological spectrum, beyond the divergence of opinions, and grounded in love worked. High risk, high resonance. Sensual and spiritual. Grounded and transcendent. Ephemeral and enduring.

Where does that bring us this morning? We, the Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden, will never be the same. We are positively transformed by welcoming new members and newcomers. We are buoyed by the renewal of "our own covenant with this family of faith."

"Morning has come, arise and greet the day!"

I know that you sometimes get discouraged. I know that amid this season of planning and pledging for the year ahead, our vision is large and our pace uneven. I have been with you for not quite nine months, a symbolic time span. Yet I am confident, through what I witness not just on Sundays but in one-on-one conversations, in meetings of task forces and committees, and in stepping back and switching to a wide-angle lens, that this congregation is on the brink of transformation. We are on the threshold of bursting through some hard ground into the clear light of day, like that determined blossom in my backyard and with just as much beauty and bravado.

How gratified I am that the new members we have welcomed this year have found ministries rich and clear in worship, in justice making, in religious education for children and youth and adults, in the creation of a meditative garden just outside these doors, and in a newfound presence in our larger community.

During my two years as interim minister in another congregation, I sought the wisdom of Rev. Mary Hnottavange-Telleen. Mary is a colleague and mentor who has served 13 Unitarian Universalist congregations over the past twenty years as an interim minister. She has seen despair and she has seen hope. She has seen congregations all but fossilized and congregations transformed.

In Mary's words:

"I have witnessed an entire congregation suddenly re-configure their dynamics and break out on their own, from under the dark earth of struggle involving this or that dilemma, or tragedy, or conflict and emerge surprised by their own achievement on higher ground in the bright light of a new day..."

You know this doesn't happen magically or even as spontaneously as Mary may have worded it. She explains that while such transformations

"may appear spontaneous, they are really the produce of dedication...reweaving, and not incidentally re-wiring, the congregation's internal connections, enlivening the whole body."

This is happening here. I see it, I hear it, I feel it.

Close your eyes for a moment.

Now, in the vision of your imagination, step outside. Take a few more steps. Bend over. There it is! A full-blossom lilac has wriggled its way through the hard stubborn ground. Lean over a bit further. Take a whiff. The aroma is intoxicating! Spring is here. Resurrection is real. It happens through the Spirit and Life and Liveliness that dances in the veins of Creation of which we are a part. Who knows what else can happen?

As our lives continue to unfold personally and communally, may each and every one of us be stirred to the possibility we experience in this congregation that is growing in spirit and deed. May our hearts soar, our minds open, and our souls stretch into the promise of a brand new day.

I love you, I do.

Amen.

Sources

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