

Joy's Moving Sale

Rev. Joy Atkinson's farewell sermon to the Humboldt Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, delivered on June 16, 2013

This past week I packed up the books and files that I kept in the minister's office, in preparation for my leaving, which I will be doing later today. Today is my last day among you as your interim minister. Of course, whenever you pack up to move, you find a few items that you feel you can part with, to lessen your load. So for today's final sermon, before I move off to become the interim minister of another congregation, I'm holding a metaphorical "moving sale." As I have prepared to move on, I have come across a few odds and ends—items in the form of ideas, suggestions and leftover projects for your future that I want to leave with you. These items are a real bargain, too! The only cost is a bit of your time and energy, to make them real.

These four pillar candles will represent today the four "pillars" of congregational life: Worship, Religious Education, Social Justice, Pastoral Care. It was while I was the interim minister in Santa Barbara that I came across this fourfold way of speaking about what goes on in the life of a congregation, and this does seem to be a comprehensive breakdown. It's hard to find an area that does not fit into one of these categories. But I kept thinking that something was missing. Finally it hit me, and I suggested to the congregation that there really is another "pillar"—one that is not fully covered by these four, and that is central to a congregation's existence. Can you guess which one it is? Right—the Community pillar, represented by this central pillar candle, which I will now light. The "community pillar" is the foundation for all the others. At the 11 house meetings that I conducted here last winter, to which a total of 64 of you came, I asked participants to name one thing they like about HUUF, and overwhelmingly, people identified the sense of community here, naming such things as the people, the warmth, the friendliness and sense of family, the feeling of being at home. This is a great strength in this religious community, and I believe that this already sound community pillar can be further strengthened. Here are a few

suggestions for broadening and enhancing the sense of community here.

One idea is to launch a "Small Group Ministry" program, which involves structured, facilitated small groups in which people create a covenant of commitment together, share aspects of their life stories and often discuss topics of interest to the group. Since I was only here in the area for 1/3 of each month, it was not possible for me to oversee the launching of this program, but I spoke with your next minister, the Rev. Bryan Jessup, and he is eager to work on starting a Small Group Ministry program with you. Volunteers will be needed to get this program going.

Another way to strengthen the Community pillar (as well as the RE pillar) is to add more adult education opportunities—take some of the classes offered and consider offering classes yourself. Many of you have things to teach and share with others, and there are also many adult education curricula available through the UUA that you can use to offer seminars and classes. I would also urge that you continue to support the circle supper program (participation in these dinners has flagged somewhat).

You can also enrich this community by embracing more people and inviting them into leadership roles. To accomplish this, I suggest that you need more efforts in such areas as publicity, outreach, hospitality and leadership training. I would have offered a workshop in leadership and one on hospitality if I had had more time. But if each individual member here would embrace hospitality to newcomers as a personal spiritual discipline, this alone would go a long way toward bringing more people into active membership. Ideally, you are all part of the fleet of Sunday greeters, not just those who are designated as such by the Membership Committee. (These are often called "Stealth Greeters.") I hope that you all will stand ready to welcome the stranger, that you don't just come here to schmooz with your friends, but that you also make a personal pledge to reach out to newcomers and become a stealth greeter. And this greeting you would do doesn't need to end when visitors come to the door and are welcomed in; it can resume after the service, where

you have the opportunity to introduce newcomers to others and include them in your conversations. A “buddy system,” coupling new members with existing ones, might help to bring new members into leadership roles.

I would like to lift up another one of your strong pillars—pastoral care, and I now light the candle representing this pillar. There is a wonderful circle of 9 women who are part of the Committee called the Caring Circle. I’ve met with this group monthly, and have been impressed with how well they keep connected with people in the congregation who could use help—either those in crises or those who need help on an ongoing bases. The Caring Circle is the eating heart of the congregation. But in a larger sense, you are all also part of this big heart, all part of the caring network, just as you are part of the “greater greeter fleet.” You can all sign up to help out the Caring Circle as they extend services to those within the Fellowship who are in need. Signup sheets are in this morning’s insert.

I now light the candle representing the Worship pillar. This is an area I have especially worked on this year along with your Program and Worship Committee, and partially at the request of your incoming minister. We held two workshops to train people to create and lead Sunday services, beginning to move toward what many other UU congregations call a “Worship Associates” program, in which each Sunday’s Worship Associate works with the minister or guest speaker to help create and then help conduct the Sunday service (Regarding that word, “Worship”—I know that it is problematic or some of you; it perhaps conjures up images of bowing down to some idol or praising a deity. But the word itself comes from two Anglo-Saxon root words: *woerth* and *scippe*, and it means literally to shape something that is of value. Creating, shaping and presenting service is worship in this sense. Perhaps that etymology doesn’t save or resurrect this word for you, but whatever you call this role—Worship Associate, Service Leader, Officiant, it is a vital one—bringing the Sunday service into being, which is after all the central event of a congregation each week. Worship is strong here and is becoming stronger.

I light the candles representing the two other pillars: Social Action and Religious Education. My sense, shared with you all here last month and with the Board, is that these two vital pillars tend to operate here somewhat like separate realms, almost independent from the congregation as a whole. Many good people serve in these two areas. This year, there have been efforts to better integrate RE and the congregation as a whole by offering several intergenerational services. Last week's Flower Communion and Milestone service was one example. More activities that involve all ages together will help to further bring the worlds of children and adults together. As for the Social Action pillar, one good way to bring social activism to the congregation as a whole is to choose, as a congregation, one or two major social justice projects that the whole congregation can rally behind, with specific ways for members to involve themselves—pursuing various forms of advocacy, petitioning, marching and demonstrating, involving children, perhaps working with other congregations in the community. Pick an area, then do it together throughout the year. As an example of this kind of all-congregation activism, the congregation I served in Tucson for the two years before I came here chose Environmental justice one year, and immigration justice another. Much of their programming and education centered around these areas. And in the large Portland UU Church some years ago, a choice was made to focus on justice for the GLBTQ community. They literally tied a yellow ribbon around their entire building and declared it a "hate free" zone. As a result, they had lots of publicity, and they attracted many new members who wanted to align themselves with such an activist congregation.

I have worked throughout this year with a small group, the Transition Team, consisting of Beverly Allen, Jeff Knapp and JoAnn Thomas. This team served as a kind of "Think Tank" to brainstorm with me about interim issues, tasks and projects. I recently asked the members of that team to make an inventory of all programs, past and present, and assess which categories they fall into: dead, waning, static, strong and dynamic, developing, new possibilities. Among the new ideas (some are ideas that have worked in the past):

Newspaper Ads, more public relations outreach
 Interfaith cooperation—e.g. with GLBT issues
 Repeat of the Welcoming Congregation program, displaying the rainbow flag
 Visitor circle after the service
 Overnight camp on Fellowship grounds
 Birdwatching/nature tour of our property
 Environmental fair on the property
 Building connections with HSU and CR students and faculty

It has all been such an honor and such a privilege, to serve as your interim minister this year!

Looking into my patented interim's crystal ball, I see some interesting things ahead for HUUF. You are about to enter a new era in your congregational life together. It's always exciting to welcome a new settled minister. I can feel your excitement about these changes. With these additions, and your increasing warm hospitality toward newcomers and broader caring for one another, I have a strong feeling that this congregation is really going to take off—to both grow and deepen! I foresee for you a congregation that continues to be a significant presence in this community, one that is known for its warmth to newcomers, for its caring for its members, for its social activism, its wonderful education program for all ages, and one that is known as an accepting place where people can come to explore their personal religious journey without fear of judgment. As I've said before, I believe it won't be long before you either return to two services or run a capital campaign to expand this sanctuary, since you will be overflowing with enthusiastic participants. I would say that your future is very bright indeed!

Now comes the time for me to say "goodbye." The hardest challenge of interim ministry I've discovered is that an interim must say "goodbye" so soon after saying "hello." This is very different from what I used to do as a settled minister. When you say "hello" as a settled minister, you look out over a sea of unknown faces, and you

realize that you have years to become acquainted, to become part of each other's lives. But as an interim, I've had to get to know you much more quickly, and to keep constantly in my mind, and yours, the fact that I will only be among you a short while. Yet, as an interim, I am always surprised to find that I still feel the deep connections ministers make to those they serve. My dear friend and colleague, Marge Keip, has said that even though you're an interim, you will come to love the congregations you serve, though you know you'll be leaving them soon. And I guess it can't be otherwise, if one is to be a true minister. In whatever time you have, if you bring your heart into your ministry, you make deep connections. But then, more often than do settled ministers, you have to sever those connections, to make way for a new minister.

I can no longer be your minister, and, following protocol, my future connections with you, especially for the next three years, must be very limited. But I want you to know that when I brought my ministerial heart and soul into this temporary ministry, I nevertheless filled them up with you—through all the committee work, in the Sunday services and during social events, in the many one-to-one sessions and conversations we've had. I have had a wonderful time here, and you were all so warmly welcoming of me. I know that you will also warmly welcome the Rev. Bryan Jessup when he arrives. I will carry into future ministries all that I have learned and received from you. Thank you for all that you have been and done. Also, many of you know that this is the congregation that ordained me into the ministry in the first place, a long, long 39 years ago this month. Because of this special connection, and now because we have just spent a fruitful year together as interim minister and congregation, you will always remain deeply embedded in my heart and will remain in my fond memory. Thank you for your good work!

I close with the words of the poet ee cummings:

time is a tree
 this life one leaf
 but love is the sky and i am for you
 just so long
 and long enough

Benediction

the words of poet Wendell Berry, from *The Country of Marriage*

What we owe the future
is not a new start, for we can only begin
with what has happened. We owe the future
the past, the long knowledge
that is the potency of time to come.