

The Magick of Meaning
Reverend Cyndi Simpson

A Homily given to the Second Unitarian Church of Omaha, Nebraska, May 21, 2017

Our worship theme this month is Our Future. All of the services will touch in some way on our shared Future here as a Unitarian Universalist community in Omaha in 2017. The image up here on the screen and on the altar is an image that spoke to me of our shared future. One that is brightly colored, diverse in all ways, abundant and strong.

As you know, I came here to you not as a permanent minister, but as a particular kind of transitional minister. A developmental minister. That means I am here to help you achieve the goals that you set for yourselves in your application for Developmental Ministry.

In your Order of Service is a list of the four goals that you laid out in your application. The Key Outcomes for each Goal have been developed and refined by the Board of Trustees over the last months. These four goals of Welcoming, Worship, Structure and Identity were seen by you as ways to achieve the aspiration laid out in your application for developmental ministry.

And what was that aspiration? Truly something beautiful!

A longtime goal of the church has been to grow and become a beacon of liberal religion in Omaha. Growth should not only be numeric but should include personal growth of the individual members and organizational growth to improve the value of the church to its members, staff and volunteers and to the city as a whole. Many of us have grown personally through our association with this community and the organization continues to evolve, but numerically, our membership has stayed the same.

*Our aspirations are to develop a vibrant, innovative and exciting church environment that attracts and retains young and older persons, including families, persons of color, those of diverse ethnic backgrounds, gender identities and sexual orientations. We envision a congregation that fosters the connection of these persons with each other and the community at large to carry out dynamic programs that exemplify our Unitarian Universalist values to **transform** our local area and the world at large.*

So, here you expressed the need for both personal and organizational growth. Not so much in terms of numbers but development. Evolution. Transformation. Of self, of religious community and the larger Omaha area and the whole world. Transformation that is driven by diversity of all sorts, among people who are connected deeply to one another. Isn't that a great vision? It's why I came here – to support you in achieving that – because I love this vision.

One of the things I've been doing over the last 9 months that I've been here is to look at you with the outsider's eyes that I have to see if I could understand what might be keeping you from achieving your goals. Because that wasn't really laid out in your application, not in the largest sense. It is so hard when you are part of something to see it clearly from the inside.

As I have observed you over the last months, I have come to believe the biggest missing piece here is meaning. Without meaning, life in religious community is without its rudder – as the meaning we make and share here underlays everything we do. Without meaning, our church work and service can feel more like drudgery, like another job. In the absence of a profound sense of shared meaning, it is too easy to find other things here to fill the meaning gap.

Such as the desire to exercise power and authority for their own sake. Or by the creation of meaning through the drama of conflict. Or the desire to pursue individual interests and relationships only for what they do for us as individuals. Without reference to the good and the growth of the larger church community as a whole.

Most of the people who come here as visitors are intrigued and interested by our message and its meaning. They've perhaps done some research or maybe seen our Black Lives Matter and rainbow banners and wondered "What kind of church flies those banners?" Perhaps they've heard something about Unitarians or Universalists that causes them to think they might find a religious home here.

And this interest and intrigue is not surprising because we have one of the most wonderful religious messages in the world. You can come here and find religious meaning for your life that does **NOT** depend on believing any specific religious dogma or doctrine. Among people who do **NOT** insist that there is only one right way to believe and that we have it.

It can be too easy sometimes, to forget how radical this is! Still! In the 21st Century!

Rather, we are here to learn and teach and share and preach a way of living that is focused on THIS life, the only life we know for sure that we will have. A way of living that is based in covenant, which are the deepest promises we make to one another. And that way of living in covenant is the covenant of our Seven Principles, grounded in our Six Sources. All to be found in the front of your hymnbook on the page right before the first hymn. Our Unitarian Universalist faith is grounded in the value of relationship, the value of reason and the value of justice. The value of spiritual growth. The value of love and compassion.

[I want you to do some exploration among yourselves. Please turn to folks around you and share briefly, very briefly, why, after your first visit, you chose to come back. If you are here for the first time, please share why you came this morning. Only share as you are comfortable doing so. And if that means not sharing, that's OK. Please make sure no one is left out who wishes to be in a conversation. After sharing. Ask for ONE WORD that brought you here and kept you coming.]

So, we just heard from folks about some of the meaning that they found here: **LIST**.

What, in the largest sense, is the meaning to be found in a Unitarian Universalist congregation? In a book about membership and what it means, written by the Unitarian Universalist Association's Commission on Appraisal, this is unpacked. Here's what they said:

The possibility of growth and change, of transformation, is the real basis for participation in a religious community. We have all experienced losses and disappointments, pain and grief. We have been broken by life and need healing . . . The experience of membership offers to individuals the opportunity to become more whole, more committed to each other and to that which is of ultimate worth, more grounded, more profoundly human, and more aware of the gift of community.

The experience of membership both affirms inherent personal worth and confers a new and expanded sense of worth as a member of a local congregation and as a Unitarian Universalist. Becoming a member of the body of Unitarian Universalism is an opportunity to find honor, affirmation, freedom, commitment and salvation. Understand salvation not as an entry pass into another world at death, but as the recognition that right here we have an opportunity to be more than we currently are, to become complete, to find wholeness, health, shalom.

That is the meaning we are all about here.

How is it then, that we enrich and deepen the meaning to be found here? I think this is partly what we have to discover and experiment with together, as a way of reaching the vision and goals and outcomes that we have challenged ourselves to fulfill.

But here are some ideas. Remember why you came here and why you came back and what keeps you coming back. Intentionally seek opportunities when you gather, to deepen that sense of connection to this community, to share what it is that makes you feel more whole and connected.

This could happen by opening every gathering for service or ministry or fellowship with a reading or a sharing at a deeper level. It could happen by reading our Covenant of Right Relations as a reminder of how we have committed to being together. It can happen in so many ways – creative ways that I know you can enjoy discovering together.

It could happen whenever we make plans and part of our planning is that we ask: how does this bring more meaning to what we do here? How does it lift up the values we find most worthy? How does this bring us into closer and richer communion and trust with one another?

In brief, I invite you to fall in love with our Unitarian Universalist faith – and with this community of Unitarian Universalists – all over again. Because that is where the magick is. The magick to be found in a deep sense of meaning and connection. Meaning that calls us to be our most whole and authentic selves. Meaning that calls us to create justice in this world.

I close with these words of Elizabeth Tarbox:

And so I say ours is a story of faith
and hope and love.

I say it is our need for one another that binds us together,
that brings us laughing and limping into relationships and
keeps us at it when we otherwise might despair at the fix we are in.

I say it is the holy we need, the eternal beyond our comprehension,
and one place we can find it is here,
working and worshipping together.

And I say there is a transcendent value worthy of our loyalty,
upon which we may set our hearts,
and its divine manifestation is love.

And so may we all say, together.
Amen. Blessed be.