



Ploughshare

A Piece of Mike's Mind

by Rev. Mike Morran

"Who are these people?"

"Is the community really what it claims to be?"

"Will they see me?"

"Is it safe to be myself here?"

Whether you know it or not, whether they know it or not, every Sunday visitor to First Unitarian Denver is asking themselves some version of these questions. And, whether you know it or not, First Unitarian Denver is honored to host a very high number of first-time visitors, sometimes ten or more on a given Sunday!

This month, A Piece of Mike's Mind will share a few things I want you to know about our first-time Sunday guests.

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Light the Chalice

by Erin Kenworthy, DRE

"Hans Deutsch, an Austrian artist, first brought together the chalice and the flame as a Unitarian symbol during his work with the Unitarian Service Committee during World War II. To Deutsch, the image had connotations of sacrifice and love. Unitarian Universalists today have many different interpretations of the flaming chalice, including the light of reason, the warmth of community, and the flame of hope. "

- UUA Website.

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First, for the vast majority of people, visiting a congregation for the first time is courageous! Especially in these times of social isolation and ever-more-siloed identities, stepping through the doors of an established congregation, where they don't know anyone, is BRAVE.

Second, the vast majority of people who visit for the first time are in some kind of significant life transition. The chances are something like 85% that a first-time guest has something going on in their lives that has caused them to seek a spiritual message, a church community, or a friendly, caring face. This is true across congregational size and denomination. My personal experience is that it could be almost anything..., someone has died, children left home, children came into the world, lost job, new job, recently moved, the end of a relationship, the beginning of a relationship.... The chances are extremely high that if they are here for the first time, SOMETHING is going on.

Third, twenty years ago, the chances were about 70% that a first-time visitor had already checked us out online, visited our web page, and read about our core beliefs and what to expect. These days the chances are 100%. What I want you to know is that if they are physically here, they have pre-selected us to visit! It was not random. They know who we say we are, and they're checking out in person whether we walk our talk.

Fourth (and last for now), there are many things any given person might connect with at First Unitarian Denver; a friendly face, someone that remembers their name, the music, a good sermon, social justice work, etc. But the primary thing people respond to, over and above any of our logistical, informational, theological, or programmatic efforts, is how it FEELS to be here. Our guests, just like most of us, respond to the culture of the place and the community. Does it feel comfortable? joyful? serious? friendly? spiritual? welcoming? diverse? Do we show them we are genuinely interested in who they are? (Without pressure?) Do we make it easy for them to get information? Do we remember their name if they come back next week?

“Who are these people?”

“Is this community really what it claims to be?”

“Will they see me?”

“Is it safe to be myself here?”

May we be the community and the kind of people we aspire to be, and may we open the circle of this community ever wider.

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Lighting a chalice is one of the most UU things that anyone can do, either in our shared sanctuary at 1400 Lafayette, or in your own home. The chalice is our faith symbol in Unitarian Universalism, in the way that a cross represents Christianity, or David's Star represents Judaism, or the many other religious symbols that represent the world's diverse religious paths. In UU worship services around the continent, lighting a chalice serves as a ritual element that provides comfort to those gathered. In my own home, we have created, and occasionally use, a family chalice that we painted at a paint your own pottery studio as a family project. And I wonder, do you, dear reader, have a chalice of your own?

We are in a time of darkness. The wheel of the year turns toward the winter solstice which offers us a time of rest and reflection during the years shortest days and longest nights. For those of us who pay attention to world and national events, even the precious daylight hours seem heavy. Our shared UU values of inclusion, justice, truth, peace, and compassion seem to be held in little regard by those who hold positions of leadership in our wider community. Working toward the world we hope to manifest feels like a grueling undertaking. It is an undertaking that we are called to do, but is not particularly easy in these last few years. What, if anything, sustains us in that work? Answers vary, for sure, but allow me during this holiday season to lift up some ideas.

Light a chalice. Try it. At home, before you go to bed at night, light your chalice if you have one. If not, put a candle in a bowl. Look at the flame. Breathe in peace, breathe out love. Name something you are grateful for. Say out loud something you did during the day that felt "UU", aligned with our principles. Extinguish the chalice, and notice how you feel.

Go out into the world and intentionally share kindness with someone. Expect nothing in return. Spend one day companioning truth in all of its large and small moments. And then, when you return home, light your own chalice.

When the pain of the world lands on your radar, light a chalice, just for a moment. Light a chalice when you need to hold space for conflicting emotions present in a tough situation. Light a chalice when there are no words. Light a chalice when you feel a bubble of joy. Light a chalice when you are uncertain what the next right thing to do might be. Light a chalice when you remember someone who touched your life with goodness, and be sure to light a chalice when you gather with one of those people.

Lighting a chalice is a distinctly UU spiritual practice. Though you may be wary of claiming a spiritual identity, try on Unitarian Universalism like the gift of a sweater that was hand knitted for you by a beloved novice knitter. It might fit, it may need adjustment, it may bring you warmth and comfort, and it might at times feel constricting, uncomfortable, and like too much of a commitment. But do at least give it a try.

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There have been other moments in our world history, when the daylight has felt heavy. And still, folks gathered, loved one another, and lit a chalice out of hope as an action of resistance, and as a ritual that held their identity and comforted them on the path toward living Unitarian Universalist values into being. May we, each of us, carry that flame forward through our lives, knowing that the extinguishing of a candle does not put out the fire of commitment within our hearts that pulled us into the sanctuary at First Unitarian at some point in our lives. Light the chalice alone, light the chalice together, and know that when you cannot, First Unitarian is lighting the chalice on Sunday.

Singing Together

by Jen Simon, Ministerial Intern

A few years ago, I was privileged to attend the Front Range UU choirs retreat at Sunrise Ranch in Loveland. It was a pretty amazing couple of days, which is not surprising given that our clinician for the weekend was Dr. Ysaye Barnwell – ethnomusicologist, choir director at All Souls DC, and member of Sweet Honey in the Rock for 34 years.

Through the course of the weekend, Dr. Barnwell taught us a series of mainly African American spirituals and gospel songs. She taught in the African tradition – orally, without the aid of sheet music. The song that has most stuck with me from that weekend was a simple chant she taught that originated with the Mbuti tribe of central Africa. Ama eeboo o-ee-ay-ee, ama eeboo o ee-ay. It doesn't seem like much on its own, but when sung in a 4-part round, it evokes the chirping of birds, insects, running water, and other sounds of nature – deep inner harmonies that aren't evident until the song is sung in this way. Dr. Barnwell told us that when there is discord in the community, everyone is gathered in order to sing this song. And the community might sing it for hours and hours – days, even – until the village elders have determined that the people are really listening to one another. It is then that the gods and ancestors may be invoked to come down and share their wisdom with the community, and it is then that true communication happens.

I take two lessons from this:

- 1) Divine visitation (in whichever form you receive it – the 20th-century theologian Paul Tillich defined creativity as the breaking through of the Infinite into the finite. That's one of my favorite definitions.) requires deep communal connection, and
- 2) Taking the time to form embodied, in-person connection is vital to community care.

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Dr. Barnwell in a 2015 TED talk* lamented that we do not sing together in the way we used to – in schools, in churches, in union meetings, at informal get-togethers in people’s homes. She said that when people pass sound through their bodies and to one another, they are creating something powerful. “Songs have a way of pulling us together – instantly.”

Over the past few weeks, I’ve preached on Black spiritual practices that come out of African religious tradition. And in our Toward a Black UU Theology class, we explored the ways in which our Black UU ancestors contributed to Unitarianism, Universalism, and Unitarian Universalism by bringing their culture and traditions of resistance and resilience to our faith tradition, and how they fostered theological conversation between UUism and traditionally Black traditions.

As Mark Morrison-Reed points out, Rev. Ethelred Brown walked a fine line between the African American culture of embodied worship and the heady intellectualism of the Harlem Renaissance in his Black Unitarian church. Rev. Joseph Jordan and his Universalist successors based his ministry firmly in the physical needs of his church community. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was a member of both the Unitarian and AME churches in Philadelphia, and needed both in order to fully live and articulate her experience as an African American suffragist in the 19th and early 20th centuries. And Rev. David Hilliard Eaton brought Black and white UUs together as he integrated All Souls, Unitarian in Washington, DC – and wrestled with the question of inclusion of very different cultures in one physical space.

One of the themes that emerged in class was the importance of bodily liberation, not only in Black spaces, but in all religious spaces, as a way of affirming the divinity within us all, and of pushing back against white supremacy culture that seeks to control our bodies, no matter our race. That connecting with one another physically and emotionally (and always consensually!) is a revolutionary act.

And so now I’m curious about your experience: What embodied activities and practices help connect you to the people around you? Singing? Dancing? Games? If you could add an embodied practice to our community to foster even greater connection, what would it be?

*You can watch Dr. Barnwell’s TED talk here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hY6svYv39tI>

President's Corner

by Mary Sullivan, President of the Board of Trustees

As I look at my calendar, I'm reminded there are only twenty something shopping days left. These are words that might strike terror in some of your hearts; for others, not at all. For me, these days, it all depends what I'm shopping for and what what time clock I'm working from.

Let's say, just for grins, that it's not brightly colored packages that will be ripped open with abandon on December 25 that I'm shopping for. Let's imagine I'm searching for brightly colored gifts of illumination, self discovery, my place in the universe; priceless treasures I can open and examine for the rest of my life.

Can we think for a minute about the supply and demand of these types of gifts? This feels nothing like speeding to the toy store, shoe store, sports store, etc. to try to nab the latest and greatest new phenomena before they run out. But wait . . . just sit in front of your computer; you can surely get it that way, and much easier. That is until you see the "Sold Out" alert, with a caption stating no deliveries before mid-January. Aaaaauurgh!!

Let's leave this nightmare for a moment to return our thoughts to the other types of gifts I'm might be exploring. Mike is currently teaching his "Souulful Journeys" class and we are about half-way in. Every time I go to class and again when I meet with a different person in a dyad in the week following class time, I receive new presents to open and observe. Some of these gifts are not beautiful to behold at first sight, but all hold an element of discovery. Some of these parcels I want to close right back up and go on to the next. But I'm encouraged to linger to see if there is a utility for me in this less than appealing gift. Maybe I'm not ready to see or accept the lesson this parcel holds for me. Maybe I will close it, to be opened again at a later date.

But there are also many welcome treasures to be found as I dig through the unopened packages. It can feel like an archeological dig to uncover truths that have been waiting to delight and comfort me all along. Waiting for any certain date on a calendar to justify the solicitation and receipt of these types of gifts seems silly and restrictive.

So why don't I go shopping for these gifts more often, if they are so readily available to me? Why does it take a class on spirituality for me to stop all my busyness and listen to what the universe has to offer me? I guess one of my gifts might be the answer to that question.

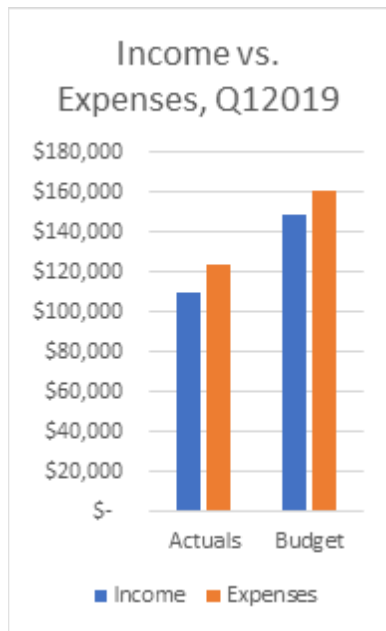
And you want to know the really good news? I don't have just twenty something shopping days left. I have the rest of my life; a multitude of shopping days. Or do I? In actuality, I could have hundreds or thousands of shopping days left . . . or maybe, just one. Maybe I don't want to procrastinate on shopping for these priceless gifts of illumination and self-discovery. Maybe today is the best day to start, since today is the only day I really have.

PS: Transparency Check: I still hope to find a little shiny something on the morning of December 25.

How're We Doing? A Budget Status Report at The End of First Quarter

by Karl Jonietz, Treasurer

The short version: For those readers who are not philomaths, the short version is that we are on track and both our income and expenses are generally in line with our forecast.



A slightly longer summary: With many thanks to all who have paid or are paying their pledges, we are ¼ of the way thru the year and have a bit less than ¼ of our pledged contributions, as is usually the case over the summer. Gift card sales, concert income, and additional fundraising is on track, although facility rental is below expectations. On the expense side the story is much the same. We have spent a bit less than ¼ of what we budgeted, as expenses are a bit less over the summer. We have continued to make improvements around the building, drawing down our property reserve. Other expenses are in line with expectations. Our bank balances are acceptable with about two months' expenses in our operating account.

Our construction loan balance is down to just below \$88,000 and, provided all remaining pledges are honored, we should pay off our obligation as planned. We have taken on new debt (\$26,000 at 6.5%) to purchase additional solar panels, but this is largely covered by the rebates we receive from Xcel Energy, in the same way we cover our first field of panels. We have about \$115,000 in our reserve funds, and our two endowment accounts total \$789,000 in addition to the \$92,000 in the Carolyn Utter fund.

Four months do not a year make, so our performance for the year is entirely dependent on receiving our pledged income, attracting new members, earning funds from our many community efforts, and managing our expenses. FUSD staff, and those members on the Stewardship Committee, the Finance Council, and the Board are working hard to ensure that we remain on track. Do not hesitate to approach any of these folks if you would like to have more detail and stay tuned for another update early in the new year.

Whole Souul Living

Our Whole Souul Living Theme for this month is Divinity. For traditional Christians, the word usually refers to the Christian God and/or Jesus. For Jews, divinity could apply to anything from the orthodox God of the Old Testament to the cosmic Ein Sof (without end) of Kabbahlistic teaching. For many Indigenous People, divinity could refer to the animating spirits of nature or the mysterious forces that turn the seasons or the world.

In the Unitarian Universalist tradition we accept the findings of modern science, and we understand that the ancient wisdom and religious teachings from world religions have something deeply truthful to tell us. We celebrate that each of us will have different approaches, preferences, hopes, fears, and ways of understanding. And, we celebrate the nearly universal human experience of transcendence, revelation, and connection that many associate with divinity.

Some questions for communal or individual reflection:



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- What experiences, forces, powers, principles, or feelings, that actually exist in your life or experience do you identify as divine?
- Is there a plan or purpose for the universe and existence? If so, where does it come from?
- There are many names for divinity; God, Spirit, Being, Allah, etc. Emerson called it The Oversoul. The Tao Te Ching calls it the Tao. Einstein referred to a "Unified Field." Whatever you call it, is divinity... Good? Evil? Indifferent? Conscious? Free?
- It is a fairly common saying that "God is Love." But if God is Love, then Love must be God! Consider, even if just as a metaphor, that if Love is equivalent to God, then you only need to be capable of love to be inherently holy, and so is everyone else! Could this idea transform the world? Could it transform you?