

# Membership & Belonging

November 16, 2014

Rev. Eric Meter & Lane Campbell

Gathering, Welcoming, Centering, Kindling, Opening:

We are here,

*after the first taste of winter this year,*

to refresh ourselves in the warmth of one another's company,

*and to celebrate the possibilities which arise*

when we give voice to the question of how we best

*nurture and expand the promise of this community.*

**And so, in this common house of life and love, may we lead lives of welcome, wisdom and kindness. Bestowing ourselves bountifully to the common good, let gratitude and question displace any easy assumption. Knowing that we are within this hurting, amazing world, not outside it, we approach our earth and social equity mindfully. Let each day express our amen.**

Singing #209 O Come, You Longing Thirsty Souls

Ingathering - A TARDIS Trip to First UU!

Let's all take a look around us this morning. Take a look at who is here with us, take a look at who is a part of First UU. Today, right now, this is what we look like. We are here this morning with people of all ages, with people who look similar to each other and some who look different.

This morning, Rev. Eric and I had the pleasure of borrowing a TARDIS from our good friend, Doctor Who. Does anyone here know what a TARDIS does? That's right...it is a time machine, a time machine that can help people trace forward or backwards in time – to different places or different time periods in our history. This morning, we thought it might be fun to go on a trip. Take a look around and remember what this place looks like. Right now, we are going to fly through time and go back, all the way back to the 1950s.  
ZAP!!

Wow, church looks really different in the 1950s. This place is so small, there are so fewer people here – it's just like a sanctified garage. We are meeting in a house called Unitarian House, where church is in a concrete room. Sunday School is in these tiny rooms – so tiny that enrollment was all full, there was no more room for these kids. The same group of people are at church each week. And oh my goodness! They are looking to buy a new

building. This one is too small. They are looking to buy 93 W. Weisheimer Road – the very building we are in right now. Wow, these folks really paved the way for our church to exist. To be a member here, for the cost of just \$5, everyone got a year’s subscription to the Christian Register, a hymn book, a monthly pastoral letter, and other literature/news.

How big was the church? Any ideas about notable figures in the church?

And now it’s time to take a trip to the future!

ZAP!!!

Well, would you look at that? There are video cameras in the rafters. And while a Board member is welcoming the congregation here, another member of the ministry team is at a smaller building in Gahanna, watching the service being projected there. Afterwards they’ll stay for the potluck, and then lead a class with the help of two teens from nearby.

Later in the service, the principal of the local middle school and the mayor step up to thank the congregation for the 25 years it has hosted an after-school homework program.

In the future this building is lovingly called the Mothership, and there are three other sites owned by the congregation. The parking lot is still as full as ever, but the neighbors no longer complain because they are always given tokens for free food at the community fair the church hosts each spring.

But what’s not clear to me is who comes to church? Years from now, who do you think will be right where you are right now?

Okay, it's time to get in our Tardis one last time.

ZAP!!!

Wow. That was amazing. (Are you as dizzy as I am?)

We’ve come a long way: we’ve seen where we’ve been and had a glimpse of where we might end up. And to get there....well that makes right now pretty special, doesn’t it? Because we can’t get there in the future unless we do right now really well.

So, thanks for joining us on this adventure. I hope your classes today are great, too.

**Greeting**

Judith McDowell

Picture Directory announcement

Heidi Drake

**Affirming**

*#437 Let Us Worship*

Let us worship with our eyes and ears and fingertips;

*Let us love the world through heart and mind and body.*

We feed our eyes upon the mystery and revelation in the faces of our brothers and sisters.

*We seek to know the wistfulness of the very young and the very old, the wistfulness of people in all times of life.*

We seek to understand the shyness behind arrogance, the fear behind pride, the tenderness behind clumsy strength, the anguish behind cruelty.

*All life flows into a great common life, if we will only open our eyes to our companions.*

Let us worship, not in bowing down, not with closed eyes and stopped ears.

*Let us worship with the opening of all the windows of our beings, with the full outstretching of our spirits.*

Life comes with singing and laughter, with tears and confiding, with a rising wave too great to be held in the mind and heart and body, to those who have fallen in love with life.

*Let us worship, and let us learn to love.*

**Singing**

*#67 We Sing Now Together*

**Communing**

We move now into the center of our time together this morning, a time marked by the stillness that will follow the sound of our temple bell. May these words guide us into this time of reflection....

As winter begins to settle in around us, who does not seek out places where warmth can be found? Who doesn't hold on just a bit longer than usual to a warm hand that is offered in friendship?

My best guess is that all of us have known times when warmth was hard to come by. When hands extended in care were few and far between. Maybe these days are one of those times. Yet when we feel we belong, whether it be some place or among a certain group of people, we are naturally warmed. And when we bring ourselves to those places and those people we find that warmth extends from us.

To belong – to find the eternal call for home answered – is one of life's greatest gifts. Its lack is one of life's tragedies.

Together, we can help one another give shape to the human need to belong. Together we can give shape to the call for home.

This morning, in all that we say and do, and in the stillness that will surround us in just a moment, may we honor that call.

*bell*

Stillness and belonging. Need and potential. Ourselves and others. Our lives are given shape by countless factors, countless others. Into the continuing stillness let us bring to mind the names of those we love, those who challenge us in old familiar or brand new ways, those we miss, those we long to see again. We name them now, either softly into this shared space, or quietly in the embrace of our hearts.

### *naming*

Out of the stillness rose the names of those whose lives give shape to our own. Out of the stillness now let music rise as we celebrate the gift of living.

### **Readings**

*Our first reading this morning is from the sociologist Robert Bellah. After co-writing the books Habits of the Heart and The Good Society, our denomination asked him to turn his lens on us. This is from his report back to us in 1998. Some of his points may sound dated to us here today, yet his main argument is no less true today than it was then. And as we're talking about membership and belonging this morning, Lane and I have asked our Membership Chair, Leslie Armstrong, to be part of our celebration this morning. Leslie....*

It is no accident that the United States, with its high evaluation of the individual person, is nonetheless alone among North Atlantic societies in the percentage of our population who live in poverty, and that we are dismantling what was already the weakest welfare state of any North Atlantic nation. Just when we are moving to an ever greater validation of the sacredness of the individual person, our capacity to imagine a social fabric that would hold individuals together is vanishing. And this is in no small part due to the fact that our religious individualism is linked to an economic individualism which ultimately knows nothing of the sacredness of the individual. If the only standard is money, then all other distinctions are undermined.

What economic individualism destroys, and what religious individualism cannot restore, is solidarity, a sense of being members of the same body.

Our second reading today comes from the meditation manual *Voices from the Margins*, a collection of writings by UU people of color from North America. Here is Manish Mishra-Marzetti's piece, *River Call*.

Between rocking the boat  
and sitting down;  
between stirring things up,  
and peaceably going along,

We find ourselves  
here,  
in community.

Each called  
from many different

journeys,  
many different  
life paths,  
onto this river road.

Some are here  
because the rocking of  
the boat  
has been too much:

too much tumult,  
too much uncertainty,  
too much pain.

Some are here with questions  
about where the boat is going;  
how best to steer it;  
where this journey ends.

Others are here  
as lovers of the journey,  
lovers of life itself.

Here in front  
beside  
behind

each a passenger;  
each a captain;  
doing the best we can.

“Rest here, in your boat,  
with me,” the river calls;  
“Listen to how I flow,  
the sound of life coursing all around you.”

Let the current  
hold you,  
let the current  
guide you;  
the river that gently flows  
through your soul,  
whispers:  
“Come, let us worship.”

## **Preaching**

Eric – To begin, a story about belonging:

After my first year of college I realized that beyond ministry, which I knew I was far from being mature enough for, I had absolutely no idea what I wanted to do after I graduated to pay rent and buy groceries. And as I was at a large state university surrounded by miles and miles of corn fields, I began to think that I might be wise to think about transferring to a school in some city – at least I might begin making contacts there that would help in finding work once I graduated.

So I starting looking for a new school.

To make a long and mostly boring story short, I knew which one I wanted to go to when I read the following story in a college ranking guide. There, amid a half page description of the school I ended up graduating from, was the following story, and yes I will embellish it just a bit:

The school was not a known for its athletics. In fact, the football team once had a five-year-long losing streak. On the day that streak finally came to an end, there were roughly 25 people in the stands.

But those 25 got the word out. “We won! We finally won!”

“No, really. We won.”

Folks stopped what they were doing. Experiments and papers were abandoned. The cafeteria emptied. There was an exodus from the school library.

At the time the school had maybe 1700 students, but soon over 2000 people – students, professors, janitors and folks who lived nearby – all descended upon the field. The throng – I know no more fitting word – ended up pulling down the goal posts they were so overjoyed.

Now that was a spirited community I wanted to be part of: educated losers who understood the value of winning.

Now, that's one story about the power of wanting to belong to a larger group. And while that story was a large part of my wanting to attend that particular school, it was not one I told, say, my parents.

I tell it to you this morning because it highlights the drive we feel to be part of something larger than ourselves. This morning, I've asked Lane to join me in talking to you about membership and belonging in terms of relating to a faith community such as ours, and I began with a story about wanting to belong to a specific group because membership is just one way in which we may belong to any given group. Belonging is primary. And belonging requires a choice.

In this congregation's Path to Membership classes, we've noticed that more and more of our participants are asking, "Why should I join? Even if I come to worship services and get involved in the justice work of the congregation, even if I pledge in support of the work of the church so that you can know you'll be able to pay this winter's heating bills on time, why should I sign the membership book?"

In short, while folks coming to our Path classes long to be part of a vital community as much as anyone ever did, we're seeing more and more blank faces when we talk about relating to the church as an institution.

It's a pattern we're seeing across the denomination and in many others as well. For us, it actually has roots in the early days of Unitarianism in the U.S. These days the denomination is made up of member congregations. Back at the beginning of the American Unitarian Association, however, membership was made up of individuals.

There has always been tension between those who see the need for institution building and those who felt that the UU spirit is best understood as a religious movement.

But this kind of tension is healthy. In fact it's necessary.

The staff here, the lay leaders, the volunteers who water the plants and set up the beautiful flowers, our greeters and ushers this morning, Kevin working the sound board, are all doing their share to create a lasting container in which the love here can deepen and grow and spread out beyond these walls.

This line from Robert Bellah is chiseled into my understanding of church work: "without good institutions there will not be good communities, and without good communities there will not be good individuals."

My father was as active a church volunteer as anyone I've known. When he died, this is what I said to his congregation that next Sunday, "Thank you for loving him, supporting him, and challenging him. You helped make him the person he strived to be." And while I didn't say it then, his congregation made him a better father. Something I will always be grateful for.

Love expands. It reaches out. The support and loving challenge that held my father reached out, through him, to me.

The joy with which our greeters say "Hello" likewise ripples through and beyond this room. There is love here and it reaches out, too.

And the language I've been using in talking about church membership has not been resonating like it used to.

The times are changing. People have more options than ever before.

Sunday morning works for fewer families than it used to.

Back at my first church I would sometimes rail against the park district for setting youth soccer matches on Sunday morning. Then, on a rare Sunday morning off from church, I took a long walk and happened by the park district's soccer fields. Kids and teens were getting out of cars, playing under a bright morning sun with smiles on their faces. While I still hated the timing of the games, I couldn't, and wouldn't, fight against the joy on those youthful faces.

So I'm at an impasse.



People are still hungering to belong to something greater than themselves. They deeply want to be part of caring, supportive yet challenging endeavors congregations like this one provide, but the drive to be part of an institution that fosters such a spirit is not what it used to be.

Do I need to find new ways of talking about how necessary the church is in order to keep the spirit of our community alive?

Does the church, as an institution, need to find new ways to make use of the gifts of those who come looking to be part of something more?

Yes to both, but what and how?

The good news is that none of us is alone on the journey. Lane, you are also a lifelong UU, but I know your perspective is not the same as mine. How does all of this look to you?

Lane Campbell –

A few weeks ago, I was on the phone with my best friend, Betty Jeanne. Betty Jeanne and I grew up as Unitarian Universalist youth in New England – we have known each other forever. Betty Jeanne was talking to me about joining a church she has been a part of for the last five years. It struck me at the time that I hadn't heard many of my friends talking about joining a church, about becoming a member in quite a while. Certainly, here, as a Director of Religious Education, I had heard about joining the church from many of you. But for my friends, this was a unique conversation.

See, these models of membership in churches come out of a time period when church was still at the center of people's lives. In the 1950s, people attended church each week, served on committees and the Board. Many folks were at church multiple evenings a week for fellowship and Bible or text study. Church had a much larger role in our lives and in our culture. It is the reason many businesses are still closed on Sunday, or at least still have different hours. Life ran around the Christian calendar from the time of this country's founding, and in some ways still does, up through the present day. This often happened at the exclusion of our many neighbors from different faith backgrounds, but that is another sermon for another day.

In today's context, the role of religion in our lives is shifting. Church is no longer a given, it is an option. Sunday mornings are no longer carved out in people's schedules to come to church. Each week, this institution competes with brunch (and who doesn't love a brunch?), we compete with sports practices and events, we compete with sitting at home reading the New York Times for the one day a week when people can. The busy-ness of our lives has changed. The rhythm of our lives has changed. The role religious communities play in our lives has changed. And so perhaps our perspective needs to change.

Right now, in this congregation, we are all at different places in where we belong. Some of us are here to attend Sunday services and that is okay, it's fine, it's wonderful. Others of us attend on Sundays, and also take part in programs of the church – educational programs or programs for socializing or social justice. We are overjoyed and grateful you are a part of this community between Sundays. And we have members here that view this place as the center of their lives. They take part in leadership, in programs, and in our weekly worship service. This congregation would not be what it is without you. We are all so grateful for the work you do, I am grateful especially. Each of us is involved in this church in different ways, and that is okay.

When I think of organizations or movements where I want to be a member, to belong, I think of places where I am valued, where I am seen, where I can connect with people, and where I feel my presence has a positive impact. (Repeat) I want to be places where I can both contribute and be supported. My first thought is not what committee can I work on, or what project can I donate my time to. My first thought is, who can I get to know here? Who will want to get to know me? As human beings, we all want to be valued and seen in our authentic selves. This is what membership is all about – belonging somewhere that fits, belonging to a place with shared values that honors who each of us is. It's about where we choose to belong and where we choose to stay, where we feel engaged, and where our hearts live.

Long gone are the days when church was a given. In fact, church trends indicate that there is a rise in folks who have been raised outside of churches or faith communities. Unitarian Universalism has a unique religious home to offer to what writers are calling “nones” or people who come out of no organized faith background. We have an open mind to offer, spiritual sustenance, and a vision for social justice. We also have this beloved community, which has inspired and sustained so many of us. A beloved community that values art-making, beauty, connection, and truth-telling.

There are so many gifts we bring into this place, into this space each and every Sunday. In September, I posed the question to our congregation through an idea board, “What gifts do you bring to First UU?” We were invited to come together to write our gifts on a flower and plant them in a garden of gifts on this idea board. People of all ages responded. The top response across the board was love, followed by a close second of creativity and happiness. I even saw on there a love of working with kids, which of course makes your Director of Religious Education (the staff person responsible for Sunday School) very happy. The list of gifts is quite long. So long, in fact, that when I went to check on the bulletin board this past week, we were out of paper flowers to plant in our garden. And I'm sure there are so many gifts as yet unnamed and unseen on this idea board. I encourage you to check it out during our coffee hour, and to add your gifts too. Don't worry, I cut more flowers this weekend.

What do you bring into this space? How do you embody love?

When I have met with people newly-interested in this congregation, the most common response to the question, “What brought you here?” is connection. People come here seeking connection. And it is this church's purpose to offer connection to the people who come seeking. To connect people to one another, to connect people with spiritual or emotional sustenance, to connect people to a higher purpose or calling for their lives, to connect people to what they hold holy and dear.

Belonging in a place is all about connecting. It is all about finding that one person or that group of people who recognize you and see you for who you are. Church membership is all about getting to know one another and feeling less alone. Reaching out to new folks to connect can open our hearts to, as yet unimagined, experiences. Getting to know someone who has been at First UU for a while opens our minds to a richness that this church has held for them for some time. What matters is that each of us is choosing to be here this morning. Church is no longer a given, it is a choice. Each of us has chosen to be in this place, in this Worship Center at this time.

I don't know quite what this shift in our broader culture is going to mean for Unitarian Universalism, or even for First UU in particular. We certainly can't see where all of this is going. Eric, do you have any ideas?

(E:) Lane, I go back to when you said, “When I think of organizations or movements where I want to belong, I think of places where I am valued, where I am seen, where I can connect with people, and where I feel my presence has a positive impact.”

The best way I can see to move forward will be to be intentional about talking to one another about what we need from, and what we have to offer, our community here. And then to hold on to what comes out of those conversations as lovingly as knights of old might have held the Holy Grail.

(L:) The new vision of belonging to this congregation and to Unitarian Universalism is shaped by the people who walk through these doors each Sunday, by the people who are trying out Unitarian Universalism for the first time. This new vision is also shaped by the folks who have been here for a long time and remain here. Dialogue between these two parties will create the future of Unitarian Universalism and this beloved community.

## **Offering**

Together we make a community of spirit. Together we make a community that blesses the world, a community that both raises and shelters our questions, and both names and douses our fears.

Together we support such a community as best we can, in many ways, through our human presence, our gifts behind the scenes, and through this ancient and thoughtful way of

supporting what we love. All of us together are responsible for this place. The ushers will now come forward. Your generosity will be gratefully received.

## **Returning**

Lane's prayer

Spirit of our longings, spirit of that which we hold so dear,  
Spark inside all of us calling us towards our better selves,  
This morning we open our hearts,  
We open our hearts to the parts of us that yearn to belong,  
To be seen, to be understood, to move out of isolation.  
We open our hearts and we listen to that voice inside of us.  
This morning, we breathe into those parts of us that feel connected.  
We lift up gratitude for the people we can be our real selves with,  
We lift up gratitude for strong relationships, for knowing where we fit in.  
We breathe into those parts of us, and we listen to that voice.  
Source of all, help us today to feel the chairs under us, to feel the floor at our feet.  
May we meet someone today who reminds us that community is about more than a building.  
That belonging is about a feeling, about connecting.  
May we meet someone today who sees us, who knows us.  
May we lean into this community and trust that someone will be there,  
With hearts open, breathing into connection,  
Helping each of us to feel less alone.

Blessed be, amen.

**Singing**      #318    *We Would Be One*

## **Blessing**