



A Religion For Our Time

Six Part Sermon Series by Rev. Alan C. Taylor
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Part I - Embracing Change and Creativity

Change is in the air. School has started. Summer has ended. New routines are in swing. Even here at Unity Temple, change is in the air. We are starting our services a half hour earlier. And I am so glad I have not been alone here the first half-hour with the choir, as I feared might be so. Don't worry, those of you who are just walking in now--a half hour late, don't feel bad, change isn't always easy. I know. I still haven't figured out how to finish my sermons before Saturday night. At home, my wife is still waiting for me to share my thoughts without having to be asked. I've lived here in the Chicago area for seven years now, and I still get upset when driving and someone passes me on the right where I'm convinced there shouldn't be a lane.

Change often is not easy, and worse, it's often scary. When it comes to deepening in relationship, changing at a spiritual level, making a significant commitment, taking a stand, making a sacrifice, or letting go of a long-harbored grudge, the freedom and meaning that comes with such a change of the heart is often scarier than hell. We are prone to preventing ourselves from living with vibrant faith by clinging to what is known, settling for only what we can now see, or remaining sheltered in an illusion of security.

This morning, our Homecoming Sunday for the first time I have been here, falls in the midst of the Jewish High Holy Days. The ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. This is a specific time for our Jewish sisters and brothers who practice *teshuvah*. *Teshuvah* sometimes is described as dry-cleaning for the soul. It literally means to turn back and forswear thy foolish ways. It involves four steps: acknowledging regrets, stopping the harmful actions we have been doing, seeking forgiveness, and finally making a firm commitment to change. Real change typically occurs only when each of these steps, these difficult steps, are followed. And they take time. They require time for prayer or meditation or reflection. They require us to be painfully honest with

ourselves. Ideally, when Yom Kippur comes, the practitioners of *teshuvah* have wiped clean one's soul and readied themselves for the new spiritual year.

Each year. I typically explore an aspect of forgiveness and atonement at this time, because this spiritual holiday is so profound, celebrating the human capacity to change and grow. But this year, I have chosen to focus exclusively on forgiveness. Instead I have chosen to launch a series of six sermons today entitled, "A Religion for Our Time." I am doing this because I believe Unitarian Universalism at its best truly is a religion for our time. I've identified five objectives essential for authentic religion, objectives that I urge religious people of all stripes to engage. Now I've got a bias I need to tell you about. I believe Unitarian Universalism is *THE* religion for our time, but I am aware that there are strains of all the world's religions that share with us these five key objectives that serve us here and now. And those five objectives of authentic religion will be the focus of the first five sermons of my series. They are:

- embracing change and creativity for the sake of growing our souls and improving our relationships
- fostering community and connection where all are welcome and invited to engage
- building bridges of interfaith cooperation, that is, building bridges of hope and service
- cultivating courage and conscience to transform our world
- embracing diversity so that we live into the future of an ever more multicultural world

In the sixth and final sermon, I will lay out a vision for Unity Temple. I will lay out a vision for Unity Temple as a spiritual home that is at a crossroads as this congregation faces the challenge of expanding and taking care of our facilities to serve our growing membership and to extend our mission of transforming hearts and cultivating leadership that will make this world a better place to live.

I am talking about a kind of organized religion. Around here, that phrase, organized religion, is often not very welcome. The Sufi teacher Hafiz liked to say that "the great religions are the ships, poets the lifeboats. Every sane person I know has jumped overboard."

Sometimes it seems like organized religion is at the root of so much of what is wrong with the world. Religion accounts for a tremendous amount of hatred and fear and violence. Yesterday, we reached the ninth anniversary of that horrible attack by people professing to be followers of Islam. Over the past week, people professing to be good Christians and Jews have engaged in protests over the building of an Islamic Center in lower Manhattan, arson at the building site of a new mosque in Tennessee, and a highly publicized call to burn copies of the Koran which fortunately didn't take place. All this as Muslims approached Eid, their celebration of this past weekend that marked the end of their month long observance of Ramadan.

As much as it may seem that organized religion is the problem, it isn't *organized* religion but *corrupted* religion. Philosopher of religion Charles Kimball writes, "Whatever religious people may say about their love of God or the mandates of their religion, when their behavior toward others is violent or destructive, when it causes suffering among their neighbors, you can be sure their religion has been corrupted." Kimball goes on to

identify the five red flags of corrupted religion, characteristics that point not to organized religion but corrupted religion. They are: 1) absolute truth claims, 2) expectations of blind obedience, 3) the establishment of an ideal future time, 4) assertions that ends justify any means, and 5) the declaration of holy war. These are the five flags of corrupted religion.

But not all religion is corrupted. There is such thing as *creative* religion. In fact, all the great religions when they first formed had insights about truth and love that transformed human hearts. All the great religions began as a reformation of corrupted religion and they continue to draw people by their original creative seeds--their teaching of love and compassion. Of course there has been so much corruption within religion.

The difference between corrupted and creative religion can be illustrated with the movie Frankenstein. It's the story of a innovative doctor who creates life, and this life is so powerful, it ends up not only taking a life of its own but destroys the life of its creator. That's the story of corrupted religion. As the British Episcopal bishop Richard Holloway notes, "Human beings have an uncanny ability of crafting stories about ourselves that turn back and abuse us, so that we end up being oppressed by our own creations." Corrupted religion ends up projecting our fears and anxieties onto religious ideas that then assume authority over us, much in the way Frankenstein takes control of his creator. This is what has happened to one sacred text after another. Stories are handed down that were meant to transform hearts not shackle them, to liberate people from fear and hatred rather than to perpetuate them. But in time, according to Holloway, "because of their antiquity and mysteriousness people began to revere sacred scripture" and I add, in ways that corrupted their religion.

As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote in the past century, "To have faith does not mean to dwell in the shadow of old ideas conceived by prophets and sages, to live off an inherited estate of doctrines and dogmas. In the realm of the spirit only he who is a pioneer is able to be an heir. The wages of spiritual plagiarism is the loss of integrity . . . Authentic faith is more than an echo of a tradition. It is a creative situation, an event."

Creative religion is the religion of spiritual pioneers who understand that we exist in a creative field of possibility. In other words: we human beings have the capacity to change and grow. But this doesn't mean that everything turns out the way we want. Sometimes horrible things happen. Good people die young. Or as shared this morning, it happens that good people are murdered; children lose parents, and bicyclists get killed.

I sometimes wonder whether we human beings have so much difficulty in dealing with the pain and the sorrow of an unfair world that we abdicate our spiritual integrity and claim stories that assure us that all this is for the better or has been planned. But that would not be, from my vantage point, honest. That would not be within the realm of creative religion. From where I stand, I cannot affirm a supernatural deity that is all powerful and has everything in control. When terrible things happen to good people, or happen to me, there is no good reason. It is tough thing to come to grips with. We can

be good people and bad things still happen. As Rabbi Harold Kushner says, "Asking the universe to treat you better because you are moral is like expecting the bull not to charge because you are a vegetarian."

So what can we say about God in an often seeming amoral universe? Forgive me, I'm going to get abstract here. One problem stems from perceiving the core of existence as being, for we tend to perceive the world as a collection of things--isolated objects that interact but remain separate. But *being* isn't the nature of either the heart of reality or the God of my understanding. Science joins faith to demonstrate the core of reality is not *being* but *becoming*--and *becoming* is the key characteristic of all, including God. Let me explain: The universe is a welter of endless change as we and all around us reach the present as a result of the choices we have made and the choices that creation has made, and at the heart of reality there is a God-infused lure toward innovation, creativity and righteousness always inviting us toward goodness. I take this specific distinction from Bradly Artson, of Jewish American University who finds in the story of Moses a biblical basis for this understanding of God. It's the story of Moses being called by God to share his laws. In this story, God's name is revealed and the most common translation to English is: "I am what I am." But there is another viable translation. God's name could just as easily be expressed as "I am becoming what I am becoming (ehyeh asher ehyeh)." The chief characteristic of God is creativity. We, along with all creation, have real agency, and the choices we make are truly unprogrammed, and unforeseen by God. The kind of God I believe in is vulnerable to surprise and disappointment just as we are. The universe, as Artson says, "unfolds according to its own inner logic; the laws of physics operate, and God cannot or does not suspend them based on moral standards. Many of us misunderstand the nature of divine power as coercive or as all-powerful which is a religious mistake, a philosophical disaster, and a source of emotional and ethical torment."

My central point today is that we exist in a creative field of possibility. We have the capacity to change and grow, transforming our own hearts and our relationships, and this is the first and most significant objective of authentic religion. In the face of loss and grief, we can affirm that our love and prayers and heart connect us to each other and to creation--that feeling the beauty around us smelling its scents, touching the earth and sky, connecting to others, working for justice--these are encounters with all and the All, and they offer the relationship and connection that is life's true consolation.

Now I know I have been speaking at an intellectual level, and I know some of you really love this. But I want to bring this down to a concrete level. A former parishioner once shared with me an insight he had come to after listening deeply and sharing honestly with his men's group. His jaw stiffens. Sadness fills his face as he intones the words: "We rarely live the lives we planned to live." He was coming to grips with the pain of his own disappointments and regrets. And truly, for so many of us, our lives have taken unexpected turns. We may have suffered losses of family or friends, find ourselves without employment or found ourselves needing to move because of work. Or maybe we grapple with our own health or face the limitations or demons of someone we dearly love, wishing they were different than they are. Whatever changes we face, they rarely

are easy, and we may very well be in a place where we are called upon to sing a new song. We may be in a place where we need to practice teshuva, to do the hard work of forgiveness. And don't all of us need to do the hard work of forgiveness for the sake of making the commitment to change. The parishioner I speak of is not a particularly wealthy person, but he decided to give his church during a capital campaign a quarter of a million dollars. For he came to realize that his congregation, participating in honest and creative religion had wrought a change in his own heart and now he was learning, seemingly ever so slowly, how to be ever more an embodiment of love--and wanting dearly for others to learn the same.

I love the song we just sang: *Soon the day will arrive when we will be together and no longer will we live in fear. And the children will smile without wondering whether thunderclouds will appear.* For years I thought this song was about a time in the future when all people live in harmony. But reflecting on it this past week, I have come to believe that this song is about the reality that you and I create when we are a part of a religious community that truly embraces change and creativity, a community that ever invites one another to join in sharing honestly, in singing a new song, developing a new poetry and revelation for today, sitting with one another in grief and needing to find a way to change, and actively pursuing the vision of creating a brighter tomorrow, every year engaging the promise of a new beginning.

Wait and see wait and see what a world there can be if we share if we care you and me

Even our Unitarian Universalist religion becomes corrupted at times. The bias of our religious liberalism is to view human nature through rose colored glasses. We often forget and deny our capacity as human beings to hurt other people and this leads us into a political correctness that condemns anyone who dares to acknowledge that we all are in need of seeking forgiveness. Our choir sang so beautifully at the beginning of today's service the text of a poem by Rumi, "Come come whoever you are, wander worshipper, lover of leaving. Ours is no caravan of despair, come yet again come." But in the hymn in our hymnal, a line was omitted, the most significant line. As the choir sang the lines in the hymn, the basses chanted, "Though you have broken your vow a thousand times."

*Come come whoever you are, wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving, ours is no caravan of despair, **even though you have broken your vow a thousand times, come yet again come!***

Creative religion, religion for our time recognizes we are not perfect people and that we have the capacity to change and grow. We have our struggles, all of us wrestle with demons to one degree or another, and we can seek wholeness. Here everyone is welcome. To everyone we sing as we sang earlier:

Enter, rejoice and come in.
Open your ears to the song.
Open your hearts everyone

Don't be afraid of some change.
Don't be afraid of some change.
Don't be afraid of some change.

Blessed be. Amen.

Part II - Community and Connection

The church didn't have a parking lot. It was my first visit, and I had to park over four blocks away. As I walked, an older man also on his way to the church greeted me. His name was Willard. "That's a lovely red shirt you're wearing." His comment put me at ease. It's the only thing I remember of our conversation, besides his cheerfully welcoming me to sit with him during worship and introducing me to others. And I sat with him the next few times I returned, for--and I know you're not gonna believe this--I was shy and I was intimidated by approaching others. I will never forget Willard. Tears come to my eyes and I smile when I think about the lovely man whose kindness and genuine interest in me had helped me realize that there in the Oakland Unitarian Universalist Church I had found a spiritual home.

The greatest motivator for people seeking out a church is loneliness, at least according to sociologists. It's true for me. I moved to Berkeley, California a year after college, thinking Berkeley or "Berzerkely" as some of my friends called it, would be a great place to live, that there I would encounter great ideas and find direction for my life. There was only one problem. I didn't know anyone, or perhaps the more emotionally accurate thing to say is, nobody knew me. Over a number of months, I had many acquaintances, but I never felt so, so alone. I longed for connection, for community. For several months I drifted without a sense of belonging. I suffered that kind of torment that comes when knowing you are disconnected. Now, I was raised Unitarian Universalist, but my childhood experience didn't make me enthusiastic about going to church. I didn't expect a whole lot. And I remember feeling helpless, as I said to myself, well, I'll go check out the local Unitarian Universalist church because I am just so lonely. That day that I met Willard was in many respects the first day of the rest of my life. For it was that day I would find true community and connection that would sustain me.

It's easy to live in a place for even several years and not have real community. I could share with you countless stories. Here's just one. After a few years of being in Chicago, a woman in her late 30s enjoying success in her career was featured on television. This should have been a happy, joyous occasion. Instead, she cried throughout the night, for she didn't know anyone well enough to invite to join her to watch the television segment and celebrate with her. She had worked so hard for so long and then realized it didn't mean a thing if she wasn't connected to other people.

The American Sociological Review, the leading sociological journal, reported on a study about interpersonal relationships. This study among Americans was done 25 years ago and then a generation later to see how things had changed. To the question asked, how

many people can you share significant personal information with, how many people can you truly confide in? The answer 25 years ago that was most frequently given 25 % of the respondents said 3. Twenty years later, same study, same questions. What would you expect to be the most common answer to this question, how many people do you know whom you could really confide in? In this recent study, the most frequent answer, just over 25% was 0. The second most frequent answer, from just under 25% of respondents said they had only one person to confide in. Most of these people who reported one person referred to someone they lived with, most often their life partner, sometimes a parent. That means, an extraordinary half of the American population don't have anyone outside their own home with whom they know well enough to share personal information.

I learned of this study from Peter Morales. he's the president of the Unitarian Universalist Association. He says, "The people to whom we must minister in the 21st century are the most disconnected people who have ever lived on earth." This sermon is the second in a series entitled, "A Religion for Our Time." This sermon is about the core task of religion for our time to foster community and connection. I think Morales has it right. People visiting our churches are most often seeking: Relationship, connection, a sense of belonging, community, depth, and a chance to get involved. They want all of this, and yet the central, spiritual longing is for connection, for real community.

What's the supreme irony? As Morales says, "We who have smart phones and instant messages and tweets and email and voicemail and zillions of friends on Facebook, we are by objective measure the most emotionally isolated beings who have ever lived on this planet. We exchange more messages than ever at the price of true intimacy and real community. We human beings experience transcendence and love. We are wired to need one another. Fortunately there is hope.

Even after the worst that can happen to us, it is possible to discover the power of community and connection. Sherri Mandel tells a story about the power of human connection a couple months after her 14 year old son, Koby, was killed. She writes about going out to dinner with her husband for their wedding anniversary. She says, I can't say we celebrated, because we were too sad. When we walked into the restaurant, the smiling waitress with her shiny, black hair had a spirit and effervescence I could only admire. I thought to myself, "She has no idea of the pain I am living with, the weight of what I carry." As Sherri and her husband ate their meal, they realized that the restaurant would be a good place to commemorate what would be Koby's upcoming fifteenth birthday. They talked with the manager about their thought of taking fifteen disadvantaged youth to mark their deceased son's birthday. The manager said that he volunteered at a nearby center that helped teens from poor, broken families, and he thought that the teenagers would appreciate going out with them. The idea was taking form through genuine conversation, a genuine encounter. They hadn't thought about taking teenagers out for a meal, but it made sense. They thanked the manager for this conversation and then Sherri's husband said: "Do you know the Goodman family? They live around here. They lost their 16-year-old son, Tani, this year in an accident - we

went to the shiva - and I wanted to know how they are doing." The manager responded, "You can ask them yourself. Your waitress is their daughter." Sherri writes, "I looked at her, at her beauty and her spirit, and I thought, "You never know what's going on inside a person." I had misjudged her. When she came over to the table, we told her of our loss, and she shared her own. As we spoke, I realized how much of life is hidden. We don't see what's inside of people." As they shared their feelings, Sherri and her husband felt less isolated. The pain lifted for a moment. They knew they were not alone. As Sherri says, "Healing may occur when we reveal what's hidden inside of us. It brings us closer to others."

i think this is what Jesus was saying in the Gospel of Thomas when he said, "If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you."

The power of community and connection can emerge at the most unexpected places, in the most unexpected times, The power of community and connection brings healing to even the most devastated of human hearts. It always comes through a genuine encounter. Sometimes it comes as a form of grace like in Sherri's story, but it is possible to increase the odds of making this kind of grace happen. And that is what a lot of authentic religion looks like. As the great Jewish sage Martin Buber notes in today's reading, "The nature of true community, of a strong and vital religious community, is the story of welcoming and of radical hospitality. Religion is not an intellectual exercise. It is about encountering the holy as we move through our lives, encountering the spark of divinity through relationship and responding to the hopes and dreams that we truly share." Buber summed up his philosophy with five words: "All true living is meeting."

A week ago, I received a fundraising appeal through my email. Now I receive countless fundraising appeals in my email, and I don't usually open those emails. Maybe I opened this one because it said it was from Barack Obama. It began: "When Michelle and I decided that I should run for office, it was because of a shared belief in the power of community and connection, a commitment to the idea that we are our brothers' keepers." I just about fell off my chair as I was reflecting on this sermon, and here was this email from Barack Obama saying that he believed in the power of community and connection and this is what got him to run for the President of the United States.

I realized right then and there, that fostering community and connection is not only the function of authentic "religious" community but the role of all authentic community. What we are about is fostering not just religious community, community that transforms people. Obama's work as a community organizer is so inspiring on the south side of Chicago. He got people, neighbors who were initially strangers to one another, to meet, to talk, to share, and to discover their common hopes and their common concerns. And he got them to work, and it took a lot of work. As anyone engaged in community organizing knows, it takes a lot of intention, a lot of patience, it takes a lot of meetings. When people share honestly and hear others share honestly and connect, real possibility emerges. Possibility that changes hearts. Possibility that changes the world..

I think that's what Jesus was getting at when he said, If you bring forth what is among you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is among you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.

Without authentic community and connection, ordinary people cannot and will not share what is important to them. Without connection and community, ordinary people cannot share their joys and their successes or their sorrows and their burdens with others. We human beings have so much to offer one another, but how often do we pass up the opportunity to truly meet, to accept the invitation of another to connect, to open our hearts to encounter another and really understand them.

I would like to suggest--in fact I would like to challenge you--that a most significant spiritual discipline here at Unity Temple is the discipline of community. The intentional practice of welcoming others, coming to know them, and engaging in radical hospitality that transforms lives. My life was changed because of Willard. Willard in Oakland opened his heart to me. And here at Unity Temple I imagine a lot of people can say the same of Rich Meyer, the chief architect of our welcoming ministry, which invites each and every one you to play that role with someone else. I suspect Willard never knew what an impact he had on me, but I can attest what it makes when drifting and disconnected, someone listens cheerfully.

Here at Unity Temple, we provide many opportunities for community building. The first layer is our pathways to membership program. The second layer is intentional small groups, that has two parts: First, our Chalice Circle program geared to bring a group of strangers together to share, listen, and deepen in relationship. Second, small groups that gather around a shared interest, activity, or purpose. These include our men's and women's groups as our book groups, the knitting group, a hiking group. These groups come and go as people have interest in them. Now if you are someone who has the skills and interest in facilitating a new chalice circle or if you want to coordinate around a specific interest or activity, we currently have interested people to form new circles. Just let me or one of our leaders know!

We are truly at our best when we are clear that we are a community of faith where people don't pretend to have it all figured out but welcome one another to grow in spirit and to live lives of service and faith.

It is has become our motto: "We will care for you and will call upon you to care for others." One way we do this is through our Caring Team, which has long been an opt in opportunity. We're doing away with that approach! When you become a member, you will be added to this list. It won't be an opt in opportunity but an opt out one. Your email will be added to a list. When a need emerges among us, those on the list will be contacted via email. Everyone will have the opportunity to respond.

A lot of people have really wonderful hopes and dreams but no one will ever learn of them if no one ever welcomes or encounters them. A lot of people are lonely, but you would never know it by how they act. Even highly successful people know deep

isolation, indeed, emotional isolation is sometimes a result of significant achievement. A lot of people are hurting, but you wouldn't know it by looking at them. So much of who we are is hidden. It takes an act of sharing to know another, to know their hopes, their struggles, their joy, their sorrows.

Here at Unity Temple, may we be about the work of fostering community and connection for the sake of transforming our own lives and inviting others to do the same.

Blessed be. Amen.

Part III - Building Bridges

Here at Unity Temple, we need not believe alike to love alike, and I would like to suggest that this is a key element to authentic religion: that what connects people is not so much what is going on in our minds as much as what longing and hopes are emerging in our hearts. This morning, in this third sermon in my series entitled A Religion for Our Time I shall explore this third core task for authentic religion: building bridges, building bridges of interfaith cooperation and dialog, building bridges of hope and service.

When I was growing up in my small Unitarian Universalist congregation one song hit me every time we sang it. It was the one we just sang, This Is My Song, and particularly one line: This is my home, the country where my heart is, here are my hopes, my dreams my holy shrine, but other hearts in other lands are beating with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine. My imagination often conjured up visions of what it would look like for the hearts of people of all different nations and religions to be connected.

This song was on my lips nine years ago, as I joined hands with a huge number of Christians, Jews, and fellow Unitarian Universalists to make a circle around a Muslim mosque that had been vandalized just north of Seattle. It was just a week after the attacks of September 11, when Arab-looking people and mosques were targets of fear-infused acts of violence. Not only did we make a huge circle around the mosque demonstrating our solidarity with our Muslim neighbors, we organized around the clock security watches at all Seattle area mosques, and reached out to members of the Muslim communities for educational events.

I have never witnessed such effective interfaith cooperation, before or since, though I know it happens in different communities and different times. Suddenly it became clear to me, that the song we just sang needed to have its words expanded, for people who are different than me aren't only living in other countries. They are living here, that hearts of all different religions and ethnicities are beating with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine and yours.

Building bridges of hope and service is an especially crucial task today. Acts of hostility, violence, and discrimination against Muslims are on the rise. Over the last few weeks, a whole new level of fear and hatred has been unleashed as evidenced by the furor over Muslims building a community center in lower Manhattan. Two weeks ago, The Portland Press Herald in Maine published a front-page article and photo of a large group of local Muslims praying together to mark the end of Ramadan. Sounds like a thoughtful thing for a newspaper to do, but many readers were upset, because publication coincided with the ninth anniversary of the September 11 attacks. After receiving a huge amount of criticism, the newspaper published a front-page apology with this explanation: "We erred by at least not offering balance to the story and its prominent position on the front page." New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof described it as an apology for being respectful of Muslims and then he asked what kind of balance is being suggested, more stories about Muslim terrorists? Should sympathetic treatment of a religious group need balancing stories about how awful some adherents of their religion can be?

There is so much grief that hasn't been worked out in our nation's midst--about what happened on September 11 nine years ago. There is so much grief and so much irrational behavior. Just consider the crazy story about Molly Norris. She's the Seattle cartoonist who published an online poster last spring that satirically proposed that people draw figures of the prophet Muhammad on May 20. She entitled it 'Everybody Draw Muhammad Day.' She did this because she was so appalled that Comedy Central edited out references to Muhammad from an episode of "South Park." When she learned how upset Muslims became, she publicly apologized, wishing she could make this whole idea go away. She visited mosques and befriended Muslims and wrote about how graciously she had been received. But her poster had gone viral, and extremists on both sides used her idea to fan the flames of hatred. Rev. Terry Jones cited Everybody Draw Mohammad Day as what inspired his notorious "Everybody Burn a Koran Day" for September 11 and threatened to torch a bunch of copies of the Koran on the lawn of his church. This summer, a radical Yemeni-American cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, who is suspected of organizing terrorist attacks declared online that Molly Norris "should be taken as a prime target of assassination." And poor Molly, she's had to move, give up her job, family and friends, and take up a new identity. As for Mr Awlaki, he is also in hiding, considered by the CIA as one of the most dangerous people on the planet.

Is the world going nuts? It depends on who and what we focus our attention. Do we focus our attention on Rev. Terry Jones or the extraordinary consensus among people of faith that he is not mainstream. This guy who threatened to burn copies of the Koran is not representative of Christians, but the problem is that a lot Muslims abroad think he is--and maybe some of us reactive religious liberals here too. For some of us, it is easier to point out that Osama bin Laden and Anwar Awlaki are not representative of Muslims, (which is true) but here in the United States even some elected congressmen say things implying that all Muslims are terrorists. And I want to shout, "Do you personally know any Muslims? I do!" I know several dozen Muslims, and they are gracious, thoughtful people. They are more horrified by the extremism of bin Laden and Awlaki than they are of the extremism of Rev. Terry Jones, for they can plainly see that threatening human life is so much worse than threatening to destroy a holy book. And the public

intellectuals among Muslims, like Eboo Patel, are strong in their condemnation of their fellow Muslims who threaten violence. But the media doesn't focus on their words. All the Muslims I know share my fear that extremism breeds extremism, and the only way to break this cycle is to break through to the hearts of ordinary people, to build bridges of interfaith cooperation, to build bridges of hope and service. Most people of faith, regardless of creed, agree that authentic religion resists brute force as a method of problem-solving, for such behavior closes down relationship and reinforces divisions. Instead the religion for our time must call us to lay down our swords and shields to break down barriers of fear and hate and help people see that the barriers we erect between one another are arbitrary and hurtful to the flourishing of humankind. This task of authentic religion requires a different kind of weapon, the weapon of sharing our own vulnerability. Opening our hearts to others may not effect change in them and may even require a sacrifice from us, but this is the way of authentic religion.

When Peter Sagal, the host of the National Public Radio show, Wait Wait Don't Tell Me, spoke here at Unity Temple a few weeks ago, he expressed great distress over the way forces in our culture oblige us to take one side or another on polarizing issues, thus reinforcing the self-righteous belief that everyone on the other side must be an idiot, a hate-monger, or simply out of their mind. Peter said that his primary objective is to transcend divisions and get to know and understand people, all kinds of people, as ordinary human beings. But today's culture is being manipulated and shaped by powerful media that prospers on hate-mongering from both the left and the right. Unfortunately the loudest, most obnoxious voices draw the most attention and obscure the humanity of those whom they hold in contempt. Peter didn't have any grand answer to how to counter these forces other than seeking to simply develop authentic relationships with all kinds of people. I agree. Actively engaging others who are different from us builds bridges. And as we discover that our hearts beat with the same hopes and dreams as theirs, then we can build bridges of interfaith cooperation.

One great religious teacher who was a master at this was Jelalludin Rumi. Rumi was a Sufi teacher. Sufism is the mystical tradition of Islam. Rumi lived in the 13th century, the time of the crusades, and witnessed sectarian conflict far more violent than today. When he died in 1273, representatives of every major religion came to his funeral. The translator of today's poem by Rumi, Coleman Barks explains that in the midst of that chaotic time, Rumi often taught, "I go into the Muslim mosque and the Jewish synagogue and the Christian church and I see one altar." Barks says that Rumi often made it clear that someone who considers religion or nation a primary important human category is in danger of severing the heart from its ability to act compassionately. Let me repeat that: someone who considers religion or nation a primary important human category is in danger of severing the heart from its ability to act compassionately. This radical idea is taught by sages by all religious traditions.

Listen to Rumi's words again:
The way is full of genuine sacrifice.
The thickets blocking the path are anything
that keeps you from that, any fear

that you may be broken to bits like a glass bottle.
This road demands courage and stamina,
yet its full of footprints! Who are
these companions? They are rungs
in your ladder. Use them! With company you quicken your ascent.
You may be happy enough going alone but with others you'll get farther, and faster.

Rumi knew that our companions, those with whom we build bridges of hope and service, have no boundary of religion or nation. He knew that authentic religion isn't easy, that the way is full of genuine sacrifice. And he knew that fear is the greatest obstacle in the spiritual life, for fear makes us rigid and freezes shut our hearts, making us brittle and expecting that we're going to break like a bottle. Fortunately we are not alone, if we open our hearts, open them wide, we discover that love and compassion can be our guide. And as we build bridges of hope and service with others, so much is possible, for we then move so much closer to the holy.

Regardless of what we believe about the sacred, we are capable of walking together just as Hindus and Muslims walk together to Sabarimala Temple as shared in the story for all ages. Twenty years ago I visited Sabarimala. I witnessed the Hindus and Muslims who walked this pilgrimage together. We are capable of working together toward a future of greater understanding. And that is one thing that makes our Unitarian Universalist faith here at Unity Temple a religion for our time. Here we strive to practice bridge-building among ourselves. Here we have atheists, agnostics, Buddhists, Christians, Muslims. We have scientists and naturalists. What it takes to be bridge-builders is to develop relationships with people of different religions, to discover what hopes and dreams we have in common, and to find ways to work together. A core task of our religion is to take this bridge building beyond our walls. The future of our world depends on people like us to do it. So build bridges of interfaith cooperation. Build bridges of hope and service. This is sacred work.

Blessed be. Amen.

Part IV - Cultivating Courage and Conscience

Christopher Columbus is one of the most significant people in the history of religion, not for what he taught or what he believed, but for what he did. Now Columbus is not typically seen as a hero in liberal religious circles. When talking about Columbus, I find that we are prone to focus primarily on what terrible things happened in the wake of the discovery of the New World: the greed of the conquistadors, the decimation of the native population, and his misplaced pride and erroneous belief that he had reached Asia. But what gets lost in this approach is that Christopher Columbus lived with an extraordinary boldness that transformed his world, a world that was stuck, stuck in a religious worldview that suffered from a lack of imagination. For a thousand years, there was no significant movement in religion, just as there hadn't been any significant

movement in science, in the arts, or in economics. The dark ages kept western civilization under a cloud for an entire millennium that wasn't dispersed until Columbus and other explorers broke through the boundaries of what was thought possible. But once Columbus headed west and returned to tell about it, he singlehandedly unleashed an enormous wave of imagination for what is possible, and suddenly it was clear: the church that claimed the world is flat was propagating religious views that didn't correspond with reality.

What inspires some people to risk their lives for what they believe in? What prevents others from becoming the captains of their souls and thereby failing to contribute to the betterment of our world? These are important questions to consider for any religion worth its salt. This is the fourth sermon of six in a series entitled "A Religion for Our Time." This week the objective of authentic religion I am exploring is cultivating courage and conscience.

The best thing about doing a series of sermons is that I hear from many more of you with specific questions, insights, and concerns. Because none of these sermons were pre-prepared, that is, they are written over the days just prior to the Sunday each is delivered, I enjoy the quality of dialog that emerges. For example, I recently received the following inquiry: During the first three sermons of your series, you haven't named why I came to Unity Temple and what continues to fuel my commitment to and investment in this congregation. And what's that I asked. Our children, providing an engaging religious education program that instills in our children that kind of faith, that spiritual clarity, that inspires them to live with integrity, that assures them that they can make a difference in the world, and that sees them through even the roughest of times. Is not that a core objective for any religion that is for our time?

What a wonderful question! Absolutely, one of our most important functions as a church community is to provide not only an ethical framework for our children from which they can develop their own morals but to help them clarify the foundations upon which our heritage stands--from which they can develop a faith that can see them through their most challenging times. Though, for me, while there is an element of this work in each of the objectives I am exploring, this function is embraced largely by today's objective of cultivating courage and conscience. We strive to do this with our children through a vibrant and engaged religious education program, but it is an objective that concerns us all. Not only are we about cultivating leaders of the next generation, we are also about cultivating leadership for today.

Edwin Friedman in today's reading asserts that American culture today suffers from chronic anxiety that too often leads to a sabotaging of our leaders and a tendency to adapt to immaturity. This chronic anxiety creates a cloud over our capacity for strong collective and individual vision and imagination. We are in need of people willing to live with the boldness and sense of adventure that Columbus demonstrated just over 500 years ago. All ministers who have entered the Unitarian Universalist ministry over the last 25 years are familiar with Edwin Friedman because his first book, *Generation to Generation*, has long been required of aspiring UU ministers. Friedman, in *Generation*

to Generation, is the pioneer and remains one of the clearest teacher about leadership in emotional systems, whether that system be a family, a congregation, a corporation, a city, or a nation. Friedman then consulted with leaders throughout his life, and just before he died four years ago, he wrote his last book, A Failure of Nerve. He showed how the factors that kept European civilization imaginatively stuck during the dark ages are similar to the factors that keep contemporary American civilization gridlocked. For we too have our equators. Those imagination-inhibitors or emotional barriers that prevent new thinking have the very same effect on limiting leaders' horizons today that the equator and a geocentric view of the universe had for the millennium before the Renaissance. Today's emotional barriers don't have anything to do with geography or where we can travel. Instead, today's emotional barriers have to do 1) the endless amount of information that leads people to prioritize data collection and technique over decisiveness; 2) believing that feeling empathically for others makes a bigger difference than holding them responsible; and 3) the confusion between self-differentiation and selfishness.

In the generation following Columbus's first voyage, as artistic imagination flowered in painting, sculpture, literature and architecture, as the invention of the watch made it possible to fine-tune coordination of daily time periods, as observations of space and experimentations led to the creation of the telescope, and as the first newspapers widely disseminated information within communities, fresh imagination and inquiry erupted over how religion could be reformed. It was Martin Luther who led the charge of publicly criticizing the abuses of the Catholic Church and he well knew the longstanding practice of executing those intellectuals who brought criticisms of the church in the past. In 1517, he nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg church, and four years later, Luther was charged with heresy and faced his ecclesiastical trial. Luther apologized for the harsh tone of many of his writings, but said that he could not reject the majority of them. Luther respectfully but boldly stated, "Unless I am convinced by proofs from Scriptures or by plain and clear reasons and arguments, I can and will not retract, for it is neither safe nor wise to do anything against conscience. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen."

It is neither safe nor wise to do anything against conscience. Here I stand. I can do no other. With this simple statement, Martin Luther articulated the bedrock of liberal religion. In our tradition, the conscience is where God resides. To develop the courage to follow our conscience is sacred work, there is no work more important. Truly, I believe the greatest challenge facing humanity today is not external but internal.

What is my central message for today? Our spiritual work is to become the captain of our souls such that we embrace that sense of adventure, that boldness to go beyond the anxiety in our midst and be decisive to make things happen to serve our larger vision. Now this work of cultivating courage and conscience is both learned within community and it is what transforms a community, whether that community be a family, a congregation, a workplace, or a nation.

Have you ever had the experience of feeling like a hamster on a treadmill, where you tried harder and harder at making something happen, and your objective always eluded you? Or have you sought answers to a question, that without you knowing, simply needed to be reframed? Have you struggled with someone important in your life around either/or thinking that created false dichotomies? If so, you have come to recognize imaginatively gridlocked situations, and the work of cultivating courage and conscience is to move out of them.

A common example that parents must face: the perpetual quest for how to make your child more responsible. It is easy to jump on the frustratingly endless treadmill of seeking the right technique or finding the right information. But to get beyond the treadmill, parents must focus on their own development and self-differentiation rather than their child's. What transforms the relationship is developing a clear differentiated presence, knowing where you begin and end, and where your child ends.

The same dynamics are true in any community setting, at work, even the wider society. In our world of endless information, it is tempting to abnegate the call to act decisively. In our culture that prioritizes feelings and togetherness, it is painful to recognize that we can't do the emotional work of cultivating courage and conscience for others. We can't do this for anyone else but ourselves, and that the most supportive thing we often can do for others is to hold them responsible and to stand firmly in our own truth. For we influence others in ways we can hardly notice when we authentically embody the claim: Here I stand; I can do no other.

We exist in a field of possibility that is galvanized when one or more people in our midst stands with courage and conscience. For these are not simply individual traits, they are relational realities. This is the insight I came to this past week: cultivating courage and conscience is a communal task, and within community, the practice of courage and conscience makes a tremendous difference. As Friedman notes, courage and conscience are triggered when one person stands up amidst an anxious system and says with clarity and conviction, this is my vision, or I have a dream, or this state of affairs is simply not acceptable, we can do better. Then others respond either out of courage or out of continued anxiety. While the carrying out of courage and conscience is done by individuals, the development of it is at core relational.

I think that Friedman has it right: that the qualities of adventurous leadership that enabled Europe to escape its doldrums are exactly the qualities of courage and conscience necessary for breaking the imaginative gridlock today. These qualities are: 1) a capacity to get outside the emotional climate of the day; 2) a willingness to be exposed, that is, vulnerable, withstanding the fear to stand out and be alone in pursuing a vision; 3) persistence in the face of resistance and downright rejection; 4) stamina in the face of sabotage along the way; and 5) maintaining a laser-like focus on what is truly important despite accusations of being headstrong or even ruthless. These five qualities are universal. They are not personality traits but capacities to develop, regardless of age, gender, vocation. These qualities are required to function well when our surroundings are disoriented and stuck in a certain way of thinking. Such self-

differentiation, such cultivation of courage and conscience, leads to dissolving imaginative gridlock in any relationship system anywhere, of any size or purpose.

As individuals, we can all too easily feed that wolf from today's story, that world of envy, greed, and fear if we don't pay attention, intentionally stay alert and engage in self-reflection. Similarly, it is our tendency to adapt to the immaturity in our midst, unless we intentionally attend and reflect on what really is going on within and around us.

I know what it's like to be haunted with ghosts of anxiety that swirl through my mind like phantom clouds, obscuring my vision of what I know is true and good. More often than I'd care to admit, I feel like I could be clearer or more clever, or that I should be connecting with others in some deeper way. It isn't uncommon for me to regret that I have missed an opportunity to have connected with someone. For me, the measure of my own humanity in any context is whether I am able to honestly say, Here is where I stand. Now, I'm not going to get everything right, but I will give my best. I won't be the most clever or the smartest or the most charming, but I will strive to be who I am. The best I can do is to seek to use my gifts to the best of my ability. I can do no other.

In closing, I want you to think about a situation in relationship with others where you find yourself metaphorically hitting your head against the wall. Maybe you're even literally hitting your head against the wall. I've been there. During the next week, set aside some time to reflect on this situation. It can be during a quiet activity, a walk, raking leaves, washing dishes, but it needs to be a time for centering down enough to begin to recognize what's really going on. Attend to what you are fearing and take stock of what is truly important to you. Notice where you're on the treadmill, what questions need to be reframed, what either/or thoughts are restricting your thinking. Reflect on what is truly important to you. Identify where you stand in relation to the others in your situation. Be clear with yourself -- and with them if appropriate --- about the question, "What is the path of courage here that serves the highest angels of our nature?"

Engage this work of cultivating courage and conscience and you will be an adventurous explorer of the world and the soul. May it be so. Blessed be. Amen.

Part V - Embracing Diversity

Of all the Americans who are 70 years of age or older, three quarters of them are white. Of all Americans under the age of eleven, three quarters of them are not white. (As reported by UUA President Peter Morales). Our world is changing, and so must religion for our time. It won't be long before our society will soon be dramatically different than the one we know today. If our faith community wants to be relevant to our changing world, if we want to live into the theological vision that our name Unity connotes, if we want our religion to be about manifesting wholeness and reconciliation, then a significant piece of our work as a religious community is to embrace diversity. This is not an easy topic, but one that is our growing edge. We are called to wade into that work.

I am inspired that the leadership of this congregation, the board of trustees, has identified diversity as a primary goal, and not just a vague and undefined kind of diversity. They affirmed that while all kinds of diversity are important, the kind of diversity that we now need to specifically focus on is racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity. This is the fifth sermon in my six part series entitled “A Religion for Our Time.” Today I am exploring a fifth and final objective of authentic religion: embracing diversity and breaking down the barriers promoted by racism.

In 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. declared “11 o’clock Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week. ... And the Sunday school is still the most segregated school.” Now, nearly a half century later, as schools and colleges, sports teams and government agencies are significantly more racially diverse, the vast majority of houses of worship are not. Now, here in Oak Park, a community that prides itself on its racially diverse demographic, virtually all faith communities declare that everyone is welcome, but the reality is that people from one racial group make up more than 90 percent of the membership in most congregations, locally and nationally.

Now, some churches are racially diverse, and, I hate to say this, they didn’t become that way by simply waiting for it to happen, giving lip-service to their values, or simply diversifying their selections of music, hymns, and readings. Congregations that are diverse today made an intentional decision to break down the barriers of race within their religious community. They believe that this work reflects the love of God, or is a mandate of their theology, or is a mandate for our times. Congregations of all stripes are figuring out how to do this. Here in Oak Park, Judson Baptist Church, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, St Catherine/St Lucy Catholic Church, and New Life Christian Fellowship are all examples of communities living out a commitment to multiracial multicultural religion. There’s a good working definition of what a multi-racial congregation is: a congregation in which no one race accounts for more than 80% of the membership. Moving from racial homogeneity to racial diversity, while challenging, is not impossible. In 1998, only 6% of large Evangelical churches nationally were racially diverse. By 2007, 25% of them had become so, using my definition. Among Unitarian Universalist congregations, the numbers are not so encouraging. Our exemplars are far fewer than what you’d expect given what we believe. In our circles, we speak so highly, even feverishly, about the importance of diversity, and yet we have a long way to go if we want to be a multi-racial, multicultural congregation here at Unity Temple.

Why is this work so important? One good answer: it is a matter of justice. And it is a matter of love. Far too many lives are prevented from flowering because of the racial divisions that exist in human minds and hearts.

Racism is a prejudgment based on race, coupled with the power to affirm that prejudice. Any person of color can attest to just how common prejudice and racism is in American society and yet it goes largely unnoticed by those of us in the privileged, dominant group. My wife, as a Latina woman in our community, points out things that I miss, not having the same sensitivity. Not that long ago, racists did not engage simply in subtle

forms of putting down or ignoring others, violence, condoned violence. Acts of racism reach a level in a society at which they are accepted.

This is not an easy conversation or sermon, but it is an important one. Most anyone of a color knows their color of skin can influence how they are treated by the criminal justice system, a predominantly white workforce, and any institution, including a church.

Why are religious communities such important places for this work to be done? Congregations provide models for how the wider society can live. Religious communities that are faithful to their founding ideals overcome the barriers that divide us. As a colleague asks, "If the church can't do it, who can? If the church won't do it, who will?" Now, there are many obstacles to making headway on this.

First, this is emotionally charged work. Just ask the white woman who tapped an African American woman on the shoulder thinking it was her friend, and when she turned around, the white woman said, "Oh I'm sorry, I thought you were someone else." The one tapped then exploded, "You white people think all of us black people look the same!". There's a level of rage among some people who have been deeply wounded, who have been the object of discrimination. We liberals know that. And the worse thing for any of us to step into is realizing that we ourselves did something or said or something. It's like this is original sin to be discovered having done something prejudiced, even unintentionally. And this makes a lot of us quiet, unresponsive, withdrawn from this conversation. It is not an easy conversation. It is easy to step on other people's feelings unintentionally, and yet we need to wade into that water--and God may trouble that water--for real connection to occur.

Consider this true story: Two women, one Asian and one African American, incidentally multicultural trainers, boarded a small airplane with a single row of seats on one side and double seats on the other. They were first to board and the flight attendant said, "sit anywhere you want." They chose to sit close to the front on either side of the aisle. As the attendant was about to close the hatch, three white men in suits entered the plane, were told to sit anywhere and they took seats just in front of the women. The attendant closed the door and then approached the women and asked them if they would move to the back of the plane, for the sake of redistributing weight. They complied, but anger simmered within. The Asian woman said to the other, "you know, I'm experiencing this as a micro-aggression." A few minutes later, one of them said to the stewardess, "Did you know that you asked two passengers of color, the first two people on this plane, to step to the rear of the bus." The flight attendant looked at her with a horrified expression and then said in a self-righteous and indignant tone, "Well, I have never been accused of that. How dare you--I don't see color."

How often do we have blind spots? How often? It's hard to know, being among the dominant white community to really know. And that's a major obstacle. Another obstacle to engaging this work is what's going on in the wider culture today. If we thought our society has been making progress on race relations, particularly with the presidential election two years ago, I'm starting to wonder, given the number of people making

racially charged statements to push their political agenda. A simmering rage seems to be exploding, leading to all sorts of irrational beliefs. Pew forum polls report that 20% of Americans believe that Barack Obama is a Muslim. I don't think when people claim that our President is a Muslim they are using it as a religious descriptor, they are using it as an emotionally charged word that has racial overtones. I'm hearing from some influential quarters that Obama is a racist with anti-white agenda, being charged as anti-American with all sorts of racially-tinged slurs. This is deeply disturbing to me, as I am not hearing voices in the media calling this out. This is another reason to be about the work of multiracial, multiculturalism.

The work of dismantling racism and cultivating a congregation of diversity can seem overwhelming. This isn't something that we can do in just a few years and be done with it, but this is a journey. This is a journey that is not easy but brings transformation to the lives of everyone who participates in it with an open heart and a willingness to be changed.

Last spring, I visited All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington DC. Their minister, Rob Hardies, and the growing, racially diverse congregation have learned a lot about doing this work. A decade ago, when Rob first began, the congregation was multiracial but they were mired in conflict. I visited on the Sunday after Easter, so I imagined it would be a low attendance Sunday. Both services were packed, and the worship service moved people, literally. The organ was accompanied by bongo drums for several of the hymns. People danced during the introit. And there was plenty of opportunity for quiet reflection. People of all races prayed together, listened together, and then socialized together following the service. The preaching was thoughtful and creative. Following the services, the choir sang a contemporary, mesmerizing world music piece. I personally experienced that kind of hope that inspires me to face what seems to be insurmountable odds.

Rob is the kind of minister who is open with his own struggle for the sake of supporting to others. He has identified three shifts within himself and his congregation that has made possible their vibrant multicultural congregation. Three fundamental shifts that I believe that all of us religious liberals need to make. First, we must engage the work of embracing diversity not from a place of political correctness but from our theological vision. Second, we must shift the way we engage multiculturalism from the head--where many of us Unitarian Universalists are most comfortable--to the heart and gut. And third, we must shift from operating from a framework of anxiety, guilt, and shame to operating from a framework of joy.

Let me unpack Rob's three shifts. First, it is important that we do the work of multiculturalism for the right reasons, not for the sake of being politically correct but out of a clear understanding of our theology. As Universalists, we believe that everyone is loved, that our mission is to bring forth the beloved community here on earth. Theistically speaking, God loves everyone. No exceptions. As Unitarians, we follow the declaration of the granddaddy of Unitarianism, William Ellery Channing, who said "I am a living member of the great family of All Souls." This is a theological statement about

the unity of the human family. Thus the name of many Unitarian churches, including Rob's, All Souls, whose cornerstone of our religious calling is to bear witness to and model the human family as whole and reconciled

A colleague recently quipped to me that when white Unitarian Universalists sing "We're gonna sit at the welcome table," we often think that we are setting the table for everyone else. The theology of this wonderful song that proclaims "we're gonna sit at the welcome table one of these days hallelujah," is that the god of many names, the spirit of life, the love at the heart of all reality, is what sets this table and we *all* are guests. We all set aside our egos. We all set aside being in charge, setting everything out. No we all come together to sit in fellowship. We are not simply trying to make room for others at our table, we are seeking to create a community where you and I and everyone who comes into our doors may sit in fellowship and feast on the unique differences we all come with, as well as our common humanity that provides us common ground.

The second shift for us Unitarian Universalists is to engage in community not just through our heads. The way we can move into our hearts is to listen openly to other people's stories. Stories of pain and alienation as well as stories of joy and celebration. We bond with others through the sharing of stories. We learn that we are not all that different, despite the unique differences among us. We are called not to just to be in the heart, but to move to the gut. This is an especially challenging thing for me, as you know I am a heart-centered leader. Going into the gut is where each of us leads, where each of wades into that challenging space of saying "something isn't feeling right to me." For me as a minister, I sometimes have a voice that says, as a white straight man, who am I to lead such change? I am a human being. That is what it takes to lead. All of us have the capacity to move not only from the head but also the heart and the gut.

It may seem odd to think that we Unitarian Universalists may often operate from a framework of guilt, anxiety, and shame, but that often is the human condition. There is no issue that dredges up more liberal guilt among us than that of race. None of us wants to be called upon anything that would be remotely hurtful to others, so we don't wade into that water. The third shift we need to make is to learn how to operate from a framework of joy. It's a framework of courage, but it is also a framework of joy. I believe there is no other practiced that ushers in this framework more than the practice of hospitality. As Joan Chittister notes: "Hospitality means we take people into the space that is our lives and our minds and our hearts and our work and our efforts. Hospitality is the way we come out of ourselves. It is the first step toward dismantling the barriers of the world. Hospitality is the way we turn a prejudiced world around, one heart at a time." I'd add that hospitality is the act of the recklessly joyful heart.

Sometimes our story for all ages sums it up best:

A rainbow of friends is the vision we see when we think about peace and world harmony. A rainbow of friends is a dream we can share where everyone's treated with kindness and care. So reach out with love to the people you meet and offer a smile to all those you greet. The world is a family whose happiness depends--on a circle of caring, on a rainbow of friends.

May we help bring about the world we want to live in.

Blessed be. Amen.

Part VI - A Vision for Unity Temple

Readings:

from Winter Hours by Mary Oliver, from the passage entitled Once

When the young deer hung herself on the fence, catching one foreleg in a loop of wire, and the rough farm dogs were running toward her, I knew the only things I could do: hide my eyes, or run. And I ran, faster than ever before in my life, and flung my body against hers, so that we were both pressed against the mesh of the fence while the dogs raced back and forth. But the deer did not know my meaning, or if she did she still could not tolerate my nearness; she hooted like a goat, and yanked her foot free, and dashed away into the woods.

A few days later, I saw her in a field. In spite of the beads of blood that were left on the fence where she had pulled her snagged foot free, she was fine, she was nimble and quick; she was beautiful.

And I thought: I shall remember this all my life. The peril, the running, the howling of the dogs, the smothering. Then the happiness—of action, of leaping. Then the green sweetness of distance. And the trees: their thickness and their compassion, all around.

from "Prophecy and Vision: The Church for the New Millenium" by Diana Eck, delivered to All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City

If there ever were a time that we need to spin out a new fabric of belonging and a wider sense of "we" for the human community, it is certainly now.... Developing a consciousness of our growing religious inter-relatedness, developing a moral compass that will give us guidance in the years ahead—these are certainly among the most important tasks of our time. They will require the leadership of Unitarian Universalists and the Unitarian Universalist Association. You have a theological orientation toward the oneness and mystery of God that is essential for the world of religious difference in which we live... You are, in my estimation, the church of the new millennium. In this era, Unitarian Universalism is not the lowest common denominator, but the highest common calling... In a world divided by race and by religion and ideology, the very presence of a church like this, committed to the oneness of God, the love of God, the love of neighbor and service to humanity is a beacon. The Unitarian theology, and yes you have one, does not reduce the mystery of the divine, the transcendent, but amplifies it, broadens it to include the investigation of the many, many ways in which the divine is known and yet unknown... You do have a mission. The world is in need of your theology.

sermon:

This morning, with this sixth and final segment of my sermon series entitled “A Religion for Our Time.” I want to share with you a vision, a vision of what we can do together. Now, the first thing I want to say about this vision has to do with termites. To quote the late entomologist, Lewis Thomas, “There is really no such creature as a lone termite, functionally speaking, just as there is no such thing as a genuine solitary human being. Two or three termites gathered together aren’t much better. They might move around, touch each other nervously, but nothing happens. But keep adding more termites until they reach a critical mass, and then the miracle begins. As though they had suddenly received a piece of extraordinary news, they organize in platoons and begin stacking up pellets to precisely the right height, then turning the arches to connect the columns, constructing the cathedral and its chambers in which the colony will live out its life for the decades ahead, air-conditioned and humidity controlled, following the chemical blueprint coded in their genes, flawlessly, stone-blind. They are not the dense mass of individual insects they appear to be; they are an organism, a thoughtful meditative brain on a million legs.” Similarly, miracles happen when human beings come together to work together for a common purpose.

Over the past five weeks, I have laid out what I see as the five elemental functions of authentic religion, the five broad ministries that characterize what I would call the religion for our time. And I hate to say it, I have nothing new to share regarding my vision for Unity Temple. My vision for our congregation has already been laid out--we shall transform lives and will help heal our world as we do these five things: as we embrace change and creativity, as we foster community and connection, as we build bridges of interfaith cooperation, as we cultivate courage and conscience, and as we embrace racial and cultural diversity. If you have missed any of these earlier sermons, I commend you to our podcasts. But there is something I must make clear this morning.

We, here and now, are at a crossroads here at Unity Temple. In order for us to fulfill the vision of becoming a religion for our time, we are in need of significantly more space.

Miracles happen when human beings come together for a common purpose. And what’s more: We human beings have far more imagination, creativity, and skills than termites, but only when we move beyond our fears. If termites can come together to build such a sophisticated and long-lasting home for themselves, imagine what we can accomplish here as Unity Temple Unitarian Universalist Congregation. Now we have reached a critical mass in a couple of different ways. We have reached a critical mass such that our building facilities do not accommodate our needs. Many of our classrooms will not hold more children. We rent space for our administrative offices a block and a half away. Unity House is inadequate for gathering our expanding community. Now, this problem of lacking space is a good problem if we are willing to embrace the opportunity it poses.

For we also have reached the critical mass to solve this problem. We have the shared imagination, the skills, the commitment to significantly expand our facilities. Six members of our community with specific areas of expertise along with two leaders in

historic preservation have been meeting over the last year to figure out how we shall expand our facilities while also raising the funding to care for this building. This team, which we have called the Pursuit Team, has laid out an ambitious idea, an audacious plan of creating a campus of two architecturally significant buildings. It is clear: we need to bring together the imagination, the skills, the commitment of the entire congregation to preserve our beloved Unity Temple and to build a new landmark building that will provide space for our religious education programs, offices, and community gathering.

I am excited by the boldness of this plan. I am invigorated by the imaginative and courageous dream that is catching ahold of more and more of our members. But truth be told, the first time this idea was put before me, my first thought was, "How? How can we ever do that?" Thoughts and fears that I'd call gremlins within in my mind initially pointed out all sorts of obstacles. I was stuck in imaginative gridlock regarding this building and the possibility of creating another, just as our congregation has been for a long, long time. Too often we get mired in questions of "How?": How can we care for our aging, sometimes crumbling, building? How could a second building be built when we are landlocked? How can we expect to raise the funds? How can we get enough people really committed to see this a reality? How can we work together as a wider community, not just this congregation, but

Leaders among us have reminded me that How? is not the right question to be asking right now. For the question of how leads us to look for answers outside ourselves. To quote the book title of Peter Block, *The Answer to How Is Yes*. We need to follow the subtitle of this book: *Acting on What Matters*. The primary question that we need to focus at this moment is not how we will make our dreams a reality, but instead: what is worth doing, what really matters? What *is* worth doing? As we address this question as individuals and as a congregation, I challenge you to expand your imagination, to dream big, to trust the power of what we are doing together. For it matters, realizing this vision of transforming lives and helping to heal the world. Now that we have hired professional counsel--we will figure out how to achieve our dreams. We will move our collective ship, if you will, out of the harbor of imaginative gridlock into a bold and adventurous journey. For when we are honestly engaged with one another for the sake of a shared significant purpose, energy is released, more imagination emerges, courage comes forth. For we, I believe, shall realize that we are pursuing a purpose greater than ourselves, a shared significant purpose. Miracles will happen, new paradigms will emerge, and we live with greater clarity and deeper meaning.

I chose the reading from Mary Oliver this morning because there are times in our lives when we have two options, to hide our eyes or to leap into action. This text is like scripture to me. It speaks to the way Oliver moves through the world and implicitly asks whether we are leaping towards what truly matters to us. If we do so, we will not only make a real difference with our lives, we will know that same profound happiness of leaping and knowing that compassion is all around.

In our second reading today, Diana Eck challenges us Unitarian Universalists that the world is in need of our theology, that this little light of ours, we have got to let it shine.

For the theological vision of Unitarian Universalism calls us to spin out a new fabric of belonging and a wider sense of we for the human community. She was specifically charging Galen Gugenrich and the All Souls Unitarian Church of New York City but implicitly challenging us all. I agree with Galen that the church of the new millennium would insist that all humanity emerges from the same source and shares the same destiny. We shall be a religion for our time when we live out our theology. Our theology calls us to experience God as the welcome table to which we are all invited to sit as guests. When we experience God as that unifying presence that holds us together, that presence within and among and beyond us that directs us to what is good and true. Our theology acknowledges our profound dependence upon one another and thus our morally responsibility for the well being of all our brothers and sisters. Our theology recognizes that we don't always take the right way, but we are always capable of turning, turning toward wholeness and reconciliation.

Dr. Lewis who wrote about the termites also conducted a study about bees, a study that has been repeated and confirmed. He placed a sugar cube near a hive and then he engaged in a little game, moving the sugar at regular intervals 25% further than each previous distance. It was not long before the sugar cube was moved hundreds of feet at a time. Thomas writes, "Sooner or later, while this process is going on, the biologist shifting the dish of sugar will find his bees are out there waiting for him, precisely where the next position had been planned." Apparently the hive has a greater intelligence than any of the bees or even of all the bees, but it's when the hive works as an organism that it becomes more than the sum of its parts. The same goes, I believe, for congregations, or any network of authentic relationships. Our congregation, our church community, is not the building, it is the reality of each of us in our hearts connecting with others and others, and interconnecting. What emerges is more than the sum of our parts.

It doesn't seem that long ago when I arrived (just over seven years ago) and called upon this congregation to imagine with me what could be possible among us. On the other hand, it feels as though I've been here a long, long time, especially when I reflect on all the change and growth and ministry this community has made that lives out the mission and vision to which we are collectively called. Regardless which way I'm looking at time, I find myself deeply grateful for the opportunity to serve you here at Unity Temple.

You have challenged me to grow, to grow as a minister, as a pastor, as a leader. And nothing is more satisfying to me than witnessing the response, your response and my response to you as we grow together. For my part, I will do everything in my power to lead Unity Temple in providing a religion for our time, indeed to being a church for the new millennium. But this is a shared journey, a bold and adventurous journey. We must come together, trusting one another, to make our vision and our dreams a reality. Come sing a song with me and with one another. And may we open our hearts and sing "Come Spirit come, our hearts control, our spirits long to be made whole. Let inward love guide every deed, by this we worship, and are freed."

Blessed be. Amen.