Dear Members of UTUUC,

Many of you have already asked me, “So what did you do on your sabbatical and what did you gain from it?” My answer in person--in a short conversation--always feels much too simplified. This reflection more fully answers this good question. On July 3, I shared from the pulpit some of what I did and learned in a different format, available on podcast for those who have interest. As time unfolds, I imagine there will be further learnings and insights.

I must begin by expressing my gratitude for the opportunity to be relieved of my ministerial duties for six months. The nature of ministry is a constant stream of demands, especially with a thriving and growing congregation. Over my first seven and a half years here at Unity Temple, I threw myself into serving this congregation, and it has been an extraordinary chapter of ministry here at Unity Temple for both my own growth and the Congregation’s, but one that took a toll on my own spirit, body, and family. A sabbatical offers a minister the opportunity to renew, refresh, and rest, while pursuing interests that aren’t otherwise possible. In my case, the sabbatical allowed me “to get a life” beyond the congregation on one hand and to attend to my family during significant life transitions on the other.

My sabbatical began with two distinct learning opportunities. For much of January, I studied Spanish in Guanajuato, Mexico, markedly improving my facility with speaking and understanding Spanish. For four hours a day, I studied with a tutor, and outside of class, I enjoyed being in the small, beautiful colonial city and had an unexpectedly rich cultural experience, in large part because a friend of my wife from Guanajuato gave me an “in” into the community. From the second day, I had a standing invitation to lunch at the table where local community leaders dropped in to take “comida,” the large meal in the mid to late afternoon. I became acquainted with an interesting group of shop owners, doctors, and leaders from the university, all the while practicing my Spanish. I loved being immersed in the town known for its artistic history, enjoying the fresh local
food, discussing philosophy in Spanish with some local students, and developing a friendship with a Unitarian Universalist who plays in the symphony and manages a popular bar!

In February, I attended the UUMA Institute--UUMA means Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association. I serve on the national Executive Committee of the UUMA, and over the last couple years we have vastly expanded our infrastructure with the hiring of an Executive Director, a significant increase in dues, and the offering of a much higher quality of continuing education for ministers. This Institute was the first of its kind and highly successful as 400 ministers gathered for a week of study, reflection, and collegiality. I attended the Social Ethics seminar, facilitated by Gary Dorrien, renowned professor from Union Theological Seminary. Because the Institute was in Monterey, California, my family stayed with my parents in Bakersfield and I was able to visit with my parents and my brother’s family for a few days as well.

Spanish study and the UUMA institute were what I had always planned on doing, but in the months prior to sabbatical, my original plans had to change as Angie and I learned the wonderful news that she was pregnant with our second child. Because much of the sabbatical shifted to being closer to home, I chose to initiate a relationship with a spiritual director here in the Chicago area (I have long had a spiritual director in Massachusetts), to visit a few Chicago area churches on Sunday mornings, and to take classes in theater improvisation at Second City. I took the first two classes in the Second City improv sequence, as well as two three day intensives in improv and writing. I found myself studying with aspiring actors and comics, enjoying the practice. I quickly learned that the goal in improv is not to try to be funny, but instead to do three things: to just show up, to let go of the inner critic and constant chatter of the mind, and to respond naturally, spontaneously to what has just gone before, thus building upon whatever it is that emerges.

The final, and most significant focus of my sabbatical was family. Our daughter, Erica Isabel, was born on March 1. My mother and Angie’s sister along with Marco’s two year old cousin were here, but my mother’s unexpected illness meant that I was in charge of the two toddlers. For those first five weeks of Erica’s life, especially after our visitors had left, I was the primary domestic keeper, with my forays away limited to my weekly improv class, intermittent engagement with the spiritual director, and taking Marco to explore local churches on Sunday mornings.

When Erica was five weeks old and only a mere 6 pounds, Angie and I learned that her father had very little time to live. And so we raced to obtain a passport for Erica and go to Mexico City. We had six days with her father before he died. I had known that Angie’s father was the rock of the extended family but during this time I learned many further inspiring stories about his life. I stayed another week following his death, and then I returned to Chicago to attend two Second City improvisation and writing intensives, taking Marco with me since my parents had arranged to be in Chicago at this time. After a week and a half, I returned with Marco to Mexico City for what turned into an additional three weeks to be of support to Angie and her mother.
The juxtaposition of death and birth during the sabbatical was intense. These unplanned events gave me the opportunity to attend to my family when it matters most. I understand now on a much deeper level how important it is to be with family during such profound transitions such as a death of a family member. It wasn’t always easy, and in the midst of it, I didn’t always see just how fortunate I was or how beneficial this would be to me both personally and professionally. The result was a much greater appreciation for family systems. And since family systems theory was on my reading list, the work of Edwin Friedman became all the more significant and relevant to my sabbatical learning.

During the final month of sabbatical, my family enjoyed being together here in the Chicago area without any specific demands upon us. I enjoyed returning to a bit of yoga after a decade respite, intermittently sitting at the Zen Meditation Center, journaling regularly, and cooking. The simple practice of sitting down to dinner seven days a week with the family was the most fulfilling.

Being away from the Congregation for six months was a gift. I return with the knowledge that the Congregation can run itself well without me. I return with the opportunity to engage my role as Senior Minister in a new way, since the Congregation is now in a very different place than it was eight years ago. I am currently in discernment and in conversation with the leader over how this looks like.

One learning I had during sabbatical was about the sabbatical itself. I entered my sabbatical with an approach of maximizing my productivity while I was away, but that is not the goal of a ministerial sabbatical. The goal I learned is to “get a life” outside of the system that typically consumes my attention. The most important work was not about producing anything or gaining specific skills or knowledge. The most important work was that of the spirit, allowing fallow time and time for attending to the people in my life.

A specific re-learning about my role here is that I am not here principally to run a church. I am here to be the spiritual leader, to attend to the spiritual development of members of our community. I reflect at great length on the implications of this and how to do this. One good answer that has emerged is providing a regular opportunity for spiritual practice in the early evening. Tuesday Reflections in the Temple will begin on September 13.

Another learning that I gained is a deeper faith how we human beings make real changes in the world, typically in the closest circles around us. My own theological inquiry has delved into how we human beings are deeply relational and constantly worked on by forces largely out of our own control, and yet we have the capacity to influence how our surroundings unfold--that we all are in a state of becoming, including those forces that are largely but not entirely out of our control.

I return with the privilege of having witnessed the most profound transitions in life within my own family--I have had the space to embrace these transitions and be fully present to my family during these challenging times. This in itself is an enormous gift, one that will support my vocation for years to come. First, through the firsthand experience gained that provides another level of engagement in my pastoral care, and, secondly,
moving forward with the clarity that I have attended my family during an especially challenging time.

I return with a renewed appreciation for spontaneity and look forward to discerning ways of engaging playfulness here at Unity Temple. Having engaged theater improv as a spiritual practice and receiving training at Second City, I hope and intend to return to this practice in time. In addition, I have learned how many of our members have practiced improv. An improv troupe within Unity Temple has already emerged and engaged the Congregation at the July 31 service. The future is open to more engagement!

In addition, I learned that this Congregation is fully capable of functioning without me! I was struck by how little anxiety there was among the Congregation when I left at the end of December. I believe this was due to thoughtful planning coupled with an outstanding staff and a fabulous set of lay leaders. Upon my return, I discovered that you not only survived but thrived in my absence. The sabbatical helped me gain perspective on just how healthy our system is here at Unity Temple. This discovery was not only mine, but that of our leadership, and in this way my sabbatical has already benefitted the Congregation.

It is my hope and intention that many benefits of the sabbatical have yet to emerge among us. I trust that the quality of my leadership is now enhanced with this time away. I return ready to embrace a complex landscape and significant challenges. Undoubtedly further learnings and insights will emerge in time, thanks to this sabbatical leave.

I originally anticipated getting a lot of rest. That was not to be. I return not so much rested but refreshed and ready to begin the next chapter of my ministry here at Unity Temple.

Again, I thank you for this opportunity to be relieved of my duties as Senior Minister from January through June.

Warmly,

Rev. Alan Taylor