

HEAVEN KNOWS WHERE WE ARE GOING!

THE UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP OF PETERBOROUGH

THE REV. JULIE STONEBERG

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OPENING WORDS *The Bright Thread of Hope* ~ Gretchen Haley¹

There is too much beauty in this world to give up on it yet,
and it is always too soon to surrender to cynicism.

Bring your doubt, your skepticism, your downright confusion
even your bitterness -

but in the midst of all these, in the center,
wrap your tender fingers around that still "bright thread of hope,"
feel in your heart that still steady hunger for something more,
the vision we glimpse every day in the rising sun across the foothills
the light that spreads across the face of the one we love
the look of knowing all there is to know and still loving life,
loving us
just as it is, just as we are.

For this hour, we come to celebrate, to praise, to give thanks
to refuse to give up, to steady ourselves
keepers of hope, brave builders of this still-possible world.

Come, let us worship, together.

STORY FOR ALL *Flight School* ~ Lita Judge

(In this story, a penguin, believing it has the soul of an eagle, enrolls in flight school and finds it can fly with a little help from its friends.)

MEDITATION *Desert Spring (adapted)* ~ Victoria E Safford²

They had no idea where they were going, when they left that night, in the dark, without lights,
without shoes, without bread, their children smothered against them so they would make no
noise.

They had no idea what they were getting into, following this Moses, this wild-eyed one who
claimed visions and made promises but who after all could guarantee them nothing, except death
if they were caught.

They had no idea, these slaves, what it could mean, this promise of land (their own country) and
life abundant. Of freedom they knew nothing, except what they could taste by living in its
opposite, slavery, and that taste became a hunger, and that hunger became insatiable till they were
ravenous for freedom, and they went out then – but no one knows to this day whether they were
led by Moses or by the outstretched arm and mighty hand of something else, of something eternal

¹ <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/opening/bright-thread-hope>

² <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/meditation/desert-spring>

(as they would afterwards and always claim), or whether their own human, hungry will made them flee that night from Pharaoh.

They went into the wilderness. There they wandered forty years, which in those days was a lifetime. Forty was a good, old age, so many of them died before getting anywhere, and many were born in the desert and grew to adulthood knowing nothing but the journey – not slavery, not freedom, just the going. They whined and complained and muttered, and some mutinied...ungrateful people, even when manna rained down from heaven...; unhappy people, longing, out loud even, for the familiar security of Egypt, ... as awful as it was; impatient people, making cheap little idols and gods of metal to bargain with in secret...

[Today, let us] remember: the promised land is not a destination – it is a way of going. The land beyond the Jordan, that country of freedom and dignity and laughter – you carry it inside you all the while. It is planted in your mind and heart already, before you ever start out, before it even occurs to you that in order to leave that life in Egypt, the intolerable bondage of that life, what you need to do is stand up and walk forward.

READING *Crossing Bridges* ~ Jan Taddeo

When I was very young, my family often went camping...on the Maryland shore. It was a long drive, but there were lots of adventures along the way. The last adventure was crossing the Verrazano Bridge...a bridge which rises sharply so you can't see on the other side until you get close to the top. As we approached the bridge my father would holler back to all us kids, "Look out! It looks like we're going to land in the water!"

Creating adventure was a theme in my family. My father would take us out on Sunday drives just to "get lost." He would say things like, "Let's just turn down this road and see where it takes us." My mother would take us on penny hikes, flipping a coin at each fork in the trail to see which direction to walk next. We explored trails, creeks, and went bushwhacking a few times, always looking for new adventures.

Growing up with an appreciation for the unknown and creating adventures in unexpected ways has served me well. I like to try new foods and activities, go to places I haven't been before, ride roller coasters ... especially ones in the dark. I love Star Trek because they boldly go where no one has gone before. I like to explore new ways of doing things even when I'm not certain how it might turn out....

Unitarian Universalists step out into the unknown all the time as we embark on our spiritual adventures. We go searching for new ways to make meaning of our lives, to create a more just and loving world, and to answer questions of ultimacy together.

We seek creative ways to raise our children with inquiring minds and loving hearts, and to provide them with the tools to navigate an unpredictable future.

We cross bridges and borders as we learn to navigate the multicultural world around us that challenges us to expand our worldview and embrace new ways of engaging a changing world.

Whether we are crossing a bridge from a place of comfort to challenges we never anticipated, or from our own cultural norms to completely new worldviews, we have resources, friends, and

mentors to guide us.

...For this amazing journey, we carry in our backpacks a sense of wonder, a sense of humor, and a lot of courage. Our compass is the compassion we hold for all our neighbors.

Our sustenance is the joy of discovering our true selves and experiencing the divine in one another. Our map is the sacred covenant we hold with one another to walk this journey together.

With so many tools to guide and support us as we approach new bridges, it is not such a leap of faith to trust that we will arrive at the distant shore. Together, we can boldly go where our vision and our faith call us to go.

MESSAGE *Heaven Knows Where We Are Going!* ~ Rev. Julie

Okay, so I'm no Moses! I've received no message from god, or heaven, or anywhere else telling me that I am chosen to lead you, nor has any divine message arrived in my inbox, giving me clues about where the Promised Land might be. Chances are, even if I'd gotten such a message, I wouldn't be able to convince you to get out of Egypt, as we know that trying to lead Unitarians is about as possible as is herding cats!

Not that I want to herd you anywhere. That's not how we operate. We work through things in conversation. Listening. Doing our research. Checking out the options. Talking about it some more. Listening more deeply. Carefully discerning the best direction and the next step. Engaging in 'safe-to-fail' experiments. Trusting what's good-enough-for-now. Evaluating. Listening again.

Each of us makes life decisions on a daily basis, whether we are conscious of it or not. We decide how best to spend our time and our resources in order that we might have the best life possible given our circumstances...and we each determine the qualities of a life well-lived, whether that be about the values we espouse, the ways we serve our community and our planet, or the things we have. We also decide where it is best to live, again depending on a variety of factors, including what we can afford.

And this is where this spiritual community is today...intentionally raising consciousness about who we are and where we are, toward making a decision about where we should 'live'. We're asking questions about what matters to us about where we meet. How does our meeting place affect our identity and our future? What does our budget allow? What would make our home ideal?

A tiny bit of background...this congregation is approaching its 60th anniversary. For not quite forty years, we were nomadic, not really wandering in the desert, but still, without a permanent address...meeting in homes and a variety of rental spaces. Then, in the early 90's, a building was purchased, with much pride and excitement, but within ten years, it became obvious that it was too small, and that it did not match our values for accessibility. And so, it was sold, and fortuitously, we fell into the opportunity to rent from Beth Israel while we looked for a different building to purchase. The first lease was for three years. We've been here for nearly 15 years. (And that's okay. Remember the snail in last week's story? Sometimes it's necessary to persevere for a long time, in order to gradually, slowly, discern what's next.)

A congregational motion in 2011 sent us in the direction of exploring the possibility of making this a permanent home. And we started meeting with BIC's leadership. When it became clear that while conversations in the abstract were helpful, we weren't getting anywhere, the tone of our discussions and the depth of our research become more serious. So, a long-range financial planning team started working toward presenting exactly that to us...a long-range financial plan based in our values and our reality (to

be presented to the congregation soon, I think.) And, the joint co-visioning task force, comprised of leaders from UFP and BIC, has been meeting monthly.

I could talk a lot about how we got to where we are right now, but that's not today's question. The question is, where are we going? Will this building and a relationship with BIC be a part of our future? Big questions, for sure.

About a week ago, I sent an email to the board and to the Committee on Ministry asking for input on today's service. And, on Friday, your Board executive met to talk about what the Board's role should be in guiding us through this. I'm thankful for their input. Already there are at least a dozen UFP voices, and hearts, deeply engaged in this process, and the time has come for the circle to widen, to include more of you.

One thing that is crystal clear is that nothing is yet clear. We are gathering pieces of a puzzle, and we have no idea how they will fit together. We are simply trusting that a picture of where we are going will emerge, knowing that we are living in changing times, and that whatever the emerging vision, we will need to be flexible and resilient.

Another thing that is clear, at least to me, is that we have not yet fully articulated the 'why' of this question. What would a 'promised land' look like for us? See, I'm not sure if we know why it would matter if we stay or if we go. While it's not clear what problems we are trying to solve, or what difference it would make if we were to call this place our 'forever home', I do have a few thoughts.

Identity is key to a sense of belonging and security. And a building/location can play a big role in establishing identity. It gives us a home base...a place to stand. Think about what you say when folks ask where UFP is located, or how you name where you're going when you come here. Do you think of this place as your spiritual home?

Then, meeting in a space over which we have more control might change how we meet and gather. From the outside and from the inside, it could visibly be a more Unitarian meeting place. I believe we could use a building to better live out our values, something that being renters has hampered. And I have also wondered what affect our uncertainty plays in our commitments, in general.

Some might say that a financial investment in a building bodes well for our future...that such an investment offers protection and is just sound financial planning. Do you agree? Some feel the financial obligation of a building is too great a burden. Others might feel that the ongoing conversation about staying or leaving takes too much energy and time, and that making a decision, either way, would free us up to do other, more meaningful, things.

And then there are our friends at Beth Israel. They have made it clear that to a degree their future depends on us staying with them; they need some kind of partnership to make this building viable for their small congregation. What responsibility might we have in helping to maintain a Jewish presence in Peterborough?

Let alone our own vitality and sustainability. We want to ensure a liberal religious voice and home for those who come after us. Sharing a building, partnering with others, just seems to make sense given the place of religion in our current society. Not to mention the question of environmental impact. We would strive to have the smallest possible negative impact on our planet.

These are just a few of the whys. Yes, Moses and the Israelites had much more compelling reasons for making a decision about where they lived. They were existing under the weight of slavery. And as we approach Martin Luther King Jr day, let us not forget the very stony paths that many have walked, throughout history, toward freedom. We are privileged not to be facing hardships such as those.

And yet. We are a community that is dedicated to living our values in a way that fosters personal transformation, so that we might act for a just and sustainable world. We believe that our existence in Peterborough matters. What we're asking is important. How does where we gather impact who we are able to be?

What is it that best serves the ongoing health and resiliency of this beloved community? Think about this as a meta-question, one that applies not just to this community, but also to you and your own life. This requires thinking...puzzling...trying to discern what most matters...in the interest of living into the fullness of all possibility.

I like to do jigsaw puzzles. When my family gathers each summer, we always have a big puzzle on the go. What's interesting is that not all of us do puzzles the same. Some like to focus on one area of the puzzle, finding the pieces that will fit together to make the roof, or the boat, or the orange blotch. Some stop by the puzzle only long enough to find one piece that fits, and then they walk away again. Some seem simply assist the serious puzzlers, looking for pieces that might help them put it together. My brother keeps the boxtop in hand, picks up random pieces, and looks for where they match the picture, and then sets them in the approximate location, hoping that pieces that connect will show up. And me? I pay no attention to the picture on the box; I sort the pieces into colour groups, and then I match colours and shapes to fit pieces together, trusting that if the colours match, the parts will fit, and the picture will emerge. And sometimes what emerges surprises me.

For what we are puzzling now, rather than colours, I'm focused on gathering the values that match, and trusting that when we remember and pay attention to what matters to us, it will all fit together, and the way will become clear. Much of what any big decision involves is getting clear about the values that guide us.

Some of those values, resonant with our UU principles, have already been mentioned... like, listening to every voice, paying attention to our environmental impact, acting as respectful and inclusive interfaith partners, trusting the process, and being financially responsible to both our present and our future. From just this list, I hope you can see that we are moving forward with good and careful intention.

But, remember that penguin with the soul of an eagle? We are that penguin, don't you think? We DO have the soul of an eagle, and we have visions of flying. And what is also true is that we have the body of penguin, not quite able to get off the ground without some help. For me, getting to a decision about where we live needs to acknowledge all of this...that we dream of flying, that we indeed can fly, and that flying is going to require some assistance.

And remember the story about crossing a bridge? Certainly we do stand at the foot of an adventure into the unknown. UU's famously step into the unknown all the time...we challenge ourselves to move out of places of comfort toward experiences we've never yet had, and out of our own cultural norms into

completely new worldviews³. Maybe we do this for the adventure of it, but I think it's more than that. We do it in order to learn, to grow, to embrace new understandings, and to get out of ruts of indifference.

I would even venture to say that it is in crossing bridges that we find the Promised Land...not on the other side, but simply in the process of crossing. As Rev. Safford said, the Promised Land is not a particular place; it is a way of going through life, a life that is filled with unknowns and uncertainty.

Margaret Wheatley has said that the primary way to prepare for the unknown is to attend to the quality of our relationships.⁴ So as we step into the unknown, let us attend to the quality of our relationships. For, if we don't have solid, meaningful community, we won't have what we need for the journey. We need each other's presence and support. We need a variety of styles and ways of seeing to put this puzzle together, and we need to respect that diversity by listening carefully to each contribution. We'll also need a variety of resources and ideas in order to get anything off the ground...I mean, a penguin in flight isn't necessarily a thing of grace, but it is the astonishing result of innovation and a diversity of contributions. And to survive into an uncertain future, with our hearts and spirits intact, we'll need the resiliency of a well-tended community simply because we are stronger when we stand together.

And this way of going, as a beloved community, is already planted in our hearts. We can trust it. We know how to experience connection, and joy, and purpose. We have a bag full of values and dreams with which to seed our future. We know how to move into the unknown, because we are already always doing it.

All that is required is taking the next step...and then the next. Together.

So be it. Amen.

READING *It Is That Time and That Place (abridged) ~ Qiyamah Rahman⁵*

Now is the time to call on the memories of the ancestors who thought they could not walk another step toward freedom – and yet they did.

It is that time and place to call on the memories of the ancestors who, when the darkness of their lives threatened to take away the hope and light, reached a little deeper and prayed yet another prayer.

It is that time and place to remember those who came through the long night to witness another sunrise.

...Time to remember their laughter and joy, though they had far less, and – little reason for optimism, yet they stayed on the path - toward a better day.

Time to hold to the steadfast hands and hearts and prayers of the ancestors that have brought us this far.

Time to make them proud and show them, and ourselves, what we are made of.

Time to show them that their prayers and sacrifices and lives were not in vain and did not go unnoticed, nor have they been forgotten.

Did you not know that this day would come?

Did you not know that we would have to change places?

³ Jan Taddeo, see Crossing Bridges reading

⁴ <https://margaretwheatley.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/When-Change-is-Out-of-Our-Control.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/poetry/it-time-and-place>

... It is that time and that place to know that it is our turn, that we must leave a legacy for our children. And all the children.

It is that time and that place.

We are the ones we've been waiting for!

* **CLOSING WORDS** *In Our Circle Again* (adapted) ~Shari Woodbury

Here we are
in our circle again.

A circle of vision
and reflection,
A forum for deciding
and empowering.

Here we are
at the base of another bridge,
another space spanning
the shores of today and tomorrow.
Beckoning us to cross the chasm,
one day at a time.

Here we are
gathered again at the cusp
of the future,
at the boundary
that holds community together.

We are here,
in a circle of love and trust,
brought to this moment
by a series of choices and promises...
by hope and gratitude...

Somewhere in here,
we are sowing the seeds.
Somewhere out there,
all we dream is possible.

Yes, here we are. And here we go, step by step, into places as yet unknown, carrying with us all that we have already planted...the seeds of connection, and the vision of a home for Unitarian Universalism here in Peterborough long into the future.

Go forth from here into that future, in love and in peace. Amen.

EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME