

Renewing the Flame
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There's a phrase that sometimes gets thrown around when people are talking about new ways of imagining religious communities: the "brick and mortar church." Especially in internet circles, there's sometimes a bit of condescension about this, a sense that the "brick and mortar church" is a fading institution that has decreasing relevance for the future. I've always been put off by this idea, and the main reason is that I think it's built on a false premise.

There's no such thing as a brick and mortar church. Bricks and mortar, or studs and siding in our case, are just the space that shelters the life inside the building. When that life is vital and vibrant, it grows, and it changes lives. When this congregation dedicated its first building, the house next door that the Montessori school rents from us now, one of the giants of our faith, Gordon McKeeman, traveled here to deliver that message firmly. It's great that you've got a building, was the gist of his sermon, because it shows you're serious about being a religious community for the long haul, but it's what you create and nurture and sustain inside that matters.

And here we are. This building, the 'new sanctuary' when it was dedicated some fifteen years ago—and I've heard a few people call it that since I got here in 2015—is now ours, free and clear of the mortgage that made its construction possible. And Gordon, I'm happy to say there's a lot of life within these walls.

This is a symbolic day, the day we'll mark our freedom from debt for this building by setting fire to the mortgage—not the original document, for those of you who are sensible about record-keeping and archives and such, but a copy prudently made by our Treasurer for the occasion. It's a moment for celebration, for sure.

It's also a good moment for reflection. We're through with a financial obligation, but what obligations do we still have? We don't owe money for the building—but what do we owe, and to whom, for the ongoing health of the life that's thriving inside the walls? What do we owe those who came before us—both in the larger faith and here in this congregation, those who've sustained this place for us to find and take up in our turn? What do we owe each other; and what do we owe the wider community and society around us? What do we owe those who'll follow our path into this place one day, and to the children among us and the children who'll come in the future?

The ending of the mortgage and the resources it frees up make this a good time for us to ask: where are our loyalties, our accountabilities, our responsibilities now? What do we want the life we nurture and sustain here in this spiritual home of ours to be like, for ourselves and for others?

That sense of this as a moment of possibility between the past and the future makes this a great time for us to be renewing our chalice—symbolically renewing the flame that represents our congregation’s life, our hopes, our aspirations, our quest for meaning and for loving community together. There’s a nice symmetry to it: as the symbol of our debt for the building goes up in flames, we renew our flame by kindling these new symbols of our community and our commitments.

So what are we to do now, we who are the life within these walls? What are we here for, *who* are we here for? Why does it matter that there’s a Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Outer Banks? What does the Outer Banks need a Unitarian Universalist Congregation for? There are lots of answers to those questions, and I want to thank Joe, Jennifer, and Rosemary for the thoughts they’ve shared with us. I hope we’ll share more as this year goes by, because it really is a good time for us to be thinking about what we’re called to be now, as we enter this next part of our story together.

My own thoughts about that this morning are sparked by something I’ve noticed in our opening hymn, ‘May Nothing Evil Cross This Door.’ It surfaces most clearly in that last verse, when we say ‘though these sheltering walls are thin, may they be strong to keep hate out and hold love in.’ I share that wish, I share it fervently. I told you last week that I believe the strength and health of our congregational communities is essential to any hope Unitarian Universalism has to meet the needs of this fraught and precarious time we’re living in.

But do we only want to keep hate out and hold love in? Is that enough for us, is that enough for this time in our world? I think there’s more life than that here; I think there’s life and love and light enough to overflow these sheltering walls and pour out into the community around us, and I think that if we let that happen our light and love and life will only grow stronger and more abundant.

Who needs Unitarian Universalism, who needs us? That’s not a rhetorical question, and it’s not a clever, falsely self-deprecating way to suggest that really, we’re just a modest little blip on the cultural radar of a local scene where most people are really not up to our standard of rational, independent thinking and willingness to live with uncertainty about great religious questions.

Who needs us? Who needs us but has no idea that we even exist? Who is urgently, even desperately looking for what we have to offer, but doesn’t know who we are, where we are, or even quite what it is that they need? Who is out there right now thinking that religion is all about rules and rejection, while they are starving for acceptance and spiritual imagination? Who is out there right now hearing that their life doesn’t matter, that something about them as fundamental as their very body and their sense of who they are is wrong, unacceptable, worthless? Who is out there right now wondering how they’re going to raise their children with a deep sense of compassion, morality, and justice, without also teaching those children dogmas and doctrines that they don’t believe?

Who *needs* us, and how are they going to find us? How are *we* going to find *them*?

That's my hope, today, for the future of Unitarian Universalism in the Outer Banks. That we'll be a strong, healthy, vibrant community here within these walls, oh yes, and I'm ready and eager to do my part alongside you all to make it so. *And* that we'll be visible, known, a presence in the larger community where there are so many people who need what our faith has to offer. I dream of a day when all over the Outer Banks people will know there's a faith community here that believes *no one* is doomed to be outside the circle of divine love, a faith community that believes in the assurance of grace while embracing questions and doubt about doctrines, a faith community that loves the diversity of humanity even as we honor its unity, a faith community that lives out our understanding of salvation as a shared effort to build a world of justice, equity, and compassion.

I dream of a day when we will never hear anyone say, "I can't believe I've lived here my whole life and I didn't know anything about this place!" Here in these beloved and now debt-free walls, here in the light, today, of both these flaming chalices consecrated by our love and our commitment, we are guardians and stewards of something powerful and precious—the legacy of a free faith, lived in a compassionate community.

May we continue to give it life and breath and beauty—may we grow in our understanding of its worth to the world around us—may we grow in our commitment to offer it as a blessing to all who might be blessed by it. May our light shine forth, may our love flow, and may we choose to bless the world.