

## The Gathered People

My name is Monica Jacobson Tennessen. I am a member of this congregation, and I am also a seminarian – a ministerial student – and a Candidate for the Unitarian Universalist ministry. It's my great pleasure to preach to you today.

So good morning, my dear ones. I hope you will forgive me if my language today takes little detours into sappiness. I'm very full of love for you today and very full of gratitude that you are here and we can be together in this hard, hard world. Yes, I am even grateful for those of you who are new or visiting. Yes, even those of you I don't know. Yes, even those of you I have disagreed with. You see, you are all part of the story of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Corvallis. And I love that story as much as I love the people within it.

I'm going to tell you the story of this Fellowship, the way I know it. Some of you know things I don't know, or know the same story differently, or simply LIVED the story rather than hearing about it. I honor what you know. I invite you to come find me and tell me the story as you know it. You see, I love this congregation and its story and so I am always greedy for more. To describe my relationship with this Fellowship I have to quote the immortal words of Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*: "I'll eat you up, I love you so."

It's important for us to know our history – and it is OUR history, no matter how recently you may have joined – because history shapes the present and the future. Catholics call this the *charism* of an order or group – *charism* like "charisma." It's a Greek word that means "spirit" or "gift." The *charism* of a group has to do with the fundamental quality that originally drew people to it, which lingers, perhaps growing or shifting, and continues to shape that group throughout its existence.

To start with, this congregation was *gathered* in 1949. That's a legacy from our Puritan ancestors – that a congregation is not founded, or planted, or established, but gathered. People have, in many times and in many places, found their way to Unitarianism, Universalism, and Unitarian Universalism. The conversion experience for UUs is often the sensation of recognition, of finding a community of people who share some ways of approaching the world. For us, on both sides of our heritage, those ways of approaching the world have historically involved a quest for truth, a willingness to challenge "the way things are," a fierce individualism, a desire to build the world as we think it ought to be, with more justice for all, and a great faith in the human capacity for goodness.

In the late 1940s and 1950s, the American Unitarian Association had a project known as the Fellowship Movement. This project was about gathering Unitarians, and a traveling minister named Lon Ray Call went from place to place, stopping to hold informational meetings in towns that seemed likely to support a lay-led Unitarian fellowship. Many of these places were towns like Corvallis, university towns with faculty who wanted a church for themselves and their children that didn't require them to pretend to have a belief they didn't share. And so the Rev. Lon Ray Call came here, and gathered a group of likely

Unitarians, and preached a sermon to them on October 9, 1949, about faith and the free mind.

The first Corvallis Unitarians were a small group, but they were fierce of heart and bold of vision. In the early years, the adults met in borrowed spaces on Sunday evenings, while the children had a School of Religious Discovery on Sunday mornings. But they knew they were a GATHERED people, and they dreamed of being together. And they dreamed of gathering in more people in need of a religious home – from the very beginning, announcements of events concluded with the words, “all are welcome.”

Before they were even ten years old, this congregation purchased buildings and land – the land we sit on now, and buildings whose bones are part of this building. The people were so excited to have a home that they held their first service on this land before the buildings arrived – for the buildings were trucked here from Camp Adair – and because there were no buildings at that first service, the people sat on pieces of wood, in a circle under the open air, and rejoiced at being together.

The buildings came – a strange sight, rumbling through town and out along the dirt road to this place, which was at the time beyond the edge of town. In no surprise to anyone who has made a home, the buildings needed the touch of love: renovation and new roofs and useful, welcoming things inside them. This was in 1957, and the congregation was still not even ten years old when their Building Committee Chair wrote to them, asking for more roofing volunteers, and said, “Above all this is a program of sacrifice to build for the future. This is an expression of our faith and we cannot bog down or back track now. YOU are needed.” Their bold vision called.

The people were rough with each other sometimes, in those early days – remember that they were fierce of heart, and their hearts were set on the quest for Truth with a capital T. A welcome letter sent out to visitors began, “Perhaps you may have wished to find out about Unitarianism. If so, it is quite possible that in the rough and tumble exchange of thoughts which characterizes some of our meetings you have not found the answer.” In 1959 the American Unitarian Association asked all congregations to vote on whether to merge with the Universalist Church of America, and this congregation reported that a meeting of 21 members had voted evenly for and against the merger: 10.5 for, 10.5 against. I have no idea what the American Unitarian Association thought of this.

By the way, the next year, in 1960, when the topic of joining the Unitarians with the Universalists came up for a vote again, this congregation voted to merge, 24 in favor, 3 against.

In this same time, the buildings came together, and the adults met in one while the children had their School of Religious Discovery in the other. Things were not perfect – the buildings were not connected, and the only bathrooms were in the children’s building, so sometimes the adults had to run through the rain to get over there. But the people had a home, and a way to be more together than they had been before.

By 1966, when the congregation was 17 years old, the people began dreaming seriously about a minister. They had brought in visiting ministers, and scholars, and spoken to each other at services, for all those years, and although they knew that all change brings loss they also knew that a minister would help them to grow, as people and as a congregation, and that change would bring with it a new richness and depth to their lives. Robert Fulghum, who was at the time part of the Pacific Northwest District staff, came to meet with the congregation about this decision. The order of service from one Sunday with him reads, "A Non Order of Non Service: First, there's sitting-around-and-talking, followed by the doxology. Then, there are sentences, and, after that, some singing, and some poetry, also, and some music. Then, a man disguised as a MINISTER talks about being alive and what to do about that. Afterward, there's music, once more and then some nitty-gritty announcements about things. Finally, a valediction – singing: a-men (threefold). Coffee."

And so in 1967 this congregation called its first minister: Robert Moore, whom everyone called RCA, who came to talk about being alive and what to do about that. And he loved the people from the beginning. RCA was challenging. He was politically outspoken. He was critical of the new Unitarian Universalist Association, of the US government, and especially of military action in Viet Nam. He was controversial among the congregation, and while new people came because of him, others also left. There was a fear among the people that they would not survive, and their gathering would disperse.

But that is not what happened. What happened was that RCA, with all his fierceness, loved the people. This was the congregation that ordained him, and he wrote them an Ordination Drama for the occasion. It opened with these explanatory notes:

"The concepts we are trying to convey and celebrate are:

Ministering is a process of helping-leading; a process all people can, and possibly should, take part in; part of the process of being concerned for and of loving humankind; a process of bringing people to their own beinghood.

People, individually or collectively, are responsible for and can carry out their own affairs.

People are able to make decisions and can accept the responsibility of those decisions although they cannot know in advance what all of the results and effects of those decisions will be.

This Fellowship has been engaged for nearly twenty years with the task of making Corvallis a safer place for humanity. Now we have made a significant turn toward accepting a greater responsibility for our fellow humans and toward having a greater impact upon our community."

In the dialogue leading up to the act of ordination itself, RCA gave these words to the Board of Trustees: "We're scared but we're hopeful. Yes, we accept the responsibility for making this man a minister."

And RCA accepted the responsibility for loving this congregation into its next phase of being, writing, "The religious community requires and allows our loving each other in ways that count. It encourages our facing up to the pain in the general society, the pain inside the congregation, and the pain inside ourselves. It is the quality of our religious community, not the minister or any individuals in the congregation, that provides us the inspiration for doing the most important things in our lives, the things rarely done quickly."

When RCA left them, after three years, the people found that in addition to their quest for Truth, which had always been with them, they had grown in their capacity to search together for other things: to lift up their voices in song, to reach out to each other for help, to know themselves connected. And those who had remained through the conflict around RCA's outspoken opposition to the Viet Nam war learned something about their ability to choose to stay.

It's also worth noting that in 1969 this congregation held its first "Fest Event," the Thanksgiving potluck that we still hold every year. It's still true that "all are welcome" to this additional chance to gather.

After RCA came a minister named Erling Duus, who served for four years, and helped the congregation understand how well they could care for each other and maintain their friendships, even when they found themselves on different sides of an issue.

After Erling, then the people were without a minister, as they had been in the beginning. The numbers of the people dwindled, and there were those in the District who feared that this congregation would disappear.

And then the people met Art Wilmot. He was the minister this congregation needed, and in 1979 he came here as an interim minister. Incidentally, 1979 is also the first time that the calligraphied UUFC chalice appears in our archives; although the chalice precedes Art by six months, I find it noteworthy that they enter the congregation's history in the same year.

After only a few months together, it was clear to the people that Art was the minister they wanted and needed. There were complications in this – as an interim minister, Art was required to depart. As a congregation that had decreased in numbers, the people could not afford Art's full-time salary – and he told them so. But remember, the people were fierce of heart and bold of vision, and they raised the money they needed to pay Art's salary, and they successfully argued to the UUA's ministerial settlement office that Art's time with them had been a developmental ministry, not an interim, and he was therefore eligible to stay with them rather than required to go.

Art served the people from 1979 until 1996, and in the middle of that time the congregation grew by leaps and bounds. The buildings were expanded from those two converted barracks from Camp Adair into the very building we occupy now. First the sanctuary – the room we’re in right now – and the foyer were constructed, with much of the work done by the people, as it had been in the 1950s. And as it had been in the 1950s, when the people met on stumps for the joy of being together on their land, in 1986 when the new sanctuary was mostly finished the congregation rushed to have its Easter service here – although the new room had no doors yet, the people could not wait to be together in their space.

Very shortly after the sanctuary was finished, the people turned their attention to expanding the classroom wing. In the archives are pictures of that part of the building with its walls torn off, some familiar faces from today’s congregation standing there amid the insulation and wiring, building on a second story. The pictures are captioned, “It gets worse before it gets better.” I can’t think of a better way to capture the spirit of a faith community – a group of people so united in their vision of gathering in love that they are willing to endure the uncomfortable, challenging, and even frightening times when “it gets worse before it gets better” – a people who choose to stay. Both halves of that sentence – worse and better – would prove to be prophetic.

It can be a challenge to a community to grow quickly, as long-time habits and a multitude of familiar faces mix with new ways and new people. As happens in many congregations, there was a certain strain on the security of people’s places in the community. And there was a changing set of expectations as well, as more people came to Unitarian Universalist congregations all over the country seeking spirituality – and sometimes clashed with those who had come to Unitarian Universalism seeking strict rationality and the sort of humanism that did not share space with “woo-woo.” In their fierceness, the people were challenged to remember how to love each other while they disagreed.

And then came the day that Art announced his intention to retire. During his long tenure as minister the congregation had seen a member grow into ministry, and this congregation had then ordained and installed as Associate Minister the Rev. Jill McAllister. When Art began planning his retirement, some in the congregation assumed Jill would move into the role of Senior Minister. Others felt that both ministers should depart, and their salaries be combined into one larger salary that would let the congregation attract one strong new minister. The tension over humanism and more mystical spirituality was also wrapped up in this, because the congregation feared that a minister too inclined to one approach would upset the balance and cause the other perspective to fade away from this congregation. And also in that year, the position of Fellowship President was contested, with strong feelings wrapped up in that as well.

At the Annual Meeting that year, which is sometimes still known as “Black Sunday,” things came to a head. The people were scared, but they forgot to be hopeful. They were fierce, but they forgot to be loving. They hurt each other.

Now, every person I've talked with about this has a different memory of the congregational meeting that winter – who was there, what the conflict was about, what else happened in that spring leading up to Art's retirement. It was rough, on everyone – that's clear.

Congregational conflict has been studied, most particularly by a scholar named Speed Leas, who developed a conflict scale from 0 to 5. Level 1 represents a problem to solve; Level 3 is the point at which people begin to perceive “winners” and “losers.” Level 4, which is probably what the spring of 1996 was, is the level at which the focus shifts to getting rid of specific people or to factions splitting off. Level 5, I note, is what Leas calls “Intractable Situations.” This is the level paraphrased as “annihilation.” Congregations can survive even this level of conflict, with time and love and good ministry from both professional clergy and lay leaders.

A Level 0, by the way, is considered “depression” – this is a congregation that does not know or admit that it has conflict, and so the energy is turned inward and becomes self-destructive.

Even as the people were hurt, and frightened, many of them remembered or intuited the lessons imparted to their *charism* when their first minister, RCA, was controversial: they chose to stay. They stayed through one interim minister, through a failed search during which the congregation voted to call their candidate – to hire him as their next minister – and he backed out suddenly and broke their hearts. They stayed through the next interim, and called Gretchen Woods to be their next minister.

At this point we are reaching relatively recent history. Gretchen served here for 12 years, until her retirement in 2011, when an interim minister named Joel Miller came to spend two years with this congregation during the search for the next Senior Minister. During that search the ghosts of 1996 and Black Sunday came up for some members, because the search committee selected Jill McAllister as the candidate for Senior Minister.

This was a great thing, because it caused those ghosts to surface, to be talked about, to move toward being put to rest. Remember, a Level 0 conflict is the depression of a congregation that doesn't know what its conflict is about. When there are ghosts haunting a congregation, they need to be drawn out.

It's unusual for a congregation to call back a former Associate Minister to be its Senior Minister, and it's unusual now for a congregation to call one of its own members to its ministry. Historically, however, this was quite normal: on our Unitarian side we are descended from Puritan stock, and the early Puritan congregations always called their ministers from within their membership. In some ways, the Puritan *charism* is with us here.

And of course our own *charism* is with us. We are a gathered people, from the very beginning.

You know, the people of this congregation know, that change brings both loss and gain. That nothing is certain but that uncertainty does not stop us from striving to make the world a better place. That the joy of being together in our quest for truth and our connectedness and our love is our heritage and our legacy. Because the people of this congregation are YOU, fierce of heart and bold of vision and brave enough to stay or to come back, and so, SO loving.

I have had the privilege of being among you for five years now, although in truth my connection to you begins in 2007, when you were the first congregation to gather me in to Unitarian Universalism. As I get close to moving on to undertake the congregational internship that is the next step in my ministerial formation, my heart is full of gratitude for you.

One of the things congregations do, in our tradition, is shape ministers. Our Unitarian Universalist clergy are “called out from among us.” This congregation has *produced* ministers from among its membership, and presently has a few members who are seminarians or in ministerial formation, including me. And this congregation has been *served* by ministers, beginning with RCA Moore, and has shaped those ministers as it has been shaped by them in return.

It’s easiest to talk about the way congregations shape ministers, and the way ministers shape congregations. That relationship helps make it obvious what’s happening. Yet so much more than that is happening. Because our congregations are relational and covenantal, because the thing that gathers us as Unitarian Universalists is the ephemeral connectedness and recognition between us, we are constantly shaping each other. My soul has your handprints on it; my vision for the future has your gifts woven into it; my song of gratitude will always include your love. Alongside all the beautiful things, it’s fair to say that I acquired my share of bruises here as well. But remember our *charism*, our character. Alongside fierceness and boldness and the ability to love across differences, our character as a congregation includes the bravery required to stay. To say, “It gets worse before it gets better,” and to stay for the “better.”

These experiences may be true for each of you, in small or large ways. We are forever shaping each other, giving our love and sharing each other’s lives. The trajectory of this congregation is always toward being together, sharing space and time and the deeper truths of what moves in us and between us. The legacy of each successive minister, and each generation of membership, has been a greater capacity for emotional intimacy, which grew alongside the steadfast devotion that members of this congregation have always had.

We don’t know the effects of our actions. And yet, as RCA said, we are people who are able to make choices, and accept the consequences of our actions. We’re scared, but we’re hopeful. We know, perhaps never more so than right now, that the world is precarious. In the words of William Sloane Coffin, this world is “too dangerous for anything but truth and too small for anything but love.”

Or in the words of the poet Mary Oliver,  
I don't want to live a small life. Open your eyes,  
open your hands. I have just come  
from the berry fields, the sun

kissing me with its golden mouth all the way  
(open your hands) and the wind-winged clouds  
following along thinking perhaps I might

feed them, but no I carry these heart-shapes  
only to you. Look how many how small  
but so sweet and maybe the last gift

I will ever bring to anyone in this  
world of hope and risk, so do.  
Look at me. Open your life, open your hands.

It's always been true, it will always be true, that we live in a world of hope and risk. And it's always the nature of our religious communities that we shape each other, sometimes all unawares, sometimes reluctantly, and sometimes joyfully and bravely.

So what is the *charism* of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Corvallis? I think it's this: It's okay to be scared. It's okay to be hopeful. It's okay to carry your gifts to the service held on stumps in a newly purchased lot, to the deep discord over what's right, to the sanctuary with no doors, to the meeting that frightened you with how much a gathered people can hurt each other, to the grief of a broken promise, to the opening of new ways. It's okay to carry your gifts to each other, to the world, back to the places that still hurt from the past and forward to the dreams you don't quite dare whisper for the future. It's okay to be fierce and bold and loving and to remember that sometimes it gets worse before it gets better ... and you can stay.

I cherish every gift you have given me, so small and so sweet and so large and so light. I hope you are able to see the gifts this community offers and the gifts it needs: because we need each other. We need to gather, and to gently let our regard and our words and our touch shape each other.

I have not just come from the berry fields, and yet I do ask you to open your hands. The ushers will be bringing around plates of berries, and in the spirit of people who are scared but hopeful, who seek to draw ever closer, who know that each life makes a tremendous difference, who are fierce of heart and bold of vision and brave enough to love each other, I invite you to join me in tasting one berry. Open your life. Open your hands.