

COMING HOME

Rev. Dr. Dorothy May Emerson
First Parish Church in Billerica, Massachusetts
September 7, 2008

OPENING WORDS--#416, Robert French Leavens (adapted)

Holy and beautiful the custom which brings us together,
in the presence of the Most High:
to face and affirm our ideals,
to remember loved ones in absence,
to give thanks, to admit our shortcomings, to offer forgiveness,
to be enlightened, and to be strengthened.

Through this quiet hour breathes the worship of ages,
the cathedral music of history.

Three unseen guest attend: Faith, hope and love.
Let all hearts prepare them place.

WATER CEREMONY

The Water Ceremony we are participating in here today is one of the most common and most loved rituals in Unitarian Universalist congregations, but few people realize how it began. In most religious traditions, important rituals appear to have begun when a great religious leader first did something so special that others picked up on the idea and repeated it in honor or memory of them.

In this case, the religious leadership that began this special ceremony was a group, not an individual. And it was a group that was not allowed much religious leadership at the time. The water ceremony was created for the Convocation on Feminist Theology held in 1980 in East Lansing, Michigan. The women and men who participated in that gathering believed that religion in general and Unitarian Universalism in particular needed to be more inclusive of women and feminist perspectives.

The water ceremony was created as a way to symbolize the coming together of women (and men) from all over the country with a common vision and purpose. They brought water from home and poured it into a common vessel. Later, each of them took some of the water back home, and many used this mingled water to start the water ceremony in their own congregations. Thus the water—and women's religious leadership—was spread across the land.

Today our mingled water will be used for two purposes. Part of it will be saved for use in dedicating children and for other blessings during the year. The rest will be used to water plants in the memorial garden.

You may participate in this ceremony in several different ways. You may have brought water from a special place you visited during the summer or during the past year. Perhaps that special place is your own backyard or your kitchen. The water you name can be any place that nurtures your spirit. If you didn't bring water with you, some is available on the table here for you to use to represent water that has special meaning for you.

As you pour your water into the congregation's crystal bowl, please share in one sentence what your water means to you spiritually. Or you may simply pour your water in

silence. The rest of us will participate in this ceremony by bearing witness to the mingling of the waters.

As we pour our separate waters into the congregation's bowl, let us remember that although we come from different places, together we form one congregation. Like rivers running to the sea, we're coming home, we're coming home.

CANDLES OF JOY AND CONCERN

Another of the most common rituals in Unitarian Universalism is the lighting of candles of joy and concern. You may come forward now to light a candle in silence. If you choose to share your joy or concern, please use the mike and begin by telling us your name.

PRAYER AND MEDITATION

Spirit of Life in whom we live and move and have our being, dear God, we lift our hearts this morning in praise and thanksgiving for all that is our life. We are grateful for this place of worship and for the community that gathers here. We ask special blessings on those who have shared concerns and joys with us today, and those who carry other joys and concerns in their hearts.

We ask your guidance throughout the coming year as we work together to welcome those who seek to nurture their spirits among us. Help us be beacons of justice and compassion in our communities and with each other. Be in our hearts and give us strength and wisdom for our daily living. And may we honor the past as we live our values and principles in the present and build a strong foundation for the future.

We acknowledge the difficulties of living our values with all the stresses and snares of the world we live in. We recall the shootings this past summer in our sister church in Knoxville, Tennessee. We pray for their continued healing and protection. And we recall the violence of seven years ago this week on September 11th. May we continue to work for a world where all people are respected for their inherent worth and dignity, where all people have enough to eat and safe homes to live in, where all people have the economic means to live decent lives, and where the fertile ground of inequality that pervades our present world providing the context for terrorism to grow, will be replaced with justice and peace for all.

We know we have a lot to accomplish to build a world we can be proud to pass on to future generations. May we be strengthened in this great task by our time together and by the love and support of this congregation.

And now let us add our own prayers or sit for a time in silent meditation. (pause)
Amen. Blessed Be.

SERMON

It is a special honor and privilege for me to stand here today in the same pulpit used by a famous Unitarian minister who shares my name, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Waldo, as he was known to his contemporaries, talked and wrote about many inspiring ideas that not only influenced our religious movement but also American thought in general. One of his great essays was on Friendship. In it he writes these words: "Happy is the house that shelters a friend. ... A friend is a person with whom I may be sincere. [With a friend], I may think aloud."

I would like to echo these words today and suggest that a congregation can be a house a friendship, a place where we can be sincere with each other, a place where there is trust, so we can think aloud and thereby discover new meaning for our lives.

Some congregations call this Homecoming Sunday, the first Sunday after Labor Day when the congregation re-gathers after many have been apart during the summer. There is a sense that today we are coming home, coming home to a place where we can be ourselves, where we can seek spiritual growth, coming home to a safe haven for our questions and concerns, coming home to a place where we can work together with others to make a better world, and where we can be supported in times of need.

Now, not everyone has positive associations with home. Some people grew up in homes and families that faced many problems, serious problems like poverty, violence, sexual abuse, alcohol and drug addiction, and family members who lacked the capacity for love and nurture. As Laura Cunningham points out: "There are homes you run from, and homes you run to." (*Sleeping Arrangements*, 1989)

Many people come to Unitarian Universalist congregations as an alternative the religious homes they grew up in, religions that made them feel constricted, unwanted, or even unclear. Others come because they want to participate in a spiritual community where they will be accepted for who they are, with all their questions and doubts, and with their hopes and dreams.

At best Unitarian Universalist congregations are homes with a special mission—to welcome all who step inside this house with the invitation to participate fully in all activities and endeavors. This invitation is unique, because as Unitarian Universalists we affirm what one of our founders, Francis David, said some 500 years ago: "We need not think alike to love alike." The emphasis, you see, is on love, friendship. What binds us together as a religious community is not our beliefs but rather our caring for one another and our commitment to making the world a better place for all.

That is why so many people have a feeling of coming home when they discover Unitarian Universalism. That is why those who have been part of this faith for many years seek to welcome those who come, because we know what a special place this is in today's world of religious and political fundamentalism.

Extending the hospitality of home to newcomers is part of our mission in this world. Welcoming the stranger is one way we practice the recognition that we're all in this together. Our 7th UU principle affirms: "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." Often we think of this as emphasizing our connection with nature and the environment, but it also applies to our connections with people.

We know there are many people who could benefit from an understanding of Unitarian Universalism, who might find a spiritual home among us. If more people accepted and respected the diversity of beliefs that exist in most UU congregations, there would be less fighting over ideology, and we could direct more of our energy and resources to cleaning up the environment and making sure all people have the wherewithal to live decent lives. Our contribution to the health and vitality of the interdependent web is to make our congregation a welcoming and supportive place and to share our home with others.

One of the challenges this congregation faces—and one of the subjects for our work together in this year of interim ministry—is how to go about welcoming new people while maintaining the sense of home that is so important to the members already here. Author Gloria Naylor has some insight for us:

Home. It's being new and old all rolled into one. Measuring your new against old friends, old ways, old places. Knowing that as long as the old survives, you can keep changing as much as you want without the nightmare of waking up to a total stranger. (*Mama Day*, 1988)

This year this congregation celebrates its 350th anniversary. (Isn't that amazing?!) Throughout the year we will be honoring the old and learning from our past, recognizing the positive achievements and contributions and acknowledging the shortcomings and

mistakes. We will build on these lessons as we proceed in the present to provide worship, education, special programs, and service to our community and beyond. And we will lay the groundwork for the future, strengthening this free church “that reveres the past, but trusts the dawning future more.”

I know from having met some of you already that you are a caring and supportive community. As you widen your circle of care, I believe your sense of home will grow and deepen.

One of Waldo Emerson’s friends and colleagues was Margaret Fuller, who wrote book called *Woman in the 19th Century*. This small but influential book empowered generations of women to think and act for themselves. In it she wrote: “A house is no home unless it contains food and fire for the mind as well as for the body.”

May this house of worship bring you food and fire for your mind and food and fire for your body. May this congregation be for you a place where you truly feel at home, where you can think aloud, speak boldly, and share your full self. May this be a place where you can leave the shackles of the past behind and find new ways of being together in community, that we may create a world of joy and peace. And may this place shelter us as we grow in spirit and in truth and become strong enough to keep hate out and hold love in. Amen. Blessed Be.

BENEDICTION—Fred Gillis, #694

May the Love which overcomes all differences,
which heals all wounds, which puts to flight all fears,
which reconciles all who are separated,
be in an among us
now and always.