

## FEELS LIKE HOME

A Sermon by  
Dottie Mathews, Assistant Minister

Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship  
2600 Philip Lane, P.O. Box 1791  
Appleton, WI 54912-1791  
(920) 731-0849  
Website: [www.fvuuf.org](http://www.fvuuf.org)

August 13, 2006

READING: *from "Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex, and Politics" by Starhawk (1982)*

We are all longing to go home to some place we have never been – a place, half-remembered, and half-envisioned we can only catch glimpses of from time to time. Community. Somewhere, there are people to whom we can speak with passion without having the words catch in our throats. Somewhere a circle of hands will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter, voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power. Community means strength that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done. Arms to hold us when we falter. A circle of healing. A circle of friends. Someplace where we can be free.

SERMON:

Well, here we are together! This is the first Sunday that your new Assistant Minister is preaching. Now, don't worry – you'll still have Roger up here MOST of the time; But isn't it great to know that, as he wrote in the most recent newsletter, he now has the back-up staff he needs so he can afford time away once in a rare while, when the occasion calls for it. I stand here this morning representing one more tangible step toward the fulfillment of a vision this congregation has held for quite a while – one

piece of which is to judiciously and eagerly expand the staff so that this faith community's ever-broadening ministries can be well supported and fruitful. I am unreservedly overjoyed to be a part of it all, and I know from conversations with other staff members, we all share that same enthusiasm, even though space is tight and folks are getting bumped around a bit to make room for me and Julie (our new Secretary). You can see in the Order of Service that we're doing a bit of musical offices and logistical rearranging, but it has all been done with good humor and great mutuality, and with the joy of knowing that we are part of something good and powerful and forward leaning.

To be honest, as I thought about how deep my emotions are on this day and I prepared for this sermon, I hesitated – I heard some internal cautions: “Be sure you don't sound too self-indulgent” (which is always an apt reminder for any public speaker) but, what the hay, this is my one and only “first Sunday after actually being hired in my first official ministry” sermon, so maybe I should just go for it!

No, the truth of the matter is that today I bring you my heart, my immeasurable gratitude, and my unwavering promise to help carry onward the best I can all the incredible work being done here. So, that “voice of caution” is true - I don't want to be self-indulgent today but it does seem like at least a bit of “us-indulgence” is called for! We have come a long way together and we've had many opportunities to pause along the way and celebrate. I'm thinking of our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration last year and the honoring we did of our founding members and the long path that led from that time to this. Together, with the generous-beyond-belief willingness of so many kind and caring hearts, we've reached one milestone after another – not without some bumps along the way, not without the occasional veering off path, of course - but for the most part we have kept a steady forward pace and we have a momentum and vision for our tomorrows that makes these very exciting times indeed for us!

My sermon today is about “home” and this place - this most extraordinary place - does indeed “feel like home” to me. In so many ways, it is exactly that: the image and air of this sacred space has been a significant part of my life's journey for the last several years.

It was here, in this building, I heard for the very first time the joyful good news that Unitarian Universalism had to offer a yearning and disaffected soul like mine back then. It was here that I found a community

of people who didn't think it was necessary to agree with one another in order to sustain the safe space for conversation and valuing of one another's differing thoughts – even about life's most crucial questions! Here I found a direction and place for my passions, joining my hand with others who sincerely wanted to DO something to build the common good – not just bemoan the apparent lack of it.

More personally, it was here that I met my life partner, Rosie, (at a newcomer picnic of all things) and here that we were joined in a tender Ceremony of Union with our family and friends present – some of whom were pretty uncertain HOW they felt about such an event until Roger's eloquence and gentle spirit softened their hearts.

Here, you walked with us through two arduous journeys of diagnosis, treatment and remission as my younger son, Tim, struggled with an initial bout of cancer and then found his way through a recurrence two years later.

Here, you rejoiced with me when I embraced my call to the ministry and it was from this place that you sent me off to seminary with hugs, good wishes and unbounded emotional support – not just for me but for Rosie and my three grown children too – holding us throughout those challenging four years.

And, here, when the time was right for the addition of your second minister, the Search Committee and then Board communicated with me with absolute integrity and faithfulness. The “by the book” way that the Search process was handled only deepened my already-vast respect and appreciation for this Fellowship.

There is no other sanctuary in the world that means to me what this place does. So, given all that, you can imagine how it feels to be returning now as one of your ministers.

And, it's been a wild two weeks. I've learned a LOT! Whew! It's been dizzying – gives me great sympathy for all the other incoming first-time ministers. My learning curve is probably just a little less steep than theirs – like, I already know where the coffee is, for instance. But, beyond that... well, let me just say that there are things that NO seminary class can teach you about what goes on in the administrative wing of a religious institution! I know it's a bit of a mystery to many of you - even I was unprepared for all that goes on here! My near-20 years in the business world were very valuable in many, many ways, but they did **not** really prepare me for this. And, as I puzzled over that, I realized that in the

business world, we're most often dealing with a product. My staff and I in those days had very definite tasks and deadlines, forms and filings, to complete. There's plenty of that here too, of course, but what I am coming to know deeply (a knowing, I'm sure, that will only increase as I continue to walk this path) is that the work of this congregation is not so much about products – but it is fervently and authentically about PEOPLE. And this holy work of PEOPLE-care deservedly takes very large amounts of time. Tending to the stuff of our lives cannot and should not be rushed.

Thankfully, this is a place that has held that belief from the start and the way this ministry has grown, our members and friends know that this sacred work of caring for and ministering to others is shared-everyone-is-needed sort of work. This has never been a community that relies wholly on professional staff to create and run programs; nonetheless, what I am coming to know is that it takes far more than I previously understood of work down that hall (actually now BOTH halls) to keep everything moving and circulating on this energetic upward and outward trend – supporting and collaborating with you and one another to create the strong sense of community that is available here.

In our opening reading, Starhawk describes *community* as a feeling of immense comfort together – a place where eyes light up as we enter. My observation is that many of us view this as such a place. We – all of us here – are in the business of caring about people – inside and out, through and through. We care for one another whether we are celebratory or hurting, whether we are acting pleasantly or grouchy, when we are hope-filled and when we are despondent. We are in the business of CARING and embracing the truth that we're, very definitely, all in this together.

One of the speakers at the Ministry Days prior to the UU General Assembly in St. Louis was the renowned Buddhist writer, Sharon Salzberg. She spoke of a learned spiritual practice she has adopted of entering every space, every group, with a private reminder to her own heart, “these are my people” she says to herself. She imagines that whatever the group is – fellow travelers on a New York subway or a conference of UU clergy – wherever she finds herself, she tries to hold her heart in such a space that she recognizes that all are “her people.” A spiritual practice that reinforces this notion is to imagine being locked in a room together for a lengthy and indefinite period of time. If that happened and you knew that this is it – these present in this locked room with you are all you have for survival,

you'd relate to "your people" in a particular way. In order to survive, it stands to reason that you'd find ways to collaborate and pool resources; seek peace together and draw upon one another's strengths. The situation would tend to make you unwilling to spend time on petty grievances. That all just makes sense in order to endure and survive in the best possible way.

Well, Sharon Salzberg's faith system -and ours- tells us that we ARE all inextricably connected to one another. We ARE bound to one another in the intricate and marvelous web of life and we know, for instance, that whether this Fellowship continues to rise (or if it were to plateau, or make a slow descent) depends entirely on how well we recognize every person here as "our people" – how well we capitalize on one another's strengths and how we keep our hearts – and our doors – as wide open as we possibly can.

I think her exercise is a valuable one. I've tried it in several settings – like last Friday night waiting my turn in line with about 150 other Pyrotechnic Guild visitors as we jostled for a place in front of the half-dozen "portolets" in our area of the field. Really! It made a big difference to recognize all those folks as "my people." We were definitely in it together.

So, as you glance around the room, you might take a moment to recognize in your heart – "these are my people." You can try it at your office and in line at the grocery store. For a real spiritual practice you MIGHT even try it with your relatives!

The fact that that made you chuckle, brings me to another point about this concept of "home" - it can have some terribly mixed meanings for us. We continue to hallow the word, I believe, because we hold a concept of what it might mean – Little House on the Prairie-ish sort of feeling. But, the reality of it is that returning home after one has been away for a long while can be a bit disillusioning. If you're like me, when my brothers and sisters and I come together from our disparate locations around the U.S., we arrive with a sort of amnesiac enthusiasm about "how great it will be to all be together again." And after about a day and a half, we all remember far more clearly why it is that we do this only a few times a year. Family systems experts know that it can be hard to allow one another to change; it's easy to revert to old patterns and "less than best self" behaviors. Decades-old wounds can surface and rooms can rapidly fill to overflowing with unspoken grievances. It sometimes takes a LOT of intentionality to hold good will with one another in family situations.

And we know that same intentionality is needed here at the Fellowship too, our Principles for a Healthy Congregation remind us of that. And, by the way, since I'm into some "us-indulgence" today, that is definitely a model and document of which we can be proud. If you haven't read them lately, the Principles are out on our website on the Reference tab<sup>1</sup>. Go check it out. I think the language has been crafted so well, it's something we might well frame in our Family Rooms or post above our desks at work. We might place it in all those settings we find ourselves to remind us of how it is we ought to be with "our people."

I make no effort to hide it - I think this is a very special place. My partner who does energy work likes to speak of the "vibrational level" of certain places. I'm not sure exactly what she means by that but I think it might be what I sense here. The "vibrational level" of the Fox Valley UU Fellowship makes my heart feel glad. And from what I hear the same is true for many of our members and friends. When the opportunity came for me to come back and serve as one of your ministers, I did not hesitate to accept. There is much work to be done in our troubled world - and right here with you is precisely where I wish to labor.

I had an email exchange with someone from the Fellowship in which we were discussing Roger's sermon last week – how compassionately this room held the limitless subject of grief and how openly the congregation supported one another's feelings. This member gave me permission to quote a part of her email: "How important [it is] to tell and hear stories with people who care. What a great lesson in sharing the load and finding comfort through connection. I'm getting that in so many ways these days, and I continue to learn so much from our UU community."

Like her, like me, as you sit here today, many of you carry stories of joy and loss – some of you have walked through those doors today holding in your heart deep, unspeakable pain – a dreaded diagnosis, worry over a child's poor life-choices, turmoil in your relationships, or fear over how on earth your life can proceed after experiencing a grave loss. In these times, we can come to this place and we can sit with our community – and even when the tears flow and the words of the hymns catch in our throats, somehow being together in this room brings us comfort and hope.

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.focol.org/fvuuf/reference/Fox\\_Valley\\_UU\\_Fellowship\\_HCT.pdf](http://www.focol.org/fvuuf/reference/Fox_Valley_UU_Fellowship_HCT.pdf)

And on the OTHER side of life - when our infants arrive or promotions are bestowed or health is regained, the palpable joy fills the room.

It is for all these reasons that we come home to this place each week. This sharing of stories and lives, of visions and dreams. This is the work of deepening our spiritual lives, of making the space for true transformation. Providing a safe cushion of support and encouragement for one another and taking our message of love and hope out into the community as well. May we all continue to strive together to safeguard and nurture, to expand and deepen this sense of community we are so fortunate to share. May we stay mindful that it takes our hearts and our hands, our time and our dollars to further the vision of being an impetus for good in our community – a place of deep commitment where values and actions matter.

Each week, in a sense, we return home here - and each week we arrive at some place new – because WE are new. We enter a space of new people, with new experiences, new stories to share. T.S. Eliot famously describes this phenomenon: “We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time<sup>2</sup>.” For me, I have definitely returned home – and I have arrived at a place I have never been before.

---

<sup>2</sup> *We Shall Not Cease*, T. S. Eliot