

**“Walking Together”**  
**A sermon by Revs. Wayne Arnason & Kathleen Rolenz**  
**Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**Appleton, Wisconsin**  
**www.fvuuf.org**

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**Time for all Ages** included a reading from “O, The Places You’ll Go” by Dr. Seuss

**Reading from An Ancient Source** from the book of Amos 3:3

*The book of Amos is from the minor prophets of the Hebrew Bible. Amos is a farmer who sees himself torn between the North and South Kingdoms. He is challenging the people of both kingdoms to re-evaluate their relationship with one another and with their God. To do this, he asks a series of rhetorical questions.*

Will a lion roar in the forest, when he has no prey?  
Will a young lion cry out of his den, if he has caught nothing?  
Will a bird fall into a snare on the earth, where there is no trap for it?  
Will a snare spring up from the earth, if it has caught nothing at all?  
Can two walk together except they be agreed?

**Reading from a Modern Source**

There’s a thread you follow. It goes among  
things that change. But it doesn’t change.  
People wonder about what you are pursuing.  
You have to explain about the thread.  
But it is hard for others to see.  
While you hold it you can’t get lost.  
Tragedies happen; people get hurt  
or die; and you suffer and get old.  
Nothing you do can stop time’s unfolding.  
You don’t ever let go of the thread.

*By William Stafford, from The Way It Is, 1998*

The sermon begins with Wayne and Kathleen pantomiming driving a car together and having a conversation.

Wayne: We had a great vacation in Manitoba didn't we?

Kathleen: I always love visiting your family in Gimli on Lake Winnipeg. It kind of reminds me of Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon, the town that time forgot.

Wayne: Except during the Icelandic Festival of course, when our little town turns into a mad house. I'm so glad you enjoy and support my reconnecting with my Icelandic heritage up there year after year. You're even getting good at pronouncing *Islendingadagurinn!*

Kathleen: *Islendingadagurinn!* Well, vacation's behind us now. How many more hours to Appleton?

Wayne: Oh, about six. So, are we clear yet what we're going to talk about in the sermon this Sunday?

Kathleen: (rolls her eyes) I'm clear! I don't know what you plan to talk about!

Wayne: We talked about a lot of ideas while on holiday in Manitoba, but you never outlined them!

Kathleen: You remember the conversation we had after we had our morning coffee and sitting zazen together and after my prayer practice didn't you? Big long conversation about the quote from the book of Amos, about walking or rolling or skipping together – these two congregations and the two of us; about covenants, and core values and congregational polity?

Wayne: Sure, I remember that conversation...vaguely...that's why we agreed you were going to do the first draft.

Kathleen: Me ! You said you would do the first draft! Look, I guess we'll just have to write this when we get there because it's obvious we're not going to get much done while one of us is driving and the other doesn't remember what we talked about!

Wayne: Ok fine. (silence for a minute). Hey look, can we listen to something other than Bach? I mean, he's great and everything, but do we have to another hour of great organ preludes and fugues?

Kathleen: Fine. How about Chopin?

Wayne: I was thinking more like -- Grateful Dead, especially since I was so bummed about missing their last concerts in Chicago this summer.

Kathleen: Wayne – we listened to the Grateful Dead for the first two hours of the drive ! I like the Dead a lot, but there's only so many Boxes of Rain I can stand....

Wayne: Okay – why not listen to something we both can agree on?

Kathleen: Fine. (simultaneously with Wayne)

Kathleen: Folk! Wayne: Jazz!

**Kathleen:** Good morning Fox Valley! You've already heard how excited we are to be here, as part of this most unusual and never-before-done-in-quite-this-way ministry in the life of two great UU congregations. But I have a confession to make. When this idea first came up, although I was intrigued, I wasn't immediately excited about it, because I had a very different image in my head for what my year was going to look like. It would be our last year at West Shore, our congregation in Cleveland, so I had planned to have plenty of time to spend with the members of the congregation, and being able to do a proper goodbye – much like what I heard your now former minister, Roger Bertschausen was able to do with you.

It was going to be a stress-free year, I had told myself. I would read all the books that had piled up beside the bed; I would have endless cups of coffee with church members; I was going to go deeper into my spiritual practice and share that with church members. So, when your ministerial settlement representative, Rev. Janne Eller-Isaacs had this glint in her eye and asked us in early June “Aren't the two of you still sharing one job – that is, technically you each work half time?” I felt the familiar grab of nervousness that comes with big life changes. Everything that I thought was going to happen – and everything you thought was going to happen next year, would be different. And yet, at each step along this process, Wayne and I looked at each other and said, you know, there is something greater at work here that is pulling us along – and bringing us together. It's like the Stafford poem you heard this morning, “There's a thread you follow. It goes among things that change.” So, we began to walk slowly together, with your associate minister, Rev. Leah Hart-Landsberg, then your transitions team, your board, your administrative staff, and at each step along the way, this invisible thread seemed to appear, as if leading us out of a maze of uncertainty, to this day – Our Day, as Dr. Seuss said, when we're off to Great Places, off and away, in this new relationship we are building together.

The title for this morning's sermon comes from one line from the book of Amos. It seems like a pretty simple line "can two walk together, except they be agreed?" However, so much meaning depends on the translation, and when you start looking up translations, you find an astonishing number of versions all with slightly different meaning. The New International Version asks "Can two people walk together without agreeing on the direction?" The New American Standard version is: "Can two walk together unless they have made an appointment?" The NET Bible asks "Can two walk together without ever having met?" Since early June, the two of us and your wonderful staff and transition team and board leaders have had to ask and answer all these questions just to get us this far. Regardless of the translation you choose, the image of us walking together, and finding direction together is a good one to start us talking about this beginning.

**Wayne:** Kathleen and I have been walking together for quite a while now in both our marriage and our professional partnership -- twenty years this fall for our relationship, seventeen years for the marriage, and fifteen years for the professional partnership doing co-ministry. I suppose we ourselves are living proof that two can walk together, even if they don't agree – because there are plenty of important things about our lives and personalities and commitments where we are quite different. There's an eleven year age difference between us, and although that hasn't felt very important for a lot of our married life, it's feeling like a pretty important difference right now, because I am doing my last year of full time settled parish ministry this year and planning to formally retire at General Assembly 2016. Kathleen is planning to continue her career with new possibilities and choices abounding.

Another difference between us is our theological orientations and languages. We're obviously both committed Unitarian Universalists, but our spiritual practices and identities have

been formed by two other traditions, Buddhism for me and Christianity for her, and we each actively connect with worship and retreat opportunities within those traditions throughout the year. As you gathered from our car conversations, we have different tastes in music, in what we like to eat and drink, and how we like to spend our free time.

As you get to know us, it might be that these differences between us, differences in gender, personality, theology, and style, might be what you notice first. Nevertheless, we want you to know that we try to speak with one voice about leadership issues in the congregation. Our experience has been that it's challenging enough to keep both of us in most communication loops, and to figure out which minister is taking the lead in the various key areas of church life. We don't want the staff or the lay leaders to discover that they can't trust a decision or an initiative from one of us to truly represent us both.

**Kathleen:** If the differences between us were all we talked about, and all you knew about us, you would probably wonder how we manage to live and work together, or why we would even want to try? The question that the prophet Amos asks is a crucial one for any committed partnership: What are the things that are critical to be in agreement about, if two people are to walk together? It's not only a critical question for couples, but a critical question for any community of people who want to walk together, and it's an essential question for congregations that are part of the free church tradition.

As we speak about differences and similarities, we wanted to remind you this morning that we wanted to buy into this relationship with you during the year ahead not just representing a transitional ministry team, but also representing another congregation that wants to enter into a relationship of mutual exploration and support during the year ahead. One of the most exciting

things in considering the possibilities in the year ahead for us was the chance for these two congregations and their leaders to learn from each other at this time of transition.

As we learned more about you, we were struck first of all by the similarities between Fox Valley Fellowship and West Shore Church. We were founded in the same decade of UU congregational expansion and had a similar theological profile of founding members. We share a Midwest cultural ethos. We are similar in size and budget and governance, and yet we have each done things differently in how we choose to staff our congregations and spend our money. We have all the same challenges that UU congregations on the smaller end of large church size face and we have come up with different strategies to meet those challenges. And – perhaps the most important similarity of all – West Shore Church is one year behind you in a very similar time of transition, as we have announced that our sixteen year co-ministry will be ending next June. As we consulted with our Board President about how this opportunity had unfolded, and asked her advice about whether we should accept your invitation, she began to smile. “Kelly,” we asked, “what’s up?” She said “You don’t know this, but I’m from Appleton, WI. Those are my people.” While she did not grow up in the Fellowship, she knew the town and the spirit of the people of this town, because her formative years were spent right here in Appleton.

It was a sign! We too felt confident that we could be your transition ministers working in partnership with your associate minister and staff was because in a sense, you are our also our people ! Both Wayne and I are from the mid-west; Wayne from Manitoba, Canada and me – from Akron, Ohio. Both of us have been working in large UU congregations and know the complexities that arise when working with a larger congregational system. But you are our people too, because as Unitarian Universalists, we share some of the same understandings about how we should be in relationship with one another - grounded in the covenant or promises we

make to one another and shaped by our commitment to congregational autonomy. The thread that runs through all of this is our commitment to certain core values – ones that will help to shape our relationship as we walk together this year.

**Wayne:** In Unitarian Universalist congregations, we proudly state that we are comfortable thinking and feeling differently about important religious and spiritual questions, or even with expressing doubt that those religious and spiritual questions are very important at all. “We need not think alike to love alike” according to the legendary quote from the Transylvanian Unitarian founding minister Francis David. It’s been intriguing to me, however, how difficult that can be to live out when the disagreements are about issues we deeply care about. I had a revelation about my own limitations about walking together in disagreement during my long settled ministry in our congregation in Charlottesville, Virginia. I made a close friend during that ministry. His family had been involved in the church, and he had grown up in the church, but wasn’t presently involved himself. This made it easier for us to be friends. So we shared a lot of common interests, and I presumed, a lot of core values. One of the social justice issues that I got involved with during my years in Virginia was opposition to the death penalty. I was talking with my friend about one day about an Easter season public witness that I was helping to organize against a series of executions that were about to take place. He replied that he was in favor of capital punishment and that he hoped that the executions would be going ahead. For a few moments, I was stunned and speechless. It had never crossed my mind that my friend might be in favor of capital punishment. We shared so many common values and experiences, as well as our UU upbringing, that it seemed inconceivable to me that he could have reached a different conclusion than I had on this important social issue. We began to talk about what we each believed, and I became more and more saddened and frustrated by the conversation. How could my friend

possibly not see this issue the same way I did. But, he didn't....He had answers for all my arguments, or he simply replied that he placed more weight on different feelings and facts in this debate than I did. We realized after a while that neither of us were going to change our opinions and we moved on to other things. But the whole experience left me unsettled, and even wondering whether we could walk together in friendship much farther.

**Kathleen:** Perhaps you have had a similar experience in relationships that are important to you, in a marriage or with family members or with friends or maybe within the community of this fellowship. What is it that holds these relationships together when your assumptions about the ties that bind prove to be wrong? The metaphor in William Stafford's poem is a powerful one in this regard. For him, the tie that binds is no more than a thread. "There's a thread you follow", he says. "It goes among things that change. But it doesn't change." What's that thread? In both a marriage and in a religious community like this one, it's the promises that you make to each other, promises that may seem as slender and fine as a thread, but in the end, are stronger than chains or steel beams of opinion when the integrity of the fabric of our lives is at stake.

We call the promises we make by different names. When we officiate at weddings, we ask the couples if they are ready to speak their Vows. Family members use the metaphor of blood to represent the commitment they feel to each other. In a congregation, the word we use frequently to talk about the promises we make to each other is "covenant". This time of transition for the Fox Valley Fellowship will be one where we all have to keep coming back to the meaning and nature of our covenants, both our historic covenants within the congregational church tradition, and the living covenants that you all have made that embody that covenantal tradition for this fellowship in this time. We have been so impressed to learn about the work of the Healthy Congregation team in your Fellowship, and the work you have all done Together in



Community to create a covenant you call “principles for a healthy congregation.” This covenant of principles describes the ways that – and here I quote – “the members of the Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship will walk together as a diverse community bonded by love.

The promises we make have to be grounded in the reality of change as the only permanent thing about the common life we share. The covenants we make are no guarantee that the people who make them will always stay the same. Instead a covenant is always made recognizing that they will not! The thread of covenant must be supple enough to bend when the fabric of our lives is turned inside out.

**Wayne:** When people stick with any religious community long enough, we always find that changes and differences within the congregation can be more challenging at some times than others. This is a particularly unique time in the history of this Fellowship. You had a history prior to calling Roger Bertschausen , but all that you went through together makes this first year after his departure more like a time after losing a founding minister, rather than a typical time of transition. There are some unique challenges when you transition away from a founding minister. It’s a strange combination of “everything’s still the same” and “everything’s different.” All but one of the same familiar staff members are still here -- Rev. Leah and Siri and Jay and Marie, just to name a few – people who know you and who are managing the day to day and week to week operation of the fellowship. You also know that you’re not stuck with us. Our covenant with you is time-bound – so what’s going to be so different?

Well, the interesting thing is it could be anything. Something about how we do Sunday Services here at the fellowship that you’ve never thought much about before starts to get under your skin. It’s irritating in a way that surprises you. A person you see and maybe work with quite often in the fellowship who you’ve always gotten along with well has a different opinion about a

congregational issue that you care about and you start brooding about that. A committee that's always been easy to recruit for all of a sudden is a struggle to find volunteers to staff. A task you have volunteered to do at the fellowship that was always fun and easy starts to feel like work.

It's amazing how many things can start to feel different when just one part of a congregational system changes – and because everything we do here at this fellowship is voluntary – nobody makes you do it – you might even find yourself asking when things get annoying – do I want to keep walking together with these people?

Here's where it becomes important to know yourself, and who you are in relation to your own core values and those of this fellowship. In any long term committed relationship, whether it's in a marriage, a family, a friendship, or a congregation, we will all go through times when we feel disconnected, and when we rely on the long term perspective implied by the covenants we have made. Covenant is a kind of safety net for traversing the high wire of times of transition when the familiar no longer seems satisfying or the unfamiliar is not what you expected. Even when members of a congregation find themselves in conflict about some pretty important issues, this safety net of covenant represents one of the most important core values that we affirm, respect for the worth and dignity of each person, even when personal relationships might be strained by disagreements or difficult behavior.

**Kathleen:** After spending most of our lives in Unitarian Universalism, it continues to be frustrating thing to try to explain how the thread of covenant has replaced the corral of creed when we get casual inquiries about UU'ism from acquaintances or airline seat companions. William Stafford says it well: "People wonder about what you are pursuing. You have to explain about the thread. But it is hard for others to see."

As much as we have tried to come up with good summaries of our principles and purposes that we can memorize or hand out on cards, we can appear like the lion in the passage from Amos who roars but who has caught nothing of substance. We can snap shut the steel trap of our bright intellects on some important values and ideas, but in the end, what have we caught? Will the deepest questions of our existence be captured by any creed? We say no, and refuse to confine ourselves in that way. Instead, we pledge each other our mutual support, our honest opinion, our deepest compassion, and our passionate witness to make real all the core values that are represented by this fellowship's mission and the principles and purposes of Unitarian Universalism. One of the simplest summaries of our core values that is sometimes used in our church school covenants that children can memorize refers to open minds, open hearts and open hands. That's as good a summary as any of three core values of liberal religion that will also be guiding us in the year ahead.

Let's declare 2015-2016 as the year of the open mind! Because neither one of us – neither West Shore or Fox Valley or your minister or us have done this before! It will be tempting to keep saying to one another “well, at West Shore or Fox Valley we do it this way” Throughout the course of this year, both of our congregations will be re-examining “the way we've always done it” through the lens of transition. It will be important for us to look at every major (and sometimes minor) decision with beginner's mind; to ask open questions of curiosity; to seek to understand rather than insist first on being understood.

Let's declare 2015-2016 as the year of the open heart! Religious community is one of the places where we get to practice what it means to be fully human, and that is both hard work and heart work. It's heart work because it requires us to assume good intentions and to be patient with one another and with this time of transition, knowing how difficult change can be. It's heart

work because it requires us to insist on direct communication, especially when the issue is an emotional one. If you've got a problem with something we do or say, don't let it fester. Let's talk about it. We expect that part of our ministry with you will be listening; to your joys; your concerns; and your hopes for the future. And just a head's up – Wayne and I have enough trouble trying to keep up with our daily communication between ourselves; so that means we won't be trying to carry information for the other one, or for Leah for that matter. Open and direct communication characterizes the year of the open heart.

Finally, let's declare 2015-2016 the year of open hands. We've been so impressed with the deep connections of both direct service and social justice work that Fox Valley has done throughout Roger's tenure. Your role as leaders in this community should and must continue. As leaders who are physically present for two weeks out of the month, it's unlikely that we will be able to step into these roles that a full time minister on the ground could, but we're eager to learn from you about most important places to connect and be supportive of long term commitments in the wider community.

**Wayne:** There will be challenges ahead for all of us to be sure. You are uncertain about when or who your next settled minister shall be. We are uncertain about where we will land after leaving West Shore. We are all in a time of transition and change. What can we count on? What can we hold onto? Again, we must cycle back to Stafford's poem, written just a few months before he died. He reminds us that this thread you follow will go among things that change – but it doesn't change. "While you hold it", says Stafford - "you can't get lost."

The thread we hold onto during times of transition are the promises and core values and relationships that shape and guide us. They include our commitment to being open to what is new and emerging, even when it frightens or annoys us; a willingness to be vulnerable and

honest; and a desire to serve even when uncertain about the results. Throughout our time together, tragedies may happen; people may get hurt, some will die, some will suffer, all of us will get one year older. “Nothing you can do can stop time’s unfolding,” Safford says, but, “you don’t ever let go of the thread.”

Kathleen: My friends, the journey begins! Let’s walk together! Will we succeed? Yes we will, we will indeed! So be your name Burnbaum or Bixby or Bray, or Mordecai Ali Van Allen O’Shea, we’re off to Great Places ! Today is our Day! Our mountain is waiting – let’s get on our way!

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