

Closing Worship Service
Midsize Church Conference
Phoenix, Arizona March 2006

Co-Officiants:

Rev. Carolyn Patierno (All Souls UU Church in New London, Connecticut) and
Rev. Vail Weller (Unitarian Universalists of San Mateo, California)

Opening words by Vail Weller

It is Sunday morning.
We have come together from around the country
To learn, to stretch, to grow, to celebrate.
Now, it is Sunday morning, the time when we gather in our beloved home congregations for worship.

Today, we create a new congregation, a beautiful expression of humanity
That will exist in this form only once.
Our presence makes this space sacred.

Let us now center ourselves on our highest aspirations,
as we come together to raise our voices in song,
to listen to the still small voice within,
to express gratitude for the abundance that fills our lives,
and to light the fire of commitment.

Come, let us worship together.

Chalice Lighting (in unison) by Carolyn Patierno
Lynn Ewing and Caryl Hughan, chalice lighters

Together, the energy we harbor kindles this flame.
May our light illuminate and inspire a bright future,
A future created by hands held by our companions in the work.
This we know: when in each other's company, the race is not run in vain.

Singing Together "Guide My Feet"

Welcome and Time of Greeting - Carolyn

Meditation

As we deepen into a time of shared meditation, I invite you to close your eyes and turn within. Feel your body in this place. Feel your feet on the earth, our shared home. Notice the presence of others in this space, and the great breathing that we are all a part of. We will enjoy shared silence, a musical meditation, and a poetic reflection. Let us now deepen into mystery and enter into a time of peace.

Silence

Musical Meditation

Poetic Meditation "Epithalamion" by Penelope Duckworth

"Every man contemplates an angel in his future self." Ralph Waldo Emerson

There is an angel in each future.
We spend years searching for one
who will unfurl that becoming.

Van Gogh saw the church
with a child's eye,
the air all whirring wings in circles,
everything alive,
colors intensifying
then receding.
The shapes themselves
lifting, changing.
The steeple spirals up toward heaven.
The sky, deep and vivid
invites itself into the windows.
Two footpaths come around the church,
join and widen in the sunlight.

We look up one day and see,
running toward us
with arms out
(or are they wings),
a whole body saying
bounty,
blessing,
yes.

Singing Together "We Give Thanks"

Dreams of the Congregation

These days together have been precious. Carolyn and I have asked some of you to reflect upon the fire of commitment that burns within. The "reading" this morning comes from the responses conference participants gave when we asked them to read these lyrics from the hymn "The Fire of Commitment":

*When the fire of commitment sets our mind and soul ablaze
When our hunger and our passion meet to call us on our way
When we live with deep assurance of the flame that burns within
Then our promise finds fulfillment and our future can begin.*

We then asked, what is your vision for the present and future of Unitarian Universalism?

(A reading of the responses followed.)

Singing Together “The Fire of Commitment”

A Sermon in Dialogue Form

Reflection The Rev. Vail Weller

Not very long ago, I was at a birthday party for my friend Sam who was turning four. I was visiting with the other adults, and my husband was too. As my husband and one of the moms chatted, it came up (as it somehow does) that I am a UU minister. She was intrigued. “In fact,” she said, “I was just on craigslist (an internet site) literally the other day. I just posted the fact that I’m looking for an open-minded, progressive religion which is family friendly, and open to truths from the world’s religions. I’m looking for a justice-seeking church which is welcoming to my GLBT friends and that offers intergenerational community for those of us far away from our extended families.” She continued, “I didn’t receive any responses to my query except for the large number of people who wrote to me and said, ‘When you find such a church, let me know! I am looking for the same thing!’”

As you might guess, I went home from the birthday party and decided to look on craigslist myself. Wouldn’t you know, there was yet another posting looking for a spiritual community just like yours – just like ours in San Mateo, California.

Reflection The Rev. Carolyn Patierno:

Across the continent from San Mateo, CA, 3000 miles from Vail and the congregation she serves lives All Souls UU Congregation, the congregation I serve in New London, CT. Besides All Souls, there are six faith communities in this small New England city’s downtown – two Baptist, one Catholic, two Congregationalist and one Episcopalian. I consider as good friends the priest and ministers of five of these congregations. Each are committed to the congregations they serve and to the well being of our neighborhood, city, and wider world. The members of these congregations are lovely, faithful people. And yet, with the exception of the Catholic church, each is struggling with diminishing membership. Not so at All Souls where we are enjoying growth and vitality. Our neighbors – both clergy and laity - frequently ask, “What are you doing up there?” One ironic and fabulous proposition came from two elders from one of the Congregationalist churches who suggested to me that All Souls is growing because – and I quote – “You’ve gotten yourselves one of those gay ministers. Heck, should get ourselves one, too.”

So, apparently, there’s the long sought after key to growth – get yourselves one of those gay ministers.

At All Souls we trace the beginning of our increase back to that cataclysmic time directly following the September 11th attacks. Honestly, I thought that the many newcomers who found their way to us would stay only until they felt less freaked out, heartbroken and/or depressed – that we would serve as a temporary safe port. In the meantime, we did some things to accommodate our dramatically increased

Sunday numbers, most of them along the lines of buying and making more coffee. It was a simple start. In the years since, we've had some good instincts that have led to more changes in the way we attract and welcome newcomers. All these changes are well and good and I do believe that they are making a difference. But the more I contemplated the question, "What are you doing up there at All Souls?" the more I landed on something altogether different. I landed on this: *Our time has come.*

Reflection The Rev. Vail Weller

I believe that the world longs for our expression of religion. Certainly our society does. In these times, people are not looking for an escape *from* religion, they are looking for an honest-to-goodness spiritual community – a place to center again and again on their highest ideals, to religiously educate their children, to grow in wisdom, spirituality, and stewardship, and to actually make a difference in the world. (The vision I am describing here this morning is also the vision we all just heard of yours, the gathered congregation, when Carolyn and I share your dreams a moment ago.)

Unitarian Universalism is the quintessential postmodern faith, for we are both historically-rooted and non-creedal. We affirm wisdom from the traditions of the world, encourage a variety of personal spiritual practices, and also join together in pursuit of the creation of the beloved community and the pursuit of justice here, on this earth, in this time. We are grounded in the past, yet evolve in amazing and refreshing ways.

I am experiencing a real renaissance sweeping our movement. I am feeling folks in my congregation, cluster, and district opening themselves to the possibility that we just might be the tradition that our culture is seeking. I feel us, together, broadening our sense of purpose, our sense of **what** we're here for, what it is that truly holds us together, and perhaps most importantly, our sense of **who** we're here to serve. I also experience us beginning to let go of some of the old habits which have been holding us back, hindering us, keeping us from risking real relevance.

Reflection The Rev. Carolyn Patierno

Yes! There is that sense that we are perched on the brink of a compelling opportunity – the place where the progressive, non-affiliated religious seeker's longing and passion meet. At that place of meeting and in the midst of this particular religious and political landscape is Unitarian Universalism's great potential. But you know what? We best not be blowin' it. I invite you to think back to our first morning together. Remember the frantic anxiety in the hall as we each attempted to write down every syllable of wisdom shared by our keynote speaker? There was the pleading to slow down the pace of the power point presentation. There was the outcry when even the pause was not quite long enough to get everything down. Until above the din rose one lone voice that asked, "I'm wondering what we're not letting go of!" The question has stuck in my mind ever since as I have wondered: In order for our movement to have this break-through experience, what do we need to let go of?" Here's what I think. I think we would have to let go of our small-ness & confront head on the root causes of our relative obscurity.

I remember reading a story about a conversation had between UU & Mormon leaders prior to the 2000 General Assembly in Salt Lake City, Utah. Commenting on the large number of seekers who visit UU

congregations each year, one Mormon leader said that if all of these (or at least many of them) were to actually join a congregation, Unitarian Universalism would be the most dangerous church in America.

I want us to be dangerous in the way this man imagined. I imagine that *he* imagined that UUism has the potential to endanger the current and overriding belief that the only valid expressions of faith are those that threaten progressive values in the so-called “cultural wars.”

And although I’m certain this next idea was not at all considered of what could be “the most dangerous church in America”, I want us to be open to the positive ways that we will be changed by our growth. As we’ve learned over the course of these three days (as if we needed reminding) change can at times feel dangerous. And so, to live into this dangerous identity, we have to let go of a few things – some of them are those that we hold dear.

Reflection

The Rev. Vail Weller

There are three images that I take home from this conference.

The first says something about what we need to let go of. It was when Sarah Bridges described her early life on a commune in Northern California. We all laughed in recognition when she spoke of their high value of consensus. Their worship of consensus, however, made it very difficult for them to make a decision. They brought in an outside consultant, and the consultant said, “I am just noticing that of the 12 adults here in this room, three have neck braces on for pinched nerves.”

The second story that has taken up residence in my heart is one that Stefan Jonasson told. Some of you may have been in the workshop this afternoon when he told us that he had been on an online chat on Unitarian Universalism when a woman posted a query about UUism. She received a variety of responses, none of which Stefan thought helpful, so he offered to send her more information. She gave him an address in Georgia, and asked him to send the information in an unmarked envelope. He did so, and they began an occasional correspondence.

She lived in a town of 1000, where the liberal end of the religious spectrum was represented by the Southern Baptists. She was a high school senior, going through a real time of questioning about her faith. She felt so alone, in fact, that she considered ending her life. As she was doing research on a project for her civics class on the United Nations, she **happened across** the definition of Unitarian Universalism in the dictionary. For the first time she felt that she was not alone.

Stefan had told this story many, many times, and often people would approach him and say, “That’s my story,” and what they meant, he knew, was that this story felt like their story. But the day did come, when a woman with her child approached him, and said, “That’s my story. That’s me.” And it took him a few moments to realize that indeed it was her. They embraced, and she thanked him for saving her life.

The last story that really got to me was one Bill Sinkford told during our opening worship. You’ll remember he received a letter from an inmate on Death Row, wanting to make connection with this new faith he had learned about. “I need a religion,” he said in his letter, and Bill and Jane Rzepka and a minister local to the prison reached out their hands to this person longing for our message. “I am beginning to think you actually believe those principles you espouse,” the inmate wrote.

People are **longing** for our religious message. I feel that we are actually harming the fabric of society by not helping those people to easily learn that we exist – in fact, this is the one time I feel the word “sin” applies in our liberal religious context. People are longing for our particular expression of faith. They are casting out emails into the ether, writing letters from prison, sitting in small towns thinking there is no hope, wandering around our bustling metropolitan areas feeling alone in their values, wishing with all their hearts that communities such as ours might actually be possible. Praying. Searching. Longing.

Reflection The Rev. Carolyn Patierno

We come to these conferences to learn. Not the least of what we learn is that we are not alone. It is a message that the first time visitor yearns for. What they soon learn is what we have known: that there IS an open-minded, justice seeking, family friendly etc. etc. etc. religion, and *we are it*. Today we will begin our journeys home, returning to our congregations with the deep assurance of the flame that burns within our hearts and within our movement. But we must let go and fling open our doors to make happen our bright ... and dangerous ... future.

Amen!

Offering/Offertory

We are proud to be taking the offering this morning in support of the Pacific Southwest District's Chalice Lighter Program. Our giving this morning will allow our message to grow in this district which has hosted us for this time of learning and transformation. I encourage you to be as generous as your heart will allow!

Singing Together “Blue Boat Home”

Benediction by Vail Weller

As we sail off now on our way home,
May the Spirit of life and love and all things holy go with us.

May we take with us
The flame that burns within,
The memory of these hands we're holding, and
The lifeline we may offer each other
And might yet offer the world!

Postlude