

“What Might We Yet Be?”

A Sermon by the Rev. Terry Sims
Unitarian Universalist Church, Surprise, Arizona
April 10, 2011

Reading: “Stop Being So Religious” by Hafiz¹

What do sad people have in common?

It seems they have all built a shrine to the past

And often go there and do a strange wail and worship.

What is the beginning of Happiness?

It is to stop being so religious

Like that.

Responsive Reading: #444 “This House” by the Rev. Kenneth L. Patton

This house is for the ingathering of nature and human nature.

It is a house of friendships, a haven in trouble, an open room for the encouragement of our struggle.

It is a house of freedom, guarding the dignity and worth of every person.

It offers a platform for the free voice, for declaring, both in times of security and danger, the full and undivided conflict of opinion.

It is a house of truth-seeking, where scientists can encourage devotion to their quest, where mystics can abide in a community of searchers.

It is a house of art, adorning its celebrations with melodies and handiworks.

It is a house of prophecy, outrunning times past and times present in visions of growth and progress.

This house is a cradle for our dreams, the workshop of our common endeavor.

¹ The Gift, Poems by Hafiz, the Great Sufi Master, Translations by Daniel Ladinsky, Penguin Compass, 1999, 119.

Sermon: As you know, I have been your half-time minister now for five years, also continuing to work half time as a lawyer. I enjoy both kinds of work. And I had planned to continue splitting my time between the firm and the church. Walt is retiring after the next church year, that is, as of September 1, 2012. I believe that will be 16 years he has served this church, and 38 years in UU ministry. So at the last annual congregational meeting and at other times, I told you that when Walt retires, I would like to continue as your half-time minister and we would search for a full-time minister.

Since then, I have done a lot of soul-searching about the church's needs and mine. I have had ongoing conversations with Walt, Patty, and the Board. And I have looked carefully at the church's financial condition. After all of that, I have made a decision that has been long in coming. It is a change from what I had planned and told you earlier. Instead of continuing as your half-time minister, I would be very excited and pleased to serve this church as its full-time minister.

In light of that new plan, I offer this morning my vision of what we might yet be. And I want to know your visions for the church's future. That is the purpose of our congregational conversation this morning; to share our visions with each other. It will be the start of an ongoing conversation that will occur over the next year in various ways. I hope that our individual dreams will capture each other's imagination. Because what we want and need, of course, is a widely shared vision.

To know where we are going, I think it helps to think about where we are now and what got us here. So first, I want to remember with gratitude what some of you here, and some of those now gone, have given the rest of us. Before there was a UU congregation in the Northwest Valley, people had a vision that they could start one. I

find that remarkable; starting a church, or anything, from scratch, from just an idea. There was no guaranty that the tiny church that started then would thrive, or even survive. But it has done both.

We have not always been in this beautiful building in Surprise. Again, the significant leaps that have moved this church forward started with someone's idea, a church member like you and me. Many of those leaps have happened during Walt's leadership and with his support. We have much reason to thank him. I could not have been your first intern, but for Walt's idea that this church ought to become a teaching church. The lay leaders and this congregation embraced that idea, took a chance, and provided me a safe place to learn how to be a minister.

There was a time when we did not have a music director on staff; when music was not as important a part of our church life as it has become. We have not always been a church community in which LGBT people were explicitly welcomed. Some members thought we didn't need to be an **explicitly** welcoming congregation; LGBT people were already welcome along with everyone else, weren't they? But others, including Walt, believed that we needed to say it, to **invite** LGBT people specifically to join our church. They have, and we are so much richer for it.

There was a time when we had no children who attended regularly and had no religious education for them. I am abidingly grateful to Judith Linden, Judy Biancani, Russ and Iris Kissir for starting our RE program from nothing. For several years, they prepared lessons and showed up, not knowing whether we would have kids to teach. And sometimes we didn't. But they persevered. They did not give up, because they

believed that having a religious education program at our church was critical. And now it is.

We moved from being a family-sized pastoral church to being a mid-sized program church. And we did it without losing the family closeness. We get more done and in better ways now. The Board decides policy and the Committee Chairs and Council carry out their missions in accordance with those policies.

We did not always do a radio program. We did not always tutor adult students trying to learn English, or support Eve's Place, or the Westside Food Bank. But members like you and I had those dreams and worked to make them reality.

Each of those steps was significant in moving forward to become the church we are now. Each step required faith in ourselves and maybe in chance, or, for some of us perhaps, a higher power. Each required us to take risks, to try something new. Each step moved us forward. But we should keep in mind that not everyone agreed it would at the time.

I haven't told you this about myself before. It's embarrassing. When I was ready for kindergarten, I didn't want to go to school. That's an understatement. I **really** didn't want to go to school. We lived within walking distance of our elementary school. My mother took me the first day. I remember crying in the hallway outside the kindergarten room, begging my mother to take me back home. The kindergarten teacher, Mella Mae Simpson, told Mother firmly that the best thing she could do was to leave and let Miss Simpson handle the situation. Much later, Mother told me that Miss Simpson reassured her that I would be fine, that she'd taught hundreds of children, and that I was not the

first to be upset about coming to school the first time. I'd get used to it by the end of the first week and then would look forward to coming to school.

Well, apparently I was an extreme case. I did **not** get used to it, at least not with the alacrity that some do. I did not look forward to going to school, not for the whole first year. My sisters, Ronda and Vicki, were in 5th grade and 3rd grade, respectively. One on each side, they had to drag me to school by the arms, morning after morning. This went on for the whole first year of my public school career. Then it continued at least periodically when I went to first grade. As I say, it's embarrassing!

I wish I could go back and figure out why I was so resistant. It's a mystery to me now. And yet I recognize some things in my current self that were more pronounced in childhood. I know that I was not a confident child. I was a perfectionist from an early age, afraid of making mistakes. My guess is that I was afraid to leave my home, what I knew, where I was comfortable. I suspect I was afraid to try something new.

So, I am not a big risk-taker. And yet, as I look back on my life, there is a common theme that runs through everything I'm significantly proud of having done. All those things were challenges and required taking calculated risks; at least the risk of failure, which I felt keenly. Eventually leaving home to go to school, then college, then law school. Becoming a lawyer and then law clerk to a federal judge. Going to Europe alone. Indeed, earlier, even going to summer camp alone! Going to seminary and becoming a minister, when I believed that meant retirement from practicing law permanently. Standing up for something I felt was right, but that I knew other people did not approve of. First-time meetings that grew into loving relationships. Even musical

performances. All were challenges and involved at least the risk that I would fail to accomplish what I wanted to.

I would ask you to think about your life, the things you are most proud of having achieved. Is it also true for you that they involved a challenge, a calculated risk, a leap of faith? I heard someone say once that people **think** they want a stress-free, comfortable, and easy life. But the speaker said it turns out that what people actually want, what really makes life meaningful, are the challenges we can overcome to accomplish something worthwhile.

I want to make it clear that we are building on strengths. Strengths that made this church healthy and thriving, strengths that were bequeathed to us from those who were members of this church before us. But you and I **do** need to **build** on those strengths that others gave us. The church members who preceded us gave us **their** vision. But we need one for our time. Our predecessors gave us a trajectory, not a stopping place. This church has not come this far, with this much help and this much promise, to stop imagining what more we can be and do. There is only one way I can think of to honor our predecessors and the hard work they did to create our present church, their gift to us. It is to have our **own** vision of what we can still do, and work to make it come true.

I was talking about this sermon idea with Patty, our dear, wise ministerial intern. She said she didn't think staying the same is really an option in the long run. Over time, living things either grow or decline. We **like** to think there is a balance. A perfect equilibrium, that will let everything stay the same, the way we know we like it, what we're comfortable with. But it's not true. Not for living things, and not for institutions.

We're not ready for this church to decline. And it gives no sign of doing that. But that is because this church has been willing, even eager, to change, to grow, to live in new ways.

Visions are often general, short on specifics. But I have some particular dreams that I want to share with you this morning.

I dream of worship services that inspire us in many ways – that are feasts for minds, spirits, ears, and eyes. Recently I attended the “Excellence in Ministry” conference, a gathering of 400 UU ministers. The two music leaders from All Souls Tulsa energized us with lively music that was a fully integrated part of the entire service. At our church, I would like to hear a broad range of instrumental music and at least a 60-voice choir. I'd like us to have an occasional orchestra and sometimes do large sacred musical works well, classical and contemporary. I would like to enhance our worship services beyond words and music with visual images. I'd like to have the ability to use movie clips, or still photographs, to highlight what I'm preaching about. I want our worship services to be multiethnic and multicultural, to reflect more diversity among members than we have now.

I want us to be a church that is not just a Sunday-morning add-on to a family's already busy schedule. A church that is, instead, a fun, active, learning center for family life, as well as the center of family worship. At the end of our Gay Nineties party this past Friday night, Ann Winsor, one of our honorees, came up to me. She asked me how our church could appeal to teenagers and their families. I think that is a wonderful, challenging question. I have some ideas, but we will all need each other's help to be a place teenagers want to come and spend time.

I see our church of the future having a paid RE director on staff; a new RE building; elementary, junior-high, and senior-high groups; sending kids to Camp de Benneville Pines and on relief missions. I want us to teach our children the “Our Whole Lives” UUA/UCC curriculum. That way, our kids will learn at our church about their sexuality openly, responsibly, and joyfully. We offer wonderful opportunities for adult religious education now. I’d like to see even more.

One of the things we do best is various social activities; the Annual Congregational Meeting, the Gay Nineties parties, the Annual Auction, the “Coffeehouse,” the “Evening of Memories,” RE breakfasts for children and families. We’ve been on an upward trend this year for social gatherings and I’d like to see that continue. I also envision more people becoming involved in small Discovery Circles. They offer the chance to get to know each other on a deep level and/or pursue shared interests.

I see our church of the future as a cultural center; an oasis with a regular, varied concert series. This is the path our dear Jim Flom started us on. It’s the path that Ruth and Rick Flom continued with the excellent Jim Flom Memorial Concert this year. I want our church to be known, as some churches are, as places one expects to find excellent music and visual arts presented to the public.

I want us to be a church that more non-UU’s know as an informed beacon of reason, compassion, and passionate social action; a fearless leader in doing the right thing. I want us to lead in social justice projects like No More Deaths, immigration and prison reform, human rights, and non-violent ways of dealing with conflicts. I’d like to see us involved in direct help activities, too: serving homeless shelters; programs to

combat addiction; to protect children. When the media need an informed, religiously liberal perspective, I want them to have our church's number on speed dial.

And yes, I see us as a bigger church. I don't have a number, because I don't want us to anticipate where we'll stop. And I don't want us to be bigger just for the sake of growth itself. But if we really believe that we have a saving message, as I do, it seems to me we have a responsibility to share it with more people. They need it just like we did when we found it. I'm ready for some UU evangelism! And a bigger church can simply do more things. It has the resources to do more outreach, to be involved in more social justice actions, to produce more cultural programs, to teach more kids. And with that growth, I don't want to give up any of the closeness we feel for each other now. I just see us expanding those friendships, as I want to expand so many good things this church already does.

There is always tension between being as we are now and becoming what we aspire to be in the future. It is easier to keep things as they are, especially when we are doing well. But eventually that leads to decline. I don't want this church to be like I was going to kindergarten. I don't want us to be so afraid of making mistakes and untrusting of ourselves that we won't try something new. Because staying the same for too long, or trying to, robs us of the opportunity to be anything more.

We will become the vision we can imagine. May we love our church as it is enough to risk allowing it to become even more. And may we trust ourselves and each other to take those leaps of faith. When we look back from some point in the future, that may be what we will feel most proud of. Amen.