

# **IT'S AN EXCITING TIME**

**April 14, 2013**

It is an exciting time here in the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan. Change is always exciting, and you who are part of this congregation have been thrust into the midst of it. I recognize that not all of you are members here. This sermon, more than most, is directed specifically to the change in worship and ministerial leadership that is being navigated by our group at this time. It will bring about a significant change in the congregation.

However, the elements of both challenge and opportunity that exist in this change are common to many if not most changes we all face in our lives. I hope that those of you who are visiting or new will find value in the issues we address together now.

Already the leadership of UUFCM is working overtime to secure you the best minister they can find to lead you next year. They have done a lot of work, and you have selected a Team to help the process. It is all very exciting. Some people have called the UUA—that mythical beast housed in Boston—to find the answers to questions.

You will be, if not already are, on a first name basis with Department heads in our national office. You are learning firsthand that they exist to serve you, and are happy to do so.

Change – it is a comin'. And it is exciting. And I can't help but remember my late husband, John Kratochvil, he of the dry wit, who commented in a similar situation: *The thing about change is; things just aren't the same afterwards.*

He's right, of course. Things won't be the same after June 30, 2013. Dawn Daniels, who has served you superbly for these last five years as Worship Director,

will move to Richmond, Indiana to attend the Earlham School of Religion. And I am going to try full-time retirement. I think it may take this time. We are both moving on to the next stage of our lives; thus precipitating the change that will bring you to the next stage of yours.

Let me assure you that you have excellent board leadership at this time of transition. It was only a month ago Dawn made her decision, and the board was, of course, stunned and distressed even though they supported her decision, and then quickly rose to the challenge. They already knew how to find information from the UUA website,

and scoured it for every iota they could find. They discussed the pros and cons of various forms of ministry, and how it could be funded. They stepped forth bravely and decided to seek a  $\frac{3}{4}$  time minister.

AND THEN an angel emerged. An anonymous angel added sufficient funds to pay for full-time ministry. Let me just say that Keith Kron, who manages transitions for the UUA, is most impressed with this congregation and its leaders. “Ya gotta love ‘em,” he said. “I do,” I said. (And told him he needed to tell the interim ministers in search what a great congregation you are...)

You have come a long way in a short length of time. In the time I have served you, since 2007, you have purchased this beautiful church building, and paid for it without needing a mortgage. You have learned that having a high quality worship service is a top priority. You have become a Welcoming Congregation. You are interacting more in the community. You have learned to welcome new people with more enthusiasm. You have addressed and discussed matters of faith and morality and ethics in classes as well as worship services. You have hired a Director of Religious Education for Children,

thus demonstrating that the littlest ones among us are also deserving of the best we can offer. You have become that gem among small congregations: a group that demonstrates love and commitment, is willing to invest in the future, has some spiritual depth, and is poised to grow.

Change is already happening, as you envision a future together that does not look exactly like the present.

Change IS, however, a form of chaos—which is, you will remember, paired with opportunity. The next few years will be exciting as your interim minister helps you address how best to grow in depth,

organically and institutionally, as well as numerically. He or she will strive to elicit the best from you. You may feel a little uncertain at first; it may be difficult to find volunteers to replace all of the tasks Dawn took on that were not part of her Worship Director portfolio; however, you will grow as you meet these challenges.

The opportunity side of chaos beckons you forward. You can grow and expand your reach and influence. You can deepen further your connection with the world, the universe, and the humans who speak its praise.

I encourage you to deepen your connection with other Unitarian Universalists in our neighborhood of Michigan, and the larger association. They are really great folks, and you can learn from each other.

I am not trying to imply that it will be easy. Not so. However, I believe that you have the strength, skills and determination to meet this challenge. I will be watching from a distance to admire your progress.

Although change is entering your lives, remember please that at your core, you are still the same congregation that was gathered only about 15 years ago.

Your DNA is that of risk-takers, brave people who were willing to work to establish a liberal religious faith community here in the heart of Michigan. You knew not only that you needed this congregation, but that the people and community of Mount Pleasant did also. You were willing to listen to and work with your founding minister, the Rev. Bob Franke to bring this into being. The organizers are still here, the first presidents are still here, the first religious education teachers are still here. And, this is the critical point, even if they were not, the wisdom and courage and determination they brought to this group would be here, for it is now in your DNA.

When this transition is completed, when interim ministers have done their work, when you have chosen a new minister to lead you, when that minister is installed and working, you will still be the same—and yet not-same. Change makes a difference, but the core of each person, and the core of every group remains to provide stability.

I like the poem by Patrick Murfin that we read earlier, *We Build Temples in the Heart*.

Instead of stone and brick, instead of columns and minarets, he says, ...

*... here we build temples in our hearts.*

*Side by side we gather.*

Together, ....

*We mix the mortar of the scattered dust  
of the Holy of Holies  
with the sacred water  
of the Ganges,*

...and so forth. We draw from many sources, including the ancient pagans symbolized by ...

*rough hewn Stonehenge slabs,*  
and of course we  
*plumb Doric columns for strength of reason,*  
*square them with stern Protestant  
planks,*

*and illuminate all with Chartres' jeweled windows*

*and the brilliant lamps of science.*

*Yes, here we build temples in our hearts,*

*Side by side we come,*

*scavenging the ages for wisdom*

*cobbling together as best we may*

*the stones of a thousand altars, leveling with doubt,*

*framing with skepticism,*

*measuring by logic,*

*sinking firm foundations in the earth*

*as we reach for the heavens.*

This is what we do. This is what you have been doing. And you are strong, and you have the foundations, and you have learned to work, side by side to build this *Temple of the Heart*, on this sacred ground.

*Here we build temples in our hearts—*

*a temple for each heart,*

*a village of temples,*

*some shading another,*

*connected by well-worn paths,*

*built alike on sacred ground.*

The core of the group remains, and will remain,

enriched and healthy from the work and play and worship and loving we have done together. And, although Dawn and I are leaving, part of us will also remain. Dawn's loving heart will always be a part of your DNA. My previous experience as minister and association leader enabled me to guide (hopefully gently) your lay leaders into better methods of governance and organization.

Now you will have new clergy leaders. Someone else will come to help you develop to your fullest potential. Most of you will probably love him or her. Some of you may not.

They will leave some of their wisdom and love and courage in your congregation. And you will give them some of your enthusiasm and love and willingness to risk change and growth to take with them when they leave. The congregation will be the same and yet not-same.

David Blanchard's story of *The Vase* can also inform us as we navigate this transition. The apartment owner had been comfortable in his shrine to his former lover, even though the lover had left him. He tended his lovely treasures and treasured his memories. I picture him as gently melancholy.

When his new roommate broke the vase, it was a shock, surely unwanted and painful. However, the shock seemed to wake him from his melancholy trance. He immediately took steps to dismantle the shrine. They were healthy steps, selling some treasures, giving away others. It seems clear that the shock of the broken vase moved him out of his comfortable melancholy and gave him an opportunity to build a more cheerful future.

The shock of Dawn's leaving brings with it a challenge for you—to say nothing of the challenge she has set for herself. I applaud you for supporting her in this decision.

Even as she completes her work here, you are pursuing a process of further development. An interim minister will provide you with leadership to further define who you are as a congregation, and who you want to become. He or she will help you grow, get stronger, wiser, more inclusive.... What other goals might you have? You will become a richer version of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan.

Change is going to be part of your lives for the immediate future. I am sure that you will see the opportunity present in the chaos of change, and grasp it firmly.

I look forward to seeing the new, richer version of this loving faith community.

A metaphor I often use when working with congregations is that of dance. Imagine now, the life of a congregation as dance. The members and the minister engage in graceful movements as they move through their days together. Sometimes the tempo picks up and they go swiftly through the steps; sometimes it slows, and life in the congregation moves at a stately pace. The form of the dance may change; now a graceful waltz, changing to a fast fox trot as circumstances demand. More people join the movements, and a cotillion develops.

Some people may leave, or become unable to participate. Still the dance continues.

The minister may choose to leave, but the dance continues. Another will come, learn the steps of this specific dance, and join in the graceful movements. The congregation is the heart of the dance. Ministers come and join, lending their talents and skills, and the steps become more intricate. The minister may leave, but the dance continues.

May you dance well, learning ever more intricate and beautiful steps.

May you meet the challenge of change and take advantage of the opportunity it offers. May you grow and thrive now and into the future.

Shalom and Salaam.

Blessed Be and Amen.