

**A SPIRITUAL RETROSPECTIVE**  
**A sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene**  
**Magic Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**May 17, 2015**

**Call To Worship**

The members and friends of this congregation -- you and I -- we -- are tangled up with one another -- woven together in a unique fabric called Magic Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship.  
Sometimes we understand why we are here together.  
Sometimes we don't.  
Sometimes we will talk about our being in this place together.  
Sometimes we can't.  
But we keep showing up here on a pretty regular basis.  
Because there is more of something here than anyplace else for us.  
And that something is essential to our well-being.  
That something is community -- religious community. (Adapted from *From Beginning to End: The Rituals of our Lives* by Robert Fulghum)

**Sermon**

This house is for the ingathering of nature and human nature.  
It is a house of truth-seeking...  
It is a house of art...  
It is a house of prophecy....

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

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Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going? Our song poses the basic religious questions. Unlike some faith traditions, we Unitarian Universalists do not *know* the answers to these questions—we gather in community to consider them.

I have been your quarter-time minister since last September, and will serve this congregation 1/8-time next year, continuing to preach every first

Sunday, but only being in town on the weekend. (Rather than Thursday-Sunday.)

I am preaching twice this month because I want to reflect back to you, from the pulpit, what I see. A little of “Where do we come from?” that is, on what foundation of values do we stand? A little more of “Who are we?” we happy band of Unitarian Universalist comrades in the Magic Valley. And, on this Annual Meeting Sunday, I want to shine a light on where we might be going: as a congregation and as individuals; as spiritual beings, thinking beings, justice-seeking beings. Human beings.

The jokes we tell each other about our faith often lift up our serious issues and points of view. For instance, Unitarian Universalism (or UUism) is a highly democratic religion, with as little dependence on hierarchy as possible. Col. Sherman Potter, in the old TV series *M.A.S.H.*, has a phone conversation with a fellow officer and remarks afterward, “The General answers his own phone. Must be a Unitarian.”

Or how about the fact that we believe passionately in the human capacity for good, in our interdependent connections, our responsibility for each other—in the potential within us for justice, equity and compassion?

The famous Universalist minister Hosea Ballou argued with a Methodist colleague over the issue of eternal damnation.

The Methodist asserted, “if I were a Universalist and feared not the fires of hell, I could hit you over the head, steal your horse and saddle and ride away, and I’d still go to heaven!”

Ballou answered, "If you were a Universalist, the idea would never occur to you!"

What about our fundamental theology, the platform from which we address life's questions? A theology that embraces many paths to the Holy, that finds Mystery within and beyond us, that refuses to restrict the sacred to any one person, movement or belief system.

A UU is told "I hear you deny the divinity of Christ." "That's not true!" said the UU, "We don't deny the divinity of anyone."

Living in mystery, honoring the holy in all things, respecting the individual human being, we do our best to nurture souls and help heal the world.

How are we doing?

I would like to answer that from two perspectives. The first is what we might call "institutional," or relating to the health of our Fellowship. Institutional health, as dull as the phrase might sound, is foundational to our making a difference in the community and in our own souls. The second perspective is a little slipperier, but at least as important, the spiritual health of the people within our church community.

(Parenthetically: if you are brand-new, or even relatively new, you might not find the "State of the Fellowship" part of this sermon as compelling as you would if you were more involved. I invite you to take this as a time when you find out some things about this congregation.)

Institutionally. After several years of emotional, spiritual and practical struggle, this congregation is emerging into the light. There was a sense of tiredness when I arrived last fall. As I learned the stories of difficult lay and ministerial leadership in the recent past, I realized it was no wonder things felt a little depressed. So, we just stood together, doing what needed to be done—perhaps in a minimal way, those first few months. Your Board has been stalwart, first pretty much holding things together, then going forth in vision; I appreciate those folks enormously, for keeping on keeping on. The same is true of the stalwart Worship Committee, doing the relentless work necessary that we may have our precious Sunday services, trying more and more to bring the spiritual into our lives.

Around the first of the calendar year, I started to feel energy stirring. A Board member headed a task force to find a new place to rent for our worship and religious education. (The Senior Center just did not feel right, walking through a cafeteria to search for our rooms, not to mention that the director apparently did not find us very compatible and made our lives a little difficult.) A surprising number of people volunteered for the project, and voila! we are in a much more welcoming space.

We had 25 members in September and now have 37—pretty impressive. This number includes some folks who resigned their membership during times of stress, and who have stepped back into the

community. We have a healthy gaggle of great children and youth, and I am very much enjoying getting to know them.

The Board activated the Nominating Committee, which not only came up with the two additional people needed to serve on the Board next year, but came up with a third volunteer, so we can have a much-needed Congregational Caring Committee. Reaching out to each other in joy and sorrow is a hugely-important need in a religious community, so this feels like a very big, important step.

Several members came together— during the slower fall months!—to talk about financial stewardship and make recommendations to the Board. The Board made the decision to ask all of you to increase your giving, so that I might continue to lead you in some way next year. (This year, a sizable portion of my remuneration was a Chalice Lighter grant from the Pacific Northwest District.) You responded, with energy and financial commitment. You have generously donated the second-Sunday plate offering to a community cause, so that our influence may be known in the larger world.

There is more, but now I want to reflect on what is, ultimately, more important than our vastly-improved organization. [Which is very, very important, nay, necessary—don't hear me diminishing its importance.]

I have seen and felt spiritual and emotional healing and reconciliation, during the time I have been here as your minister. It reminds me of

something a wonderful woman from the Boise congregation said once, toward the end of her life, having seen many ups and downs, many noble acts and petty ones, in that congregation:

[This Fellowship has] brought me gradually to the realization that there is a spiritual side to human nature that needs nurturing as much as the intellect.... I listen to the beautiful music, the readings, the stories and the sermons... I am part of the universe and the universe is dynamic...

One can't quantify concepts like healing and reconciliation, but it is happening, and it is what church is all about. The folks who have returned to membership—or have stepped back into participation, after having quietly stepped out—are embodying what we Unitarian Universalists are about. They are embodying our values of respect and honesty and equality and forgiveness and interdependence and faith in each other, even when it is hard.

I have had numerous conversations with people who were hurt in one way or another during the hard times, and who have chosen to forgive themselves and others, and begin again in hope and faith. Hurting is what happens in hard times, whatever "side" you might have been on, on whatever issue(s). It just does, and it is no fun for anyone. What matters is how we deal with it. I have the profoundest respect for those who have chosen the path of learning, of change, of commitment to this place where we can find spiritual fulfillment if we choose. I have the deepest affection for all of you here, this band of UU sisters and brothers who have carried the

standard of liberal religion for all these years. I am honored to serve as your minister, all you who stay the course (taking an occasional breather, sometimes!) even when the others around us seem difficult or impossible. My respect is so great, for you who see the good and are willing to look into your own hearts for guidance and wisdom.

I am going to ask you to finish this sermon. Please take the 3x5 card you have been given. On it, please write your personal answer to the question: "Spiritually/emotionally, what do you hope for, from your participation in this congregation?"

A sense of fellowship with thoughtful, loving people.

To grow holistically as a human being.

To grow as a human being.

A sermon on not only helping homeless but getting them to attend.

I.e., a sermon on what or how we should act and what we should do as UUs if a truly homeless person were to enter our building.

Interested in helping our fellowship to grow in numbers. To help this congregation to become something for everyone.

I believe in participating to my fullest to be the face and greeter of acceptance, warmth and harmony to everyone who enters our healing space.

Gain in fellowship (reduced loneliness). Expansion of awareness/learning.

A fellowship that actively explores holy mystery together and that continues to influence the greater community, as a group and as individuals. I hope for friendship, love, patience—our own building, too. (-:

A lasting feeling of hope and cooperation among the people of this community and the whole world.

I hope to find a spiritual home as well as the ideological home that I have already found.

I want to have a place where I belong, a family of peers.

To open this area to less hard-right conservative ideas and to find a place I find comfortable.

A growing group of people to share time with on Sundays and outside of church.

I hope to find support for myself and for my son and to learn to better give support to others...to relieve suffering.

I hope for continued exploration of the truth and growth as a human to be a better person.

Sense of connection.

Friendship. Calmness.

Camaraderie.

Spiritual "uplift," supportive fellowship.

Continued open-mindedness—a spirit of acceptance and most of all playful curiosity to the thoughts, musings, and beliefs of others.

I hope to find unity within my participation, because a main want is just the feeling of belonging.

To continue the growth of the MVUUF—for all that are looking for a spiritual home—like the fellowship was there for me. To contribute by living and sharing my truth.

Confirmation that I and others are safe and healthy in the expression of what we believe.

Friendships. Good relationships. Finding common ideas and solutions. Interesting dialog.

I need to clear my mind once a week and recharge my energy too. This place takes care of what I need.

Hope to spread tolerance. The national news keeps saying that atheists are attacking Christianity. I am glad to know UUs do not condone that attitude.

Friendships, mutual; caring in spite of differences.

I hope to find and experience and practice tolerance, if not always approval. Self-forgiveness and letting go of the past is something that I cannot do alone; I must do it in community.

I hope that the beautiful rhubarb plant (remember the Easter story) that Elizabeth has planted in our MV Fellowship continues to stay alive!

A growing sense of a stronger connection with the Mystery (God) and a sense of belonging to a supportive community.

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By faith made strong, these rafters will  
Withstand the battering of the storm,  
This house, though all the world grow chill,  
Will keep us warm.

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



## **Closing Words**

We call ourselves a religious community --  
Not because this place is in itself holy ground,  
But because what we do here and say here and are here --  
Make it so.

May this place ever be the workshop of our finest endeavors, and the cradle  
of our highest hopes and noblest dreams.

So Let it be. Amen (Adapted from *From Beginning to End: The Rituals of  
our Lives* by Robert Fulghum)