

Saved. Again. And Again. And Again.  
by Rev. Diane Dowgiert, August 28, 2016

An interim ministry is a time of change and transition, a time when a congregation's focus turns more inward than some are accustomed to, a necessary and sometimes uncomfortable shift for Unitarian Universalists more used to looking out into our larger world for ways to be of service and to put their faith into action. The central purpose of a period of interim ministry is for the congregation to engage the process of searching for a minister they can call, someone who will settle among them for many years. I have just returned from a gathering of interim ministers who came together for a time of study and training. I want you to know that you are not alone in this journey. You are joined by congregations all across the country, your siblings in faith who are undertaking the work of examining and strengthening their congregations, preparing the ground for a successful called ministry.

I am privileged to serve as your interim minister during this exciting time in the life of your congregation. Today I want to lift up the worth and ultimate value of our Unitarian Universalist congregations, which are places of salvation where lives are saved, and people are made whole.

The first time it happened to me was on a Christmas Eve. A light snow was falling. We pulled into the last space in the dirt parking lot and made our way through a maze of mud-filled potholes before arriving at the front door. The usher

handed us bulletins and candles just as the opening hymn was beginning. We slipped into the back row and took the last available seats. I opened the hymnal and was immediately overcome with emotion. Singing was always my favorite part of Christmas Eve and yet, I was mute, unable to sing, not one that cries easily and yet, tears were streaming down my face. I tried to keep my sniffing as quiet as possible, trying not to bother those around me, trying to maintain some sense of composure and dignity. I honestly do not remember a word the minister, the Rev. Joel Miller said that night, even though he is a powerful preacher. I don't remember which hymns we sang, other than Silent Night, which was almost drowned out by the loud clanging of the rusty old furnace. When the service ended, I touched the arms of my husband and our two sons, signaling them to stay seated. I was not ready to leave yet.

A dozen or so people remained after most had left the sanctuary. Some were people I knew, others I had just met. We talked quietly with each other about how difficult the holidays can be, especially for people who have lost loved ones during that time of year. It was the first time I had been to a Christmas Eve service since my father had died several years before.

The hour grew late. Those who remained tidied up the sanctuary, turned off the heat and lights, locked the doors, and walked out into the dark night. A blanket of white snow covered the muddy parking lot, now nearly empty. We all watched

over each other as we made our way to our cars and up the steep hill to the road above. Shouts of Merry Christmas rang through the night.

I was saved that night. Saved in the religious sense of the word. Maybe not in the way that my more fundamental Christian friends meant when they asked if taking Jesus into my heart had saved me. No, I wasn't saved in that way that Christmas Eve night. Still, it was a religious experience.

The tears I cried that night were not tears of pain nor were they tears of joy. They were tears of release. On that night, I was saved from loneliness and isolation, saved from the silence that too often surrounds our experiences of grief and loss. The Unitarian Universalist congregation that took me into their hearts saved me that night.

And then it happened again. This time it was a group of women that gathered in the small, cramped classroom off the sanctuary. Together we were reading and discussing the now classic book, Cakes for the Queen of Heaven, written by the Rev. Shirley Ranck. There is now a whole curriculum developed around the ideas in the book, but then, we only had the book, which traces the history of explicitly female religious roots going back to pre-Judeo Christian traditions, through ancient Judaism and Christianity, the powerful Goddesses of Asia, Africa, and the indigenous religions of the Americas. Something magical happened as the book opened us to a reclaimed history of powerful female

religious figures. The stories of these historic women opened our own. We began to share our own struggles with body image and eating disorders, histories of sexual violence, our own and those of our daughters, discrimination and harassment in the workplace, breaking free of gender-prescribed roles, making our way into male-dominated professions, balancing the needs of work and family, issues of sexual and affectional orientation, issues of reproduction, infertility, and having control over our own bodies, domestic violence and spousal abuse, insufficient child support and inadequate access to affordable child care – pretty much every negative impact patriarchy can have on a woman’s life got discussed. Admittedly, we were probably oblivious to the negative impact patriarchy has on men’s lives. We were all doing our best to survive. And so, our discussions were not abstract, but dealt with the concrete realities of our lived experiences as women.

That group of women saved me. They saved me from the silence that surrounds the reality of women’s lives in our culture today. They saved me from the internalized oppression that had me believing the myths and stereotypes of womanhood that kept me subservient and fearful. Again, a Unitarian Universalist congregation saved me by opening my mind.

I could keep you here for hours telling stories of how congregations save lives, but first I want to talk about salvation, one of those words that cause difficulty for Unitarian Universalists. I dare say it is not a word that comes up in

our daily conversations with each other. In traditional religious use it involves metaphysical and supernatural formulations for getting into heaven after we die. Unitarian Universalists have a wide range of beliefs about whether there is an after life or not. We tend to focus our energies on the here and now. If there is a heaven to be found, it is here on earth, in this lifetime. It is our life's work to make it so. Salvation isn't for another time and place, but right here, today.

The Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker, former president of Starr King School for the ministry writes, "Within the embrace of sacred gathering places, people come together for form connections with one another and with that which is holy and life-giving."

In her words I hear what it is that makes our congregations sacred, places where we gather in the spirit of love to make real and lasting connections with each other and to affirm that which is life-giving and life-saving. If this isn't salvation, I don't know what is.

Make no mistake. Our Unitarian Universalist congregations save lives, and not just figuratively. This truth was most evident in the recent past when people who were gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender found refuge within our walls after being rejected by their families and religious communities, literally thrown out of their homes. In the early days of the gay rights movement, our congregations were often the only ones in any given community where the LGBT community was not

only welcomed but celebrated as precious members of the human family inherently imbued with worth and dignity. Many a story is told of those who made their way to our doors when they were so filled with despair they saw suicide as the only way out. Within the warm embrace of Unitarian Universalist community, lives are saved more times than we will ever know.

As you heard Cindy Dillard tell the children this morning, through your many social outreach programs, the Unitarian Universalist Church of Greensboro saves people you may never meet from homelessness and hunger.

Make no mistake. Our UU congregations save lives. Another way we do so is through Our Whole Lives, a curriculum that teaches Lifespan Sexuality, a program that we often refer to with its acronym OWL. These classes provide age-appropriate, faith based, biologically accurate information in a safe setting where the complexities of emotional and sexual intimacy can be explored. You can only begin to imagine how many people have been saved from sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies because of their involvement in OWL. When I meet young adults who grew up in our congregations, they often tell me that OWL was the most meaningful and enduring experience of their youth. Many have testified that OWL saved them from non-consensual and exploitive sexual relationships, or it saved them with a healing grace when they had survived sexual abuse.

I can give personal testimony as to how our Unitarian Universalist youth programs save lives. After the shootings at Columbine High School, I went back to be with my home congregation, the Columbine UU Church, the congregation that saved me on that Christmas Eve all those years ago. In the week following, the youth from church who were in the school the day of the shootings wanted only to be at church. They felt safe there. Not only that, they and their families got the support they needed to begin to work through the trauma and rebuild their lives. I'm still in touch with some of them. They are leading happy and fulfilling adult lives now. A congregation saved them from living lives of trauma-induced despair.

Yes, our congregations save lives in some large and dramatic ways. I'm sure that many of you have stories of how your life, or the life of someone you know has been saved because of a UU congregation.

When I travel, I often visit the local UU congregation. There are two times that I specifically remember, because they were times when I needed them to be there. One was the UU Church of Montclair, New Jersey. It was during the time when my family was deeply into wedding planning as my son and daughter-in-law were preparing to be married. One thing that experience taught me is that in all my years of performing weddings, I had vastly underestimated what parents go through emotionally in the process. I needed a place to go to be ministered to as I integrated the changes in my family. The Rev. Charlie Ortman's sermon that day

spoke directly to me. In recapping his sabbatical experience of riding his bike across the country, he told of one particularly frightening encounter with a huge sixteen-wheel truck. He said that sometimes in life all you can do is hold on, white-knuckled, and pray. Even if the good reverend hadn't been there to impart that gem of wisdom, I would have been grateful for the gathered congregation, singing the hymns, saying the words of the readings, surrounded by fellow travellers on the journey, saved again by a congregation.

Most recently, I visited the UU congregation in Santa Barbara. I was there for District Assembly, the gathering of UU congregations in our geographic area. Again, I found myself needing to be ministered to, so I was grateful for the opportunity to stay an extra day and worship with the good folks of Santa Barbara. I was especially grateful for the presence of so many of their members, given that they had just hosted the 450 people attending District Assembly. The Rev. Caitlin Cotter's inspiring sermon titled Bread and Roses didn't speak directly to what I was experiencing that day. It did lift my vision to see the work that lies ahead of us. The heaven we long for is still outside our reach.

It may surprise you to know that all of the congregations I've spoken of this morning struggle to raise enough money to pay the minister and staff and to care for aging buildings. It may surprise you to know that they struggle to recruit enough volunteers and that they deal with conflict about finance and budgets and



governance. Those that are fortunate have endowments to fight over. Each of these congregations has gone through successions of ministers. Yet, their presence endures. Their ministry endures. They continue to save lives.

There is something salvific in congregations, call it hope, call it faith, call it grace, or call it love. In the coming weeks, if you find yourself wondering on a Sunday morning if it is worth coming to hear a certain speaker or if you find yourself wondering if you will like the new minister, come anyway. Your presence just might save someone. That someone could be you.