

“Why Are We Here?”
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“Why Are We Here?” I realize that with a title like this, some of you might be pretty excited. You’re thinking, Finally! In 20 minutes I will know the purpose of my life! Or you might have been expecting me to boil down what the philosophers have said about the meaning of human existence. But that’s not what I’m planning to talk about. Or, maybe I will. Maybe you will hear something that helps.

What I mean when I ask, “Why are we here?” is more like, “Why are all of us in this congregation here?”

Each of us attended our first service at this congregation for different reasons. But we all came because we wanted to be in a place where we would be in the company of like-minded people. We may have been parents looking for a Sunday School program that could help our children explore religious questions in an atmosphere of openness and acceptance, rather than fear and suspicion. Many of us (adults) may have been looking for the freedom to explore religious questions, too, which feels a lot safer in a place where we are cared for and accepted.

We stayed because we found what a joy it was to be with people who thought the way we did! How energizing to have discussions with people who saw the world the way we did, who shared a vision for a just and peaceful future. It was like a fresh breeze after being stuck in an airless room.

We stayed as we learned the value of a community like ours. We stayed as we expanded our understanding of what it means to be a community that is radically inclusive. We became a Welcoming Congregation, one which intentionally welcomes persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.

Retired minister Tom Schade says that most of us Unitarian Universalists see building religious community as our most important work. He points out that our most distinctive rituals, the Water Ceremony and the Flower Communion, focus

on the theme of the many joining into one: many waters become one water; many diverse blossoms become one bouquet. He says, “We work at caring for each other, and listen intently as we share our stories. We try to be the village for each other’s children. It is hard, constant work, and there are moments when, in each of our congregations, our focus seems to blossom into the experience of beloved community.”

The religious community that we have found here is important. And it is valuable. Here our values, our ethical understandings and our desire for connection to something larger than ourselves are affirmed. It’s not putting it too strongly to say that for some of us, a UU congregation is a haven of hope in a world that at times, seems hopeless. Terasa Cooley, a UU minister and former Director of Congregational Life at the UUA, says that once we find this sanctuary, our natural instinct is to pull the door closed behind us. And there we are, in a cocoon, safe from the harsh world beyond the door.

Tom Schade says, “Liberal religion has a purpose, and it is bigger than we think, and certainly bigger than gathering with like-minded people for mutual support.” Being a religious community is not enough.

The goals and the purpose of our congregation can’t be just about ourselves. And we know that. We have, by necessity, been inwardly focused recently with our move. And yes, there is more work to do on our building. But we are getting settled in. I think it’s time to turn outward again, and to turn outward in ways we may never have done before.

We are guided by seven principles. If we could boil all seven of the UU Principles down to one word, what would it be? I think of one word which, somewhat ironically, never actually appears in the principles. That word is, “Love.” We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of all people –everyone deserves **love**. We believe in justice, equity and compassion in human relationships –we dedicate ourselves to making **love** the foundation of the way we treat each other.

We believe in accepting one another and encouraging each other in our spiritual growth –we **love** people as they are AND we also make space for them to grow. We believe that everyone has the right to a free and responsible search for truth

and meaning. We believe in individual conscience and in democratic process. Having respect for people's thoughts and choices is an important aspect of **love**.

We believe in peace, in liberty and in justice for everyone, because we are committed to acting in **love** not just toward those around us, but all people. Lynn Unger, minister for Lifespan Learning at the Church of the Larger Fellowship says, "We want people to treat one another in the ways that love demands. Love that doesn't include peace, freedom and justice is a pretty flimsy kind of love." And, lastly, our respect for the web of all existence includes a **love** of all beings and of our beloved earth.

All the world's major religions teach Love. They all teach that we are to love others. Yet it seems that a lot of the world hasn't caught on to love. Somehow, the message has gotten lost.

I'd like to tell you about "The Love People." During the summer of 2010, about 150 Unitarian Universalists went to Phoenix, to protest Arizona's anti-illegal immigrant law. These UUs were among hundreds of people who swarmed into the downtown streets. The UUs wore their bright yellow "Standing on the Side of Love" t-shirts as they marched and carried banners and got arrested for civil disobedience. There were so many UUs in those yellow t-shirts that people started calling them, "The Love People."

I love that! It really does encapsulate what we're all about. I believe that being a part of a Unitarian Universalist community can help us grow in our capacity for love and compassion. AND, being a part of a UU community can encourage us to live out our love and caring in the real world.

This, then, is the larger purpose of the UU community. It's actually two-pronged: to help us develop our capacity to care passionately and to feel the strength and courage to take action. The larger purpose of our community is to cultivate our passion to love the world with everything we've got.

Tempie Taudte, a member of the UU Church of Tampa, Fla., was one of the "Love People" in Phoenix that summer. She says that back in the 60s, she was too busy graduating from college to get involved in the civil rights movement. She says she made a decision to come to Phoenix because she finally had time and she wanted to give back, in part to make up for her lack of involvement during the 60s. It was

her church community back in Tampa that helped her, though. Safe inside the soft cocoon, that community gave her the passion, and they gave her the courage to take action out in the world.

In fact, they and the ad hoc community in Phoenix gave her courage to do something she probably never would have done on her own. On Wednesday of the demonstration, she decided to risk arrest the following day. "It breaks my heart to know that families are being disrupted and parents taken away [because of the immigrant law]," she said. "I want the rest of the country to hear us."

On Thursday, Tempie and others sat down in the street and refused to move. She was arrested, along with 28 other UUs. After her release Friday afternoon, she knew that she would never be the same. She went back to Tampa and challenged her congregation to get even more active than it had been on immigration issues.

Whether or not our own circumstances allow us to pick up and fly to Arizona for a protest, there are almost always things we can do. Like writing letters to our representatives. Those letters make a difference. Sending a letter, like the ones we'll be writing after the service today, is an act of love. It is saying, "Yes, I believe in the power of love to change the world."

And the time is now! The world needs us now! I want to know: what are we going to do about it? What bold, audacious act are we going to commit to make the people of Stroudsburg turn their heads and say, "Hey, those are the Love People!" What risks are we going to take?

The First Unitarian Church in Portland, Oregon sits on an entire city block. And it's been awhile now, but they did something bold and audacious. They staged a protest against legislation designed to remove certain civil rights from gay and lesbian citizens, and it would declare homosexuality to be perverse.

What the members of First Unitarian did was they tied a gigantic red ribbon around the entire block. They put up signs proclaiming, "Hate is not a family value," "Hate Free Zone," and other similar sentiments. Pretty soon there were three TV stations, two radio stations and a newspaper reporter on the scene. The minister, Marilyn Sewell, gave a speech and it ended,

Today we tie a ribbon around this block. We say welcome to all. We say all are deserving of love. We say all are deserving of justice. In declaring this a hate-free zone, we hope that...Portland...will also be increasingly hate-free, a place where tolerance and diversity are a way of life, a place where justice is a given, and a place where love and neighborliness flourish.

Do we also say all are deserving of love? Do we also say all are deserving of justice? Do we also want our community to be a place where tolerance and diversity are a way of life? A place where justice is a given and a place where love and neighborliness flourish? Do we say all these things?

We all know actions speak louder than words. So what are we waiting for? Let's get going! Are you ready??