



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Getting Ready for the Next Steps”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

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At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts

Don't judge each day by the harvest you reap but by the seeds that you plant.

Robert Louis Stevenson

Tradition is not to preserve the ashes, but to pass on the flame. Gustav Mahler

The function of one generation is to make change possible for the next. The real function of each generation is to sow the seeds that will make a better world possible in the future. Joan Chittister

Reflection following Stewardship Consultant remarks

In *The Tin Forest*, a man lived among humanity's discarded stuff. In a gray and dim reality, he dreamed of bright color and beauty. In the face of his dreary and lonely burying and burning lifeless metal each day, he envisioned a verdant forest filled with life each night. One day he was inspired to create his dream out of the materials at hand. He built a tin forest...And then a miracle occurred.

One crumb attracted one bird that left, but returned with its mate, setting in motion a sequence that transformed a lifeless junkyard into a lush paradise. Something out of nothing, and it was good. Very good.

Sixty years ago, this Fellowship's founders also built something out of nothing. Where there had been none, they came together and created a place for liberal religion and ideas in Athens. In time this Fellowship became a lush, living forest of people, relationships, ideas, and shared values. All it took was the seed of an idea that sprouted into something amazing. You who affiliate with this congregation are like the old man. You offer crumbs, you nurture yourselves and those who come here. Like the bird who made its home in the tin forest and whose presence transformed it, each one of you contribute to the transformation of one another and of the whole community.

Each and every one of you brings something special and unique to this community in the form of ideas, skills, generosity, compassion, and commitment. The result? A forest rich in complexity, diversity, and beauty.

But these days our roots feel pot-bound, unable to reach new, fertile soil. Our dense overhead branches stop sunlight from reaching tiny seedlings on the ground. Before roots and sprouts wither away, it is time to dream again, time to re-imagine our forest, time to create a Fellowship that meets our current needs and better serves our mission and vision.

Barry Finkelstein, our UU Stewardship Consultant, has been helping us see where we need to improve our stewardship, our husbanding of resources, financial and human, so that we can dream and make real our dreams for the facility that serves the continuation of our values. I know I am not alone in wanting to thank him for the insights and expertise he has shared with us this weekend, and will continue to do as we move forward. Our next steps forward are becoming clear and manageable.

We do not exist for a building. We do not exist to rival our neighbors' churches in size or expense. We do not consider expanding our building and parking lot because we wish to impress anyone.

We exist to further our values. We exist to make sure anyone who wants to be part of our liberal religious community can find a place here. We are planning to expand our building and parking lot because in doing so we will increase the ways in which we develop our spirituality, grow in wisdom, and continue to transform our lives and our larger community and world. It is our mission and vision that we serve. That is the larger calling we can agree upon. Each of us can decide for ourselves whether something more, something divine or divinely inspired, calls us, too.

Most weeks we publish on the back of the Order of Service our Fellowship Mission, Vision, and Covenant, along with our Unitarian Universalist Principles. Sometimes we print the six categories of wisdom sources that inform our beliefs and values. I invite you to turn to them right now.

The Vision is what we aspire to become. I think we're already well on our way towards reaching that lofty goal of becoming a beacon of liberal religion and spirituality in Northeast Georgia.

The Mission is what we are doing to make that beacon light shine brightly. Through our pastoral care of one another we support each other in good times and in sad times. Through our activities in the community, through lifting up our values in worship, education and small groups, and through the fun and frolic fellowship activities we engage in, we explore life's meaning together.

We may not always get our actions right, we may let each other down when we don't mean to, we may not be as generous as we might be, but we are not unusual. Our strength is that we try again. Our strength is that we open our hearts, accept our imperfections, and recommit ourselves to try harder. When we try our best and do our best, we are at our best.

We have lived in this facility since 1992. We have cared for it and it has provided us with the space to do great things. Lives have been transformed within these walls and beyond. Now is the time to look to the future, to the next 20 years. Let us be wise and generous stewards who care for the facility, the forest, that nurtures us. Let us continue to give some of our time, talent and treasure to transform more lives. Let us continue to nurture our seedlings, guide our growth, and put to rest ancient giants when that time comes. Let us continue making our values real and our forest lush with life and beauty.

We can do it together. May it be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. What are you passionate about in Unitarian Universalism, the Fellowship, or your personal spiritual journey?
2. What changes do you wish to see and what will be needed to realize them, here or in the world?
3. How might you have changed as a result of your connection or involvement with Unitarian Universalism? Do you consider these changes positive or negative, and why?