



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “The Road Rises to Meet Us”

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At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

### Centering Thoughts:

*Yet the Lord pleads with you still: Ask where the good road is,  
The godly paths you used to walk in, in the days of long ago.  
Travel there, and you will find rest for your souls. Jeremiah 6:16*

*The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step. Lao Tzu*

*Sabbath ceasing means to cease not only from work itself, but also  
from the need to accomplish and be productive, from the worry and tension  
that accompany our modern criterion of efficiency ... Marva J. Dawn*

### Sermon:

As you know by now, this is my last Sunday before I head out on sabbatical. When I first began planning for this time away, it was always theoretical, off in the distance like the leprechaun’s pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. And now, with only a few tasks, meetings, and a wedding left on my ‘must do’ list, it’s still not real. I can’t imagine being absent from your lives for five months, though I know my spirit or soul needs time to catch up to my body.

A colleague once told me that you know you’re in the right ministry setting when you realize you love the people in your congregation. Whatever your shortcomings, curmudgeonly habits, and other imperfections, I do love you. I love celebrating your joys, and I love holding your hand or giving you a hug when you need comfort. I love sharing your questions about life or how to be good and live well. I love seeking wisdom with you. I love sharing the ministry. And, to be fair, I have my own shortcomings, curmudgeonly habits and other imperfections, and I love that you accept me, regardless.

I may not always show my love – after all, we need healthy boundaries between us. I sometimes may be too focused on twenty zillion other things, especially on Sunday morning. I may appear distant sometimes, but that’s not my intention. In a congregation of our size there are just too many people for me to be in a close relationship with everyone. But that doesn’t change the fact that each one of you matter to me and I want to be part of your lives.

That makes leaving, even temporarily, difficult. I don't know how to suddenly stop being in relationship with you, as a sabbatical requires. And when I return, I know we'll both have changed.

We can't stop growing and learning while we're apart. The road rises to meet us wherever we are. Because my sabbatical is also your sabbatical from me, when I come back in August we'll need to share our different journeys and get to know each other again.

The idea of a sabbatical comes from the biblical concept of Sabbath. According to ancient Jewish writers, God created the universe in six days and on the seventh day God rested. In Exodus, the people are commanded to follow God's pattern by working six days and resting on the seventh, the Sabbath. Additionally, Hebrew Scripture indicates fields should lie fallow every seventh year. The ancients may not have understood the science, but they knew through experience that crops improve if the land has a chance to rest and restore itself. People need that chance, too.

Sadly, this Sabbath gift of rest is a gift too few open. Even if we don't feel religiously bound to observe a Sabbath, for the sake of our physical, emotional and spiritual health, we should. We do ourselves no favors by our busy-ness. Sabbath serves us, even if that rest or fallow time is as short as a daydream.

In the standard UU ministerial contract, a minister earns one month of sabbatical leave for every year served and it's typically taken in the 5th, 6th, or 7th year. Mine occurs at the end of my 7<sup>th</sup> year. I am extremely grateful for this gift.

Since it's difficult for me to break away, you may wonder why take the sabbatical. Just like God commanded the Sabbath be observed, there is wisdom in you commanding me to take a sabbatical, too. I need you to make me rest because I never fully put aside my responsibilities. And over time, that's not healthy for me or for you. And if you do the same in your own lives, it's not good for you. We each need a Sabbath, if not a sabbatical.

Many of you may look to retirement to stop all your busy-ness. But that day may get put off because you feel the need to keep working to support yourself or family, or you fear that life may feel empty or without purpose if you stop working. Just as I planned for my sabbatical, we need to plan for what we will do in retirement.

Since that day may be a ways down the road, now, while you're in the midst of busily parenting children, educating yourself, or establishing yourself in meaningful work, it's easy to be all-consumed by it. Don't forget to take your Sabbath!

I may be running the risk of implying that Sabbath is simply another word for vacation. It's not. Ideally, it is a time to stop all the things you *do* so that you can have time to just *be*. That intentional pause in your life allows you to breathe, allows you to enjoy being alive and loved, and allows you to give thanks for the life and blessings you have. Busy-ness keeps our heads down when we need to look up. Busy-ness keeps our nose to the grindstone when we should stop and smell the proverbial roses. Busy-ness keeps our ears deaf to the inner promptings of God or our souls.

During my sabbatical I plan to spend time *doing* less and *being* more. But I imagine the idea of my doing nothing may not go over too well. Americans expect productivity. Doing nothing, well, seems sinful.

So, rest assured, I have plans to do some things, too. My big adventure is the previously mentioned Celtic pilgrimage to sacred sites in Ireland with a spiritual director, archaeologist, and

historian. I have a stack of professional and inspirational books to read, and I'll spend time reflecting on the Fellowship and where my ministry might be refocused to better serve our shared Mission and Vision.

Meanwhile, you'll be thinking about what's ahead, too. You'll make final plans for our building expansion. Long-term leaders will step down and consider new roles, while new leaders step up. New initiatives may be planned. In August, together we'll map out which new roads to follow for there are always roads rising before us.

May the roads you travel in the next few months be smooth and kind. Know that the roads I take *will* lead me back here. I'll be listening for your voice calling me back home.

### **Questions for Reflection & Discussion**

1. If you had a sabbatical what would you do, where would you go, and what would you reflect on?
2. Whether on Sunday or not, do you allow yourself a Sabbath rest? What do you do or not do?
3. In what ways do you restore your body, reenergize your spirit, or connect to a source of renewal?