



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

“Crossing Life’s Bridges”

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Centering Thoughts:

If you don't know where you are going, any path will get you there. Lewis Carroll

The challenges we face in life are always lessons that serve our soul's growth.

Marianne Williamson

Unitarian Universalists understand ministry as the way we share our spiritual gifts and encourage others to share their own, connecting with what is most meaningful in life.

Unitarian Universalist Association website (uua.org)

Opening Words *(after a telling of “The Three Billy Goats Gruff” folktale with puppets)*

Rev. Alison W. Eskildsen

In the story told earlier, three goats wanted to reach the green grass on the other side of a stream. But a dangerous troll lived beneath the bridge they needed to cross to reach their goal. By using their wits and strengths, they faced their fears and reached the other side. It didn't hurt that the troll's dim wits and greed also worked in their favor.

Like the goats, we have visions of places we wish to go, too.

In this congregation there are many who serve in leadership positions and we value that leadership. We also value that we share the ministry. Whether you think of yourself as a minister or not, I believe you are. You who participate in the life of this Fellowship minister, or serve, the values we share. Everything we do is ministry, whether it's making coffee on Sunday morning, sitting beside your hospital bed, discussing a significant issue in your lives, or simply greeting each other with a smile. In these and a thousand other acts, we serve and live our values.

This morning we recognize that some have crossed a bridge into or from service as Lay Ministers. Those who serve in this manner spent a year in a training program comprised of reading, writing, and reflecting on all aspects of congregational life and dynamics. This included reflecting on their values, beliefs, and motivations for serving you and Unitarian Universalism. The Lay Ministry charter outlines their responsibilities, and I quote:

To assist the Parish Minister in visioning, planning, coordinating, and reflecting on the shared ministry and programs of UUFA. Lay Ministers nurture their leadership skills, deepen their spirituality, strengthen their connections among members, and develop their UU identity in the course of serving the Fellowship's mission and vision.

Let's hear what our newly trained leaders have to say, now that they've crossed a bridge and take note of what lies ahead.

Lay Ministry Reflections:

Iva King

Walking on the beach this past week, I picked up shells that seemed to me to reflect the diversity we aspire to here at UUFA. The shells also represented to me the opportunities and challenges I anticipate as I assume the responsibilities of Lay Minister for Life Span Development.

I picked up several small shells of various colors for our increasing number of children. With Kelli McConnell's expertise, I know our Religious Exploration program for children and youth will continue to expand and flourish.

I found a few worn, somewhat broken, yet beautiful and complex, shells. To me, those represent our older members who provide so much support and wisdom in this congregation.

And then I found what could be a small nautilus shell. Do some of you know Oliver Wendell Holms poem "Build thee more stately mansions, oh my soul?" It seemed a perfect addition to my little collection because the Nautilus grows throughout its life, constantly renovating its shell, adding new chambers – much like our building renovation!

After a bit of research, I realized there is so much more to learn about this creature!

- The nautilus predates the dinosaurs.
- The spiral shape of their shells has been treasured and copied by humans since the dawn of civilization.
- Mathematicians study the geometry of the chambers.
- The shells are beautiful! And yet, from some angles, the bodies of the creatures that build these magnificent shells are rather shocking, even ugly.
- And I found this especially fascinating – they have a large brain in comparison to their size. Like their relatives the octopus, they are capable of learning.

Yes, the chambered nautilus definitely belongs in my little collection. It reminds me how much I have grown since joining this fellowship. It also reminds me of how much I can continue to learn. The nautilus reminds me that we each have different aspects. And that, depending upon the angle from which we look at another person, we may or may not see their inherent beauty.

Regardless, we are each capable of growing, of opening ourselves to learn about and accept others, to accept the challenge of being a beacon of liberal religion in NE Georgia. We are capable of changing our perspectives on this fellowship. We have the capacity to enlarge our engagement with the Athens community and beyond.

It seems to me that, if we are careful and intentional, we can balance attending to our own needs, here within the fellowship, while engaging with challenges outside our fellowship, those that impact Athens, and Georgia, even the full interdependent web of life.

But, I must confess that all Life Span Development can encompass is more than a little overwhelming! So I must trust there will be a lot of support from other lay ministers, past and present. And I hope that each of you is willing to grow with me!

Lee Cornell

Derek Lin's translation of Chapter 33 in the Tao Te Ching opens with "*Those who understand others are intelligent. Those who understand themselves are enlightened.*"

I have participated in several leadership development courses both as a participant and as an instructor. While excellent and meaningful experiences the focus was on interpersonal relationships and how to manage those relationship to achieve a goal; the closest I came to personal growth was during one session in which we were exploring not only our own Myers-Briggs personality type, but how each type approaches a conversation or challenge, reacts to it, and reacts to individuals of other personality types. I learned that many of the conflicts I experience during interactions with teammates I interverdantly caused simply because what I - as an introverted INFJ - was saying, hearing, or doing did not mean the same thing to an extroverted ESTP colleague.

The Lay Ministry training program that Reverend Alison has crafted is not a leadership development course though. Nor it is a training session on how to be a Lay Minister. On the surface we entered into reflection of each area with readings from prophetic women and men, noting our own thoughts on and reactions to the topic, and then defining our own meaning of the topic. Activities reflective of most courses I took in school. Then, with our group assembled and having shared our personal meaning, Alison guided us as individuals into deeper thinking on why that meaning came forth; what personal history, traits, beliefs, or bias formed our meaning and how that meaning changes as we grow. I am grateful to Alison for providing sources of learning and for guiding us through this deep personal reflection. And I am deeply grateful to my fellow Lay Minister Candidates for their honest, open, and deep sharing. The balance of internal reflection, along with external expression and safe dialogue moved me a tiny bit closer toward enlightenment through understanding myself and my own motivations.

Stepping into the role of Lay Minister I thought I would have some big shoes to fill, especially as Lay Minister for Spiritual Arts. I have learned though that there are no shoes to fill. I can not be the Lay Minister my predecessors were because I am not them. We come from different life experiences.....we have different beliefs and goals.

So, grounded in our UU Principles, guided by our Sources, and always mindful of the Mission and Vision this congregation has set for itself, I hope to be a Lay Minister that leads others toward personal growth and enables everyone to contribute to the success of our Fellowship. I will make mistakes and seek forgiveness; but I know that within this loving community I will not only find forgiveness and the strength to forgive myself for my errors, but the room and support to grow from them.

Thank you for this opportunity to serve our Fellowship as a Lay Minister. I look forward to working alongside each of you as we build the world we dream about.

Bob McArthur

I previously have stood here to discuss mainly governance issues: about the building project, the capital campaign, or the annual budget drive (and yes pledge forms still available at the rear of the Sanctuary!). And because I will continue next year in Board leadership, I will wait until the following year to assume the duties of lay minister.

The lay minister training this past year, together with my colleagues Iva, Lee, and Carol Lee, has taken me into new areas, ones that I am less comfortable with: such as faith, spirituality, and the history and principles of Unitarian Universalism. I am grateful to Alison for providing the opportunity to participate in what has certainly been a master class.

In the process I have thought quite a bit about the nature of religious community, such as we have here at UUFA. This sort of community is not just a collection of people who gather from time to time. There is something more: the difference is that we are bound together by our covenant and by the UU Seven Principles. These ask us to treat each other with dignity and respect.

Today's theme of bridges fits into what to me is an important aspect of our community. We have differences of outlook and viewpoint; we frequently, sometimes vocally, disagree. There are canyons, chasms, that separate us.

Each of us needs space to develop our authentic self. We should feel free to express that self; we should not feel silenced or marginalized if we find ourselves out of the mainstream.

The rest of us should respect and encourage that authentic self expression. But inevitably this requires respecting ideas with which we disagree, perhaps most passionately, as an expression of our authentic self.

It is one of the glories of Unitarian Universalism, in my view, that its fundamental values entail embracing such disagreement and difference.

Sometimes we hear people encouraging the healing of disagreements and differences, of resolving disputes. Healing, resolving are powerful, important ideas. But I prefer the metaphor of building bridges.

To build a bridge across, for example, a canyon requires respecting the canyon. The whole point is that it is not going away. To get across, to be able to deal with the other side, requires the bridge.

So too with our deepest differences. We shouldn't expect that they will go away, we should respect them, indeed learn from them, by building bridges.

This aspect of Unitarianism Universalism can be applied to the deep divisions in our society, both in the US and around the world. The disagreements are not going away any time soon. Our UU principles, at work here at UUFA, are relevant. We must work, however difficult it will be, to bridge these differences with the respect for other points of view. A serious challenge, but of vital importance.

The first step is to recognize that disagreements and differences are valuable. They provide opportunities for growth. When we learn to respect ideas and viewpoints with which we disagree, we will be able to build bridges through community.

Carol-Lee Baker

(To be added)

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. Have you crossed a figurative bridge even though you weren't sure you'd make it? Share.
2. In what ways do you think you have grown during the past year? In what ways would you like to grow or change in the coming year, and what would help you accomplish that?
3. How has your ministry or service to others grown at UUFA? How has it changed you? Share.