

# The State of the Church Address

by Rev. Joy Atkinson, Interim Minister

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Perhaps some of you saw the movie Groundhog Day, starring Bill Murray? Murray plays a weatherman whose assignment is to go to a small town in Pennsylvania each year on Groundhog Day to report on whether or not the town's mascot sees his shadow. He's a cynical, selfish fellow, and he hates this light-hearted assignment. The town makes a big to-do about the groundhog legend, with bands and speeches and a little caged groundhog, whom the mayor pretends to talk to, to get the verdict on whether or not there will be six more weeks of winter. On one of these assignments, Murray gets caught in a time loop, and finds that he is repeating the same horrible day over and over again. He even tries to kill himself to get out of this rut, but each day he wakes up again to the sound of Sonny and Cher singing "I've Got You, Babe" on the hotel's clock radio. Through the course of the movie, the character begins to learn a thing or two on these repeating days, and he actually becomes a more caring, happier person. He even falls in love. Then one day, when he wakes up, the Sonny and Cher song starts in a different place and you just know that the weatherman is finally out of his rut.

I tell you this story on this Groundhog Day, because the theme of the movie, being stuck in a pattern, or a rut (something most of us are familiar with on a personal level) can happen to institutions as well--for example, churches. Some weeks ago, I gave a sermon on the history of this congregation, from its beginnings in the 1890's. I noticed, in reading the archives, some patterns, even ruts. For instance, in the early days, several ministers ran into trouble here and were asked to leave. It seemed as if the congregation as a whole had fallen into a rut in terms of ministerial leadership. Then, there was a pattern of ministerial stability, and longer ministerial tenures, such as Bob Green's 22 years, as well as a very long -tenured religious education director, Melinda, who is now an active Board member. In recent years, there has been a great deal of turnover in leadership. An interim minister followed Bob Green, and then the next settled minister became ill and had to leave. Then came another interim, while the search committee found and then withdrew its offer to a ministerial candidate, and here I am as your third interim in six years, with one brief settled ministry in that same time frame. Is this a rut? No, I don't think so. A repeating pattern? Well, the search committee, which is hard at work searching for a permanent minister, certainly hopes not. These quick changes in ministerial leadership were not fostered by any dysfunction in the system, and this congregation has rolled well with the punches, but it has been quite a roller coaster ride.

Today, at this midpoint in the interim year, I want speak about the state of the church as I see it. On my second Sunday in this pulpit, I unpacked a suitcase of the items symbolic of the tasks of an interim minister. One of those items was a mirror. Today I hold it up to you. Perhaps a better metaphor to use would be a photo showing where you are now. So I offer a snapshot today, taken of course through my own lens.

I already mentioned the recent fast changes in ministerial leadership. The changes in leadership in religious education have also been quick since Melinda's long service.

There have been three religious education directors, Doreen, Darcy and Dawn, and between them, members of the congregation have served as acting DRE's for months at a time. It is not unusual in Unitarian Universalist congregations to have high turnover in religious educators, though it can be as unsettling as rapid changes in ministers. But things are settling down on the RE front, under the leadership of Kimba Livesay, your new Director of Religious Education.

The religious education of our children is highly important to the future of Unitarian Universalism, and it is important to give our children a good grounding in the religious traditions of the world, including the Christian tradition. To that end, this year's curriculum for two of the children's classes focuses on the life and teachings of Jesus. I understand that there has been some concern expressed because the focus this year is on the Christian tradition and on Jesus as a moral leader. The classes are using materials from the Unitarian Universalist Christian Fellowship, and from the Jesus Seminar, a group of Biblical scholars who are working on separating the actual words of Jesus from those that were added to the Gospels by early Church leaders. I can't help but wonder if there would be similar concern here if the curriculum were to focus on, say, Buddhism and Gautama Buddha's teachings. This phenomenon, a kind of Unitarian Universalist allergy to all things Christian, puts me in mind of the words of a fractured hymn by the Rev. Christopher Raible, sung to the tune of Hymn # 190, Light of Ages and of Nations:

*Light of ages and some nations,/ All traditions save our own  
Have received thine inspirations,/ Beauty, truth and right have shown.  
Eastern phrases sing thy praises,/ All our Western are absurd,  
Revelation in translation / Holds thine everlasting word.*

*Lo, that word said in strange symbols,/ Pagan poems, alien tongues,  
Chinese chants, all in our hymnals, / Never Christian carols sung.  
Indian rain dance, Raja yoga trance,/ Buddhist burblings intertwined,  
Whirling dervishes in our services, / For thy worship all combined.*

*From all sources are selected / Prophets pure and and saints sublime,  
Christ and cross, of course, rejected, / Inappropriate to our time.  
Words peculiar, unfamiliar, / With all meaning quite concealed,  
In obscurity, all thy purity, / Thus to us thy light revealed.*

Seriously, this phenomenon in Unitarian Universalist congregations is understandable; many of us have come out of Christian traditions, and have even been hurt by them. We certainly don't want that to happen to us again or to our children. Also, we may tend to see the faults and excesses of Christianity more clearly than we do those of other religious traditions. But the fact is that historically, our Unitarian and Universalist traditions sprang from Christianity, and most of our religious forebears considered themselves Christian, although they dissented from mainstream Christianity.

I belabor this point a bit because I have glimpsed a little UU Christian aversion here not just in a couple of comments about the children's curriculum for this year, but in other contexts as well. The majority of the members of this congregation may be non Christian or humanist, but there are or have been people here, as there are in many of our congregations, who might label themselves liberal Christians. I believe that we Unitarian Universalists are at our best when we embrace and celebrate the wonderful diversity in

our ranks, rather than subtly excluding certain points of view. When I first arrived here, I became aware of three different people, who at some point felt excluded or less than fully accepted because of their liberal Christian leanings. Just imagine if all us were cut from the same theological cloth. How dull that would be! We are enriched by our diversity.

I believe that this congregation, like many others in our movement, would do well to be as intentionally welcoming as possible to different theological points of view, and become aware of the subtle, non-intentional ways those whose beliefs differ from the majority are excluded. And we would do well, in my opinion, to teach our children about the multiplicity of religious traditions in the world, including Christianity. I was quite surprised when Kimba told me that some of our kids thought that the Christian cross is just a big letter "t." At this point, I can't resist telling this little UU joke, especially since it's Ground Hog Day. It seems that a new teacher in a Unitarian Universalist Sunday school class was trying to teach the children about Easter. She asked the class, "What is Easter?" One child responded, "Easter is when we carve pumpkins, ring doorbells and say 'trick or treat.'" Another said, "No, Easter is when we decorate trees with lights and ornaments and give everyone presents." Still another said, "Easter is when we make heart-shaped cards for the people we love." Finally, one child said, "Easter is when we think about Jesus, who was a great teacher who lived a long time ago. He helped people, but some people got mad at him and nailed him to a cross." The teacher was encouraged, and said, "That's right. Then what happened?" The child answered, "Well, he died on that cross, and they buried him in a tomb, and then on the third day, which was Easter Sunday, he came out, and, uh, and, uh...if he sees his shadow, there'll be six more weeks of winter!"

To return to the current state of religious education: Kimba reports that things are moving along here, that some new people have volunteered to teach, but that additional teachers are always needed and welcome. A couple of members have come forward to help with establishing a youth group, and Kimba would love to see an active chapter of the UU Young Adult Network which serves adults from 18 to 35. Kimba is also working on what is called "Way Cool Sunday School," a new concept in UU Sunday school programming, which will begin here in June and go through the summer and perhaps beyond. This very flexible program involves shorter units rather than longer curricula, like single or a few sessions on projects like art or social action, presented by volunteers who would not have to commit to teaching for many weeks in a row. All of you have something to teach and I encourage you to volunteer.

On the Adult religious education front: Kimba and I have been talking about how much can happen on this level to enrich this church experience for its members and friends. We can envision several interest groups meeting regularly, as the ongoing Humanist group does, like a Pagan circle, maybe a support group for elders, a college group, a meditation circle, or a singles group. We would also love to see adult seminars offered throughout the year, such as Building Your Own Theology, taught by members as well as the Minister. There are many user-friendly adult curricula available from the Unitarian Universalist Association. If you are interested in teaching one, please speak with Kimba or me. I think you have a real plus with Kimba. She is a fireball of energy and enthusiasm, and with your support of religious education on its many levels, I can foresee the religious education program here really taking off.

With regard to Committees: The Congregational Support Committee is expanding its vision, by offering health awareness classes, and by expanding its network of those willing to help members in need or crisis. There is a new Music Committee (there hasn't been an active one in a while); its charge is to oversee and enhance musical offerings in services and possibly for special musical events. A new Worship Committee is in the works, to work with the minister in planning Sunday services. I was very surprised to learn from Sean, your last interim, that the task of getting speakers for lay Sundays had fallen on the Committee On Ministry. I was told that attempts to get one going again have failed in recent years. This has been a rut for this congregation. We are getting a Worship Committee together to work with the next minister, and I am also working on getting more lay participation in services.

We just launched the annual pledge drive last Sunday, and reports are that it's off to a great start. In the canvass brochure, many of the good things that happen here were listed. Social concerns and social action especially strong here, in part a legacy of Bob Green. Overall, this is a lively, active and healthy place, with room to grow, to offer still more programs. There are many very busy committees, and new ones forming. One that I believe needs to be reactivated is the Long Range Planning Committee, with its charge of looking toward the future, visioning, but this is a subject for another sermon.

I want to mention just one more pattern, perhaps a rut: I've noticed that sometimes regular events get canceled, like a church service, or an R.E. class, or coffee hour, either because something else is planned, or to avoid having to get a speaker on a holiday like the 4<sup>th</sup> of July or Labor Day weekends. Before I started, Sean informed me that if I didn't do a Labor Day service myself, there'd be none. So I did one. Canceling services or functions comes from thinking of the church as a small family, a single cell. But it is too large to be one cell. There needs to be a process of "cell division," as a church grows from "pastoral" (a small church in which everyone knows everyone) to "program" size (a church with many programs going, and in which members do not necessarily know everyone involved). Canceling church assumes that of course we all know this is happening, or we're all going to do the alternative thing together. But this leaves out many people who are not in the loop, especially newcomers. It is my strong recommendation that you hold services, and coffee hours, and RE classes of some kind year round, to continue to be hospitable and welcoming to all who enter here.

One of the keys to the growth and health of congregations is reliable and consistent programming, especially in Sunday services, children's RE, and the all-important Unitarian Universalist ritual: coffee hour. Here comes another UU joke: It seems that two movers were packing up and moving the contents of a UU sanctuary to a new location that the congregation had just bought. When they pulled back the altar curtains, they found a coffee pot stashed in a niche. One mover exclaimed to his co-worker: "So it's true! They do worship the coffee pot!"

So this has been my state of the church address. It was a much easier task than President Bush's state of the union address this past week—our problems and challenges are small compared to those of our nation. What makes it especially easy is the good will, hard work and dedication of this congregation's leaders and members. When I, as a candidate for this interim position, looked over this congregation's packet, I noticed the claim that this is a congregation without a lot of infighting and factions. For the past 19 years, I have been a member of the Pacific Central District's Conflict

Management Team, and I have seen conflicts in other congregations that would make your hair stand on end! I have found, to my delight, that the claim in your search packet is true—I don't see much fighting and factionalism here. You do live out in your congregational life the famous words of Frances David, a founder of Transylvanian Unitarianism: "You need not think alike, to love alike."

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