

CURRENTS

A QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF THE UNITARIAN CHURCH IN WESTPORT



The Unitarian Church in Westport is a diverse and welcoming religious community, free of creed and dogma, and open to people of all backgrounds and beliefs.

WE INSPIRE and support individual spiritual growth.

WE CONNECT through worship, music, learning, and caring ministries.

WE ACT in the service of peace and justice.

Language of Reverence



As UUs we often shy away from words that either reminds us of a religious past we would just as well like to forget or because the meanings of these words might be committing us to a belief system we don't fully endorse. Words like God, holiness, faith, grace, prayer, salvation, atonement, sacrifice, theology and the real stumbling block, sin. It is true that many religious traditions use these words in ways that many of us disagree with theologically; prayer is often associated with a supplication to a higher power, sacrifice reminds us of the Christian faith in salvation through Jesus and grace in its the Christian meaning is an unbidden gift from God. But I contend that we do ourselves a disservice to avoid this

rich language. The language of reverence is ours to use as well in ways that better fit our own understandings of the universe. Indeed, each of these words is used richly throughout literature from the Bible to Walt Whitman.

I am very careful in how I use these words with you. Many have noticed, for instance, that I rarely use the word God in my preaching. Mostly, I do this to avoid confusion, realizing full well that there are at least as many understandings of God as there are people in the room, but also because I am not sure what that God entails. My own definition is rooted in nature and human relationships. To unpack all of that as I am trying to convey a deeper message seems more trouble than it is worth. This doesn't mean the word has no value, only that its value is greater than the words I have to express it.

Grace is a word I use often. My blog is titled "Facing Grace". By grace I mean those opportunities and gifts we are presented with that help us to change our outlook on the world and make us better people. I don't require a God to believe in grace, just the possibility that what comes our way may have more meaning than we might normally give it. I have met people, for instance, that give me insight in some unique way to a problem I am facing. I need a direction, and a direction appears. As the Jedi master once said "A solution will present itself. That is grace.

Faith is another such word. I realize that some of us are more than a little uncomfortable with faith. It suggests "blind faith" a complete surrender to something we are required to believe in. That is not how I use this word. For me, faith is that assurance that what we hold to be good and right and true is, in almost every instance, good and right and true. I have faith in the general goodwill of people to care for one another. I have faith that science and modern medicine will continually improve our lives. I have faith in democracy. Having faith doesn't mean we have to stop being concerned or stop working towards these ends. Now, more than ever, we need to work towards preserving our democracy. What it does mean is that I have an assurance that there is a high probability that what I have faith in will prevail.

We have launched in a new direction in our religious education and exploration. We are calling it "Faith Formation". I use the term faith in the way I have described it here; ours will be a ministry that helps to form a deeper faith for all of us, children, youth and adults, towards creating a world of justice, compassion and love. Faith Formation is not just a catchy alliteration. Faith Formation is the creation of a new kind of religious education; one in which all of us can believe and grow within.

With Grace and Grit, Rev. John

THE TRINITY OF PEACE

By *Merritt Juliano*

To date, 88 people have died and nearly 200 people remain missing as a result of the wild-fires raging in California. Homes have been destroyed; people far removed from the blaze are stricken by contaminated air; and untold numbers of plants and animals have perished. Once an embodiment of natural beauty, California has become a fallen paradise.

Outside the United States, both the extant and anticipated effects of climate change are even grimmer. Many underdeveloped countries face a real risk of catastrophe in the near future, if not presently. For example, Thailand is projected to lose its capital Bangkok to rising sea levels within 20 years, while its rice crop is already threatened. The latter has dire implications for global food supplies, as Thailand is the world's second largest rice exporter.

Despite the ample evidence and hard science correlating climate change and environmental calamity, conversations connecting the two are far and few between. It is not hard to see why: dealing with climate change will entail difficult reckonings and real sacrifices at the individual ("inner peace") and interpersonal ("social peace") level. In his book *Soil, Soul and Society*, Indian activist Satish Kumar argues that a "multidimensional approach to peace" is needed in order to have these conversations. He suggests that climate change is best discussed by invoking shanti, the Indian conception of peace. Shanti is a trinity consisting of inner peace (making peace with yourself), social peace (making peace with the world), and ecological peace (making peace with nature). As such, inner peace and social peace become irrelevant absent a viable environment to live in.

With shanti in mind, and as we begin the New Year, our congregation will be offering a three-part workshop on climate change. It will be a safe, nonjudgmental space to explore our relationship to nature and identify strategies to protect our sacred planet. We hope to have a fruitful dialogue on what climate change means for us as individuals, members of local communities, and citizens of the world. And out of that dialogue we will develop a course of action. We don't have the luxury of ignoring climate change.

*Merritt Juliano JD LMSW
Environmental & Social Justice Advocate
Mediator & Clinical Social Worker*

Join us for a series of
3 Conversations about
Climate change and YOU,
beginning on Sunday,
January 27 at 12:30 in the
sanctuary.

*"We can't give in to despair.
We have to go out and look for
the hope we need to inspire us
to act -- and that hope begins
with a conversation, today."*

*Climate scientist
Katharine Hayhoe*



A Spiritual Center with a Civic Circumference

From Homecoming, 2018
by David Vita

“A spiritual center with a civic circumference.” I’ve thought a lot about those words, and employed them frequently since Reverend John, quoting Unitarian minister James Luther Adams, said them during his candidate week before being called to be our minister.

For me, the “spiritual center” is the heart. It’s the why we do what we do to make this a better world. It’s our UU values, our 7 Principles.

The “civic circumference” is the what and the how. It’s the what we do and how we go about doing it. That’s our life in the public square where our faith exists as mission and where we live our faith in action.

I’m a visual person so I’d like you to join me in thinking about a balloon—the air inside the balloon, that’s the spiritual center... the surface of the balloon is the civic circumference. The spiritual center comes first and, in a very literal sense, the civic circumference shrinks or expands as does the spiritual center.

Without a spiritual center there is no civic circumference. Without a spiritual center we are Greenpeace or Planned Parenthood – we are issue driven as opposed to being theologically driven. As a congregation, as a community of faith, as opposed to a secular organization, without a civic circumference Unitarian Universalists are irrelevant.

All along the inside of the balloon there’s a tension that exists where the air is rubbing against the balloon’s inner surface- that’s where human connection takes place. That’s where love is the spirit of this church and service its law exists, where divided communities are restored, and where brokenness is repaired. Where the spiritual center rubs up against the civic circumference is where beloved community is created.

When I talk about these things with my social action friends at the Temple next door or the Methodist church down the street, for example, they can relate to these words although they wouldn’t necessarily frame it as I do. Because, I think in this sense we may be a little bit different. We don’t have a creed or a dogma so I look at our principles and I’ll start with the first one:

The inherent worth and dignity of every person.

#1 The inherent worth & dignity of EVERY person



How can we not be taking up the call for racial justice if we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person?

How can we not be supporting the rights of immigrants and refugees if we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person?

How can we NOT be standing arm- women and men- to end patriarchy if we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person?

Gun violence prevention ... climate change, mass incarceration, income inequality, voting rights... we can’t do it all—but we can all do something. The list goes on, and on, and on, and it always comes back to the same thing. We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Not just those who are saved, not just true-believers, not just people who think like us, not just people who vote alike, not just people who share the socio-economic class, racial or gender identity.



"Courage to Connect"



In this article I wish to explore a couple of concepts that are forever relevant; and these from two of the greatest teachers.

One of those teachers was the great French woman Nadia Boulanger. She once said: "*Nothings is better than music.* When it takes us out of time, it has done more for us than we have the right to hope for. It has broadened the limits of our sorrowful lives; it has lit up the sweetness of our hours of happiness by effacing the petty concerns that diminish us, bringing us back pure and new to what was, what will be and what music has created for us.

The other great teacher is Parker Palmer. In his book, **The Courage to Teach**, he states: "the culture of disconnection that undermines teaching and learning is driven partly by fear. But it is also driven out by Western commitment to thinking in polarities, a thought that elevates disconnection into an intellectual virtue. This way of thinking is so embedded in our culture that we rarely escape it, even when we try."

So what do music and the culture of disconnection have to do with one another?

There are many qualities that constitute good choral singing. There is no such thing as a choir of one! It is a group experience. Anyone who has participated in an all-state experience will know that some of the elements or qualities which will be evaluated are: blend, diction, phrasing, breathing, tuning, enunciation, understanding of the words. OK.....so what?

All of these attributes demand that the singers are focused and connected. If one were to assemble a group of opera singers and had them sing together, would it produce a good choral sound? Most of the time it would not. Why? Because one needs to listen to the group, breathe with the group, produce sounds that balance with the group. In other words, it takes entrainment, the very thing that bonds any group and makes it productive.



Parker Palmer



Nadia Boulanger

The point I am driving to is that the feeling of disconnection is swept aside in the choral experience. When a group of singers puts their feelings into a work something happens. As Boulanger said: "We are often mistaken about art. Art is not emotion. Art is the medium in which emotion is expressed." And there is the key. We have the envelope in which we can collectively express those things that lie within us that are too deep for words alone. When we do this together, there is a connection that happens. Music is not good or bad, not a polarized experience. It is about sharing something of a deeper state.

Whether it is singing in a choir or simply singing a hymn on a Sunday morning, it is a way for us to experience connection. May you be blessed with many connections in the new year and much music. It feeds the soul!



Looking for LEADERS

The nominating process for filling next years leadership positions is getting underway, with the Nominating Committee looking to fill the following committees:

**the Board of Trustees
the Endowment Committee
the Committee on Ministry
and the Nominating Committee**

If interested, contact any member of the current Nominating Committee.

In addition to those candidates named by the committee, eligible members may petition to be included as a nominee by obtaining signatures of at least 30 members. Petitions must be filed with the Secretary by noon May 1. This is an option available for any eligible member interested in leadership. Contact Monica Garrison for more information.

For those considering stepping into a leadership role, here is a brief description of the open positions:

The Board of Trustees is responsible for the supervision and direction of the affairs of the congregation in fiscal matters, in governance and in achieving its mission. Nine members serve for staggered 3 year terms.

The Committee on Ministry (COM) is comprised of 5 members elected to serve for staggered 5-year terms. The COM is responsible to the congregation for ensuring that the congregation, in its programs and ministries is fulfilling its Mission and Vision. It provides consultation, education, conflict management, assessment to the leaders and members of the congregation.

The Endowment Committee (EC) is accountable to the congregation for receiving, investing, and managing in a prudent manner all contributions to the Endowment Fund of the church. It's 5 members serve staggered 5-year terms.

The Nominating Committee (NC) has 5 members serving staggered 2-year terms. It is responsible for preparation of a slate of qualified nominees for election at each Annual Meeting.

Members of the Nominating Committee are: *Michelle Garvey (mkgarvey@aol.com), Sal Molica (smollica2@gmail.com), Sari Bodi (saribodi@sbcglobal.net), Chuck Colletti (chuckcolletti@gmail.com), and Monica Garrison (icebow2005@gmail.com)*

Hello, and Happy New Year's blessings to you all!

We are starting the year with the theme of Possibility. I am particularly fond of this theme because I am such a big believer in the power of possibilities to transform our lives when we are open to embracing them. This is a great opportunity for me to tell you a little bit more about how I landed here at TUCW.

by Rev. Shelly Thompson, Assistant Minister for Faith Formation



I believe without a doubt that I wouldn't be here if it hadn't been for the possibilities presented to me by TUCW member Denny Davidoff. If UU had royalty, Denny Davidoff would have been the Queen. Sadly, we lost Denny to cancer just over a year ago. But she leaves a huge legacy and will always be with us. She was an institutionalist even when that wasn't popular. She believed so strongly that we are better together. We need each other if Unitarian Universalism is going to survive and continue to change the world. Denny would say about possibility, I think she would have said *"Where there is a will, there is a way. If there isn't a way, make one yourself."*

I met Denny at Meadville Lombard Theological School in 2013. Still going strong in her eighties, she volunteered as a full-time fundraiser for the seminary and on behalf of the Unitarian Universalist Associations's Living Tradition Fund that supports UU ministers in need. Denny was there for me before and after my interview with the MFC in December of 2016.

I knew going to that meeting it was going to be rough because of the difficulties I had faced during my two years of parish internship. For reasons outside of my control, I lacked the opportunities to gain enough experience and contribute to the mission in the ways that make for a productive and successful internship. I did find my own ways to do some good ministry and I learned a lot from working in a large congregation.

I made the decision to go as planned to visit the MFC in Boston, to get their assessment and recommendations for how to pick myself up and go forward with my ministry. They understood the difficulties I had faced. They saw the good work I had been able to do, recognized my potential and encouraged me to keep going, to get some more experience and not to let this set back discourage me. They invited me to come back one year later. I told the MFC that I would carry on even though I had no idea what I was going to do next.

When I came out of my meeting kind of deflated and worried about how to proceed, I sat down next to Denny and I told her of my experiences. As usual she shared her wisdom, support and practical guidance with me. As someone who bristled at any form of injustice, Denny was angry that the system that was supposed to support my ministerial formation had let me down. Now as most of you know,

continued

Denny was the kind of person who would never turn down an opportunity to intervene to right a wrong on behalf of anyone who needed her. Every time. It's who she was. I felt fiercely loved and cared for by her that day. The odds were in my favor. Denny was on my side.

When Denny got home from Boston, she picked up the phone and called Rev. Jeanne Pupke, who was her dear friend for many years. Rev. Jeanne is the senior minister at First UU Richmond, VA. According to Rev. Jeanne, during that phone call, Denny was concerned about the lack of support I had received. As she went on and on, and Rev. Jeanne gave her support and understanding as a good friend does. Eventually, as Rev. Jeanne tells it, it started to dawn on her that maybe, in fact probably, she was also being pressed into service, and being given an opportunity to help Denny help me.

You see, Denny knew that Rev. Jeanne is also the kind of person who doesn't say no to the chance to right a wrong, to help people and to support Meadville graduates and Unitarian Universalism. Denny knew that First UU Richmond church is not only a great teaching congregation but also is very committed to doing good justice work. Rev. Jeanne said yes to inviting me to work with her, even though she was busy running for President of the UUA at the time. Rev. Jeanne texted me and we talked and in just two weeks time, she made it possible for me to be living in Richmond and on my way to becoming the Minister of Membership for that congregation. Rev. Jeanne and that wonderful community showed me radical welcome and gave me a chance to meaningfully contribute to the ministry of the church. My two years there were a wonderful joy and a privilege. I benefited immensely from the power of that positive supportive community to create possibilities for my transformation. I was really ready when I went back to the MFC last Winter and I was granted Preliminary Fellowship. It was bittersweet to return and not have Denny there with me.

Several months later, as I was contemplating the possibilities for where my next ministry would be, I saw the job posting for this position. I talked to Rev. Jeanne about it. We had a moment when we just looked at one another rather astonished and bemused at the wildly improbable yet real possibility that I could wind up working at Denny's home congregation. I worked to quickly submit the application, and started planning my ordination for October, just in case. I was ordained just one week before I was hired to be your new Assistant Minister for Faith Formation. There is no place I would rather be.

Here we are, at the beginning of a brand new year, full of possibilities for our faith journeys together. Thinking about how Denny lived her life, what she and Rev. Jeanne both did for me, and exactly how it was that the practice of meaningful ministry with that congregation transformed me, I pulled out the order of service from Denny's Celebration of Life held here at TUCW last February. There I discovered the text of a poem that was read during the service. TO BE OF USE by Marge Piercy.

Reflecting on the poem, I realize that whenever I have been at sixes and sevens in life, focussing on the possibilities for serving a greater good has always been my way forward. Finding a way to be of use restores my sense of meaning and renews my faith. When we inspire connect and act for the common good, there is no end to the possibilities we create to make the world a better place.

With much love,
Rev. Shelly

The poem TO BE OF USE follows on the next page

TO BE OF USE

by Marge Piercy

*The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.
They seem to become natives of that element,
the black sleek heads of seals
bouncing like half-submerged balls.*

*I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a
heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things
forward,
who do what has to be done, again and again.*

*I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.*

*The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.*

Church Staff

Rev. Dr. John Morehouse,
Senior Minister
Ext. 12;
revjohn@uuwestport.org

Rev. Dr. Edward Thompson
Minister of Music
Ext. 18;
ed@uuwestport.org

Rev. Shelly Thompson
Assistant Minister for Faith
Formation.
Ext. 17
shelly@uuwestport.org

Rev. Frank Hall
Minister Emeritus

Margalie Bellizaire
Intern Minister
216 856-5654
margalie@uuwestport.org

Diane Donahue
Congregational
Administrator
Ext. 10
diane@uuwestport.org

David Vita
Social Justice Director,
Membership Director
Ext. 14;
david@uuwestport.org

Sandra Clements
Acting Children's Program
Coordinator
Ext. 10.
sandra@uuwestport.org

Sue O'Meara
Accountant
Ext. 21
sue@uuwestport.org

Desmond Hughes
Sexton
desmond@uuwestport.org