

*Opening Spaces. Making Inclusive Places.*  
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Phoenix  
Sunday, October 15, 2017  
Rev. Margret A. O'Neill

Love is the doctrine of this congregation. Those are the words we speak every Sunday as we light the chalice. It is all very well to speak the words, but I often ask, how do we live them? What does that doctrine of love look like, what does it feel like, in action?

Love is in those words every Sunday, and love is implied as well in the mission of this congregation: welcoming all in building religious community, we are called to share our journeys, to grow in spirit, and to advance justice. Active love is embodied in welcoming, building, sharing, growing, and in advancing justice. What does that kind of love feel like, what does it look like, how do we know when we are actively living out the reality of that mission, the core purpose, of this religious congregation?

And we have a vision for who we might yet be as a congregation, the ultimate reality we seek to create here: to be a spiritual community for our time, a community that is theologically diverse, radically inclusive and justice centered. What does it mean to create a religious congregation that is truly living into that vision for our lives together?

But wait. Why, you might ask, is all this mission and vision stuff important, or even relevant? You might be thinking, "Isn't religion all about coming on a Sunday morning to hear some beautiful music (sort of like a concert), to hear an inspiring message from a preacher (sort of like a college lecture), to bring my children to a place where they can learn values and get the right information about sex (sort of like the schools we wish we had) – and I don't even have to buy season tickets or reserve a seat, I just come through the door and they just let me in for free?"

Well, yes and no. A religious congregation can be that, and we are pleased to serve that role in people's lives, but it can be so much more. I am convinced that religion at its best is activist, counter-cultural and revolutionary, a values-based enterprise in which we can be transformed into our best selves, and from which we can work to transform the world. Emphasis here is on the word "work."

We live in challenging times, and of course sometimes we need to seek refuge among like-minded people. But far beyond providing refuge, Unitarian Universalism can provide the resources for us to ground ourselves in our values, to challenge ourselves to be transformed and transforming, to make a difference in the world. This transformation happens, not in mere words, but in the work, in the commitments that the members and friends of this congregation make, the actions you take, the environment you create, and all the ways you invest your energies in making this a vibrant, welcoming community with open, inclusive spaces and activities that bring the mission and vision to life.

Your elected leaders in this congregation understand this, and they are shaping your vision for the future into actionable goals to guide our choices and priorities as members and staff over the coming years. We call those goals "ends," framed as a future state into which we want to move, a sort of target to aim for in our actions. The three ends that will guide us into the future correspond to the three elements of the vision: As we seek to be theologically diverse, we are rooted in deep understanding of various faiths and traditions, as our congregation nurtures personal growth and the search for truth and meaning. To be radically inclusive, we reach out to embrace all, as our congregation challenges itself to grow with new voices, ideas and experiences.

To be justice centered, we are inspired by our UU values, as our congregation is organized and empowered to act in advancing justice in our local and global communities. Those are inspiring, ambitious goals, and it is up to us all to bring them into reality.

There are two things happening today that provide opportunities to live into that vision. One is that members of the Board will be in the Johnson Room after the service – where you will also find stimulating coffee and yummy snacks -- to lead discussion and gather ideas about ways we can achieve those goals, those end-states that make the vision a reality. You are invited to grab a cup of coffee and a treat, and join them after worship, offering your ideas to be part of creating the future here.

The other activity is the “phase two” capital fundraising campaign that begins today, committed to opening spaces and making inclusive places in this congregation. You heard Vince’s story earlier, telling how his family felt included and cared for by the welcoming spirit of this place. What a wonderful testimony to the welcome and inclusion that is found here. But it’s not only our spirit that needs to demonstrate our radical inclusion, but our bricks and mortar as well -- and that was brought home for me by something that happened here on a Sunday morning just two weeks ago.

One of our members was welcoming people near the front entry, and she saw a young couple struggling up those long front steps with their two young children in a double-wide side-by-side stroller. She greeted them, wondering why they did not use the accessible entrance at the back. They told her that they had driven around back and found a gate, but that gate was marked with a sign that says, Private Property, Do Not Enter. They did not see another entry – and I must admit, the first time I parked out back, I did not realize that the unmarked closed patio gate was an entry, and I did not see any way to get it open (the latch is on the inside), so I understand their confusion.

So this young couple had driven their car back around front, parked, and carried their stroller up the steps – and then of course when they got to the top, their double stroller would not fit through the door. They left, and I would venture to speculate that they will not be coming back. I would not come back to such an unwelcoming place. Even if they had taken the sidewalk around the building to the left as the sign out front instructs, the back door is not wide enough for that stroller to go through either, without unloading it and folding it up. For me, that speaks volumes about how this building fails to meet our standards for truly welcoming all into religious community, and about being truly inclusive. I deeply regret the missed opportunity to meet that young family myself and welcome them into community here.

The construction that will begin in a couple of months is specifically designed to embody the vision of radical inclusion. The front of the building will be redesigned to offer a more inviting visual space as people enter the property. Paved parking, gentle ramps and level surfaces and wide entry doors will ease the way not only for those using wheelchairs and walkers, but for young families with strollers as well. An accessible, shaded patio with generous seating, along with providing a safer place for the children to play, will welcome us to gather in community in ways that nurture all who enter here. And replacing the aging and expensive air conditioning system that was draining our resources, and that was poised to fail at any given moment, probably in the hottest months of the year – well, enough said about that. We are in Phoenix, after all, and offering a cool space is part of our welcome.

When I first joined a Unitarian church, back in the years when I was part of a young family just starting our careers and with a child in outrageously expensive day care, I was a bit baffled when I learned that our UU congregations are not only self-governing but also self-supporting, and as a member I was expected to do my share. How could the small share that I could afford even make

a difference? And I have learned that my reaction is not unusual among our members, especially those who are new to this faith tradition.

But I have also learned that being part of the financial support of our congregations is a spiritual commitment, even more than a financial one, and this congregation's vision of radical inclusion extends into that realm as well. Every member is included, every member is an owner, a sustainer of this place, and if everyone does their share, no matter what the size of that share, we can meet the visionary goal of making the buildings as welcoming as the spirit of this place. If you look at the giving chart on the back of the Opening Spaces brochure that you got this morning, you will see that even \$5 a week – the equivalent, perhaps, of one fancy drink or a sandwich each week – adds up over three years to a generous commitment to opening our spaces and making inclusive places. Or if not \$5, maybe \$2 a week? Or maybe you are in a great place financially, and you want to give \$50, or \$100 a week! It is not the amount that is important, but that we are all included, all part of this project, joining our energies and resources to create the beautiful, inclusive spaces that are so important to the identity and presence of this historic, welcoming, committed congregation.

I am in a pretty good place financially, so I am making my own pledge to this capital campaign for \$1,000 to be given over just two years, since that is how long I expect to be here. That comes out to about \$10 a week, which is what is achievable for me right now in addition to my regular stewardship pledge. And if I can give more later, I know I am welcome to do that. When someone asks me how much to give, I always encourage them to make a pledge that feels like a comfortable stretch, and then if they want to add more later on, that is always an option. Some of you who gave in the first round of this campaign might even be feeling inspired to stretch just a bit more now, so we can really make this happen!

We are going to sing our closing hymn in just a moment, and then you are invited to come out to the patio and see these beautiful images up close – there will be representatives of the capital construction team there to answer all your questions and a box where you confidentially place your completed green pledge form. And you are also invited to head on into the Johnson Room, get a cup of coffee and a treat, and join members of the Board to explore how we will live into our vision for this congregation. As Unitarian Universalists, we light a chalice flame, symbolizing our commitment to active love in all its forms – in the spiritual and physical welcome that we offer, and in the actions that carry our values into the world. We kindle and nourish the fire of commitment, so that our vision and our promise will be fulfilled, and thus we create together the future that we dream, a future of diversity and inclusion that are centered in justice.