

*Living Into Our Promise*  
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Phoenix  
Sunday, April 1, 2018  
Rev. Margret A. O'Neill

What ever was I thinking, scheduling the beginning of the annual stewardship process on April Fool's Day?? The saving grace is this is also Easter and Passover, not to mention the Assyrian New Year, the Islamic Republic Day in Iran, a sort of independence day in Cyprus, the birthday of Muslim saint Hazarat Ali, and Turkmenistan's national water management holiday. There are so many wonderful things to celebrate in this world – so many messages about transformation, about emergence, about the power of new beginnings, about the power of transformative and sustaining grace.

The celebrations of Easter and Passover are all about transformation, about living into the promise of the future. The rituals of this time tell stories about those who suffered and worked for a positive change, those who emerged from a time of loss and struggle into the unfolding of new possibilities. The Passover story recounts the Jewish people's escape from slavery, their courage to cross the sea, to risk travel in the desert, to venture and to persevere in order to fulfill the promise of possibility. The Easter story recounts a miracle of rising from the tomb, rolling back the stone, with hope of a new way of being in the world, teaching a new way of life based on community and love, a new promise for all who are oppressed. These are stories of defeating tyranny, defeating death, leaving behind old ways of being and rising into a new promise. The old traditions provide us with living stories about moving from the known into the unknown, from despair into hope, creating and engaging with a future that has yet fully to reveal itself. These are human stories, and they all contain a spark of the divine, however the divine is defined for you. We are a faith tradition of what theologians call a "realized eschatology," people who take seriously our own responsibility to fulfill the promise, to create paradise right here and now in in the world, right here in Paradise Valley, in our being and our doing, with our hearts, our hands, our connection and our commitment.

Last week I talked about the history of this congregation, from its beginnings to the modern day. You can see a sketch of that congregational history on the timeline over here; many of you put your names and the ways you feel connected here on the time line last week, and at the end of both services today there will be some time to add more of your notes, since much of the choir is back with us, as well as others who might have been away last week. The post-its and pens are right up here, the task is to write your name and something about your connections here, and place it on the time line about the time you got involved here. And today we will take the annual photo of this congregation, a tradition that dates back to the earliest days – this is a congregation that honors its traditions, that respects continuity, lives into the promises of the past, even as you are open to the emergence of new possibilities.

A summary of this congregation's history might read: in the mid-1940s, a small group of Unitarians and truth-seekers made a promise – the promise that liberal religion would have a home in Arizona, and that our courageous faith would be present to make a difference here in all the ways that matter. And now, over seven decades later, this strong and historic Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Phoenix is on a new threshold, discovering together new ways to live into the promise of a liberal and transforming faith that is organized for impact in the community, the state and the nation.

I am currently teaching a class, Exploring Your UU Identity, and in the first two class sessions we talked about the foundations of Unitarian Universalism, since understanding where we come

from, honoring the promises of the past, is crucial to our strength as we live into the emerging promise of the future. Last Wednesday I described the way our congregations are organized, a model original to this continent, dating back to the year 1648. That was when the churches in the area they called New England declared themselves to be independent, freestanding, self-supporting entities. This was a new way of congregational life, in which each congregation made decisions as a small democracy, calling their own ministers, running their own affairs, and raising their own funds. So this process we call stewardship dates back to that 17<sup>th</sup>-century heritage, in which the members take responsibility for these congregations they create and sustain. A steward is one who cares for something that really belongs to the emerging future, investing in the possibility that springs from the promise.

Many of you posted notes on the history time line last week, telling of your connections here, and as I read your experiences of connection they warmed my heart. I will share just a few with you, and you are welcome to come explore them yourselves as you have time. Some of your notes describe a feeling and what you found here: “It felt like home,” “friendly to children and adults,” “generosity, justice, warmth,” “loving kindred spirituality,” “I love that all my friends and family are here,” “I love the community helping to raise my children,” and “I love the teachers.” You mentioned “challenging sermons; youth-led services, including our own kids,” and called this a “perfectly imperfect spiritual community.”

Some described an experience of connection: “met new friends,” “the love and support which was offered by so many when my wife passed away,” and “the promise in seeing my three grandchildren take part in the naming ceremony. Seeing the future smiling at the present and remembering the past was a feeling of completeness.”

Some brought me to tears of gratitude for the open heart of this congregation, as one of you wrote, “everyone here accepts me as an HIV positive gay man and I’ve only experienced kindness and compassion here. Bless you all.” And of course there were some comments that rang with a note of truth, making me laugh out loud, including “I love that there’s snacks.” There are very good snacks here indeed.

This year, in this time of transition, there are several important things going on pretty much at the same time. All of these processes have an element of the past from which we learn, which we embrace for all it has to teach us, and the new energies and initiatives that are emerging as you prepare for something new, as you live into your promise for the future. One of these is the annual stewardship drive, as during April we will ask all the members and friends to make their loving commitment to the financial support that helps this vibrant congregation thrive. Most of the letters about the pledging process for this year have already gone out, and the rest will be mailed on Monday. This year we have been able to deepen the level of personal connection in this time of commitment, with 38 amazing volunteers reaching out to have conversations about the deep connections here, not have conversations about money, but about the love that sustains you here.

I am going to read the names of this year’s Connectors, and I will ask those who are here in this service to stand to receive our gratitude. I hope and trust that you will be open to receiving their conversations when they reach out to you. The Connectors this year are Jim Allen, Carolyn Allenby, Robert Back, Tony Banegas, Ruth Braunstein, Judith Breuer, Smoot Carl-Mitchell, Ed Cernek, Dan Coleman, Mary Dawes, Gary Ezzell, Donna Featherston, Joan Gale, Debbie Gordon, Beth Graham, Ann Jackel, Glen and Terry Lockwood, Sarah Moore, Susan Morris, Eric Muehlstedt, Ceyshe Napa, Joan O’Connor, Richard Plattner, Karin Quinn Larry Reed, Arlene

Salmon, Dick Schaffer, Cherie Stafford, Linda Vance, Kathleen Waldron, Vince Waldron, Sandy Weir, Bonnie White, Mary Wilber, Jan Wise, Val Wylie, Lydia Yanak – and me!

These congregation members are generous with their time and commitment, taking the time to reach out to create new connections. Each connector has only four other people to contact, to make sure they have time and attention to do this well, that in many cases these will be new connections for you, people you do not know all that well, and this is a very good thing. Not everyone will get a personal visit this year, since there are not quite enough Connectors to go around, but I hope we can build up the Connector ranks next year to expand that personal connection process. For me, as well as making some personal visits, I am going to meet this month with our members who live in and near Beatitudes and Friendship Village to help build my own connections there, especially with some of the folks who don't get here to UUCP any more. These long time members are an important part of the heritage and the future of this congregation.

If you are not getting a visit, your mailing that is arriving this week or next will contain a golden pledge form. If your letter this week did not include a pledge form, it told you who your Connector is this year – your Connector will bring your pledge form when they visit with you. And if you did not get a Connector and you want a visit, just let me know and we will make sure you get one. And finally, if you already got a pledge form in the mail and you want to turn it in now, there is a box out on the patio where you can safely place it, and it will go to the office to be entered into our records. And if you have never made a pledge before but want to do that now, there are some extra pledge forms on the table as well, so that you can be part of supporting all the amazing things happening here.

When Smoot and I met with the Connectors this week, we asked them why they volunteered for this important work of making connections, what was important to them about UUCP, what is inspiring their generosity right now. I loved their responses, so I am going to share some of them with you – they are an inspiration to me, and they may resonate with your own reasons for loving this congregation. What the Connectors say they love about UU Phoenix is that it is a place for growing young Unitarian Universalists, bringing together children, teens, and older people in a nurturing space and time. They love the diversity, appreciate the strong staff, and know this as a place where they find community. They invest their time, talent and treasure for continuity in the congregation, so that UUCP will be here for the future, to keep the doors open. They value that this congregation is making a difference for those within our walls, and for the community around us, providing what one Connector called a “beacon in the wilderness,” and another named as a safe space and a brave space – a safe space to find connection and peace, and a brave space from which to transform the world. A safe space and a brave space, that is what you create here, and what we sustain together.

There have been so many areas of growth in this congregation in recent years, and we are reaping the benefits now – the construction to increase accessibility and inclusion will begin this spring or summer, as the final construction plans are being reviewed by the Town of Paradise Valley right now. And we are making good progress in preparing for the new Assistant Minister to begin here in August. The Children's Ministry and Adult Faith Development programs are thriving, and there is a lovely group of folks registered for the Pathway to Membership class later this month – and there is still room for more of you, of course! This is a good time to join the congregation, if you have been thinking about it for a while, to be an active part of all that is emerging here.

And of course, next week the members here will elect your Ministerial Search Committee from the amazing group of nominees that you helped to identify – and they will begin working on the process that will bring your next settled minister next year. If you need information on the nominees or the election process, Board member Sarah Moore (Tony Banegas) will welcome your questions after the service, at the table in the back over by the door to the patio. So there is a lot to do today – there is time to place your post-it on the history wall if you did not do so last week, then you can head over to get some coffee and some of the especially good snacks that Diana Ashley and Joan Gale arranged for us today, enjoy your connections with each other, and show up in the congregational photo on the patio at 11:00.

We have big plans for the coming year – this is a time of change, of active transition, as we live into the promises of past and future for which we are all responsible. Those plans include growing our vibrant opportunities for involvement, learning and development for all ages; expanding the OWL program; continuing to equip ourselves to address racism and oppression in our society; cultivating spiritual depth and leadership capacity; expanding inclusion and diversity in all dimensions; providing a powerful presence for social justice; and preparing a strong foundation for the next ministry here.

This is what you are investing in when you make a pledge of financial support – building on the heritage, sustaining the continuity, living into the promise that was first made over seven decades ago: the promise to be the beacon of Unitarian Universalism in the Valley of the Sun, the promise of your vision to be a spiritual community for our time: theologically diverse, radically inclusive, justice centered.

And now, let us rise in body or spirit to sing together about the promise of the spirit, Hymn 1028 The Fire of Commitment.