

“Who Would Have Guessed?”

Rev. Mary Gear

Delivered Sunday, March 14, 2021

Reading: “...Knows No Bounds,” by Rev. Marta Valentin.

You must live and breathe

It must be your first thought in the morning and

And the last at night when twilight descends.

It must be what you search for in the darkness,

The light that leads you to find who you are,

Where you are, what you are...

It is understood already that you would die for it,

But are you willing to be born again for it?

Change your cells for it?

If you were dying of thirst,

It would be your only drink of water,

The one liquid to quench your thirst,

Sate your parched soul,

Resuscitate your empty lungs.

In the dead of winter, it will be your fire, blanket, scarf, hat. //

In the desert, it would be your mirage and your oasis.

Even when you don't want it, can't stand it, despise it---

It will come looking for you, haunt you, track you down,

Beg your attention and love. //

For the purpose that you were blessed with, knows no bounds,

Only that if you are not paying attention,

You will be lost until it finds you,

Until you heed its call and be who and what

You were meant to be.

Sermon/Homily:

I am here alone in the OUUC sanctuary this morning, connected to you through my laptop perched on the pulpit, with a really long cord snaking across the floor, plugged into the modem in the sound closet. There are chairs stacked in the corners of the room, and other chairs set up as if waiting for you all to arrive. And, some of you will, soon. There is so much hope now as the number of COVID cases fall and the number of vaccines rise. I'm also aware that some of you have never been in the OUUC sanctuary and some of you may never be. We hope you will continue to join us online in the future. The world has changed.

This past week was the one-year anniversary of when the world changed. These past weeks, I have heard many of you remember your last.....something; last time at work or even working, your last time at school, your last time seeing your grandkids or hugging a friend, your last time travelling. Your last time at OUUC. We lost lives and we lost our lives.

Everything was normal until it wasn't. One year ago last week, the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic, President Trump issued a ban on travel from China, Tom Hanks and his wife tested positive for COVID-19 while filming in Australia, an NBA game was stopped just before tip-off when a player tested positive for COVID-19, and the entire NBA season was postponed.

On March 13, 2020 Governor Inslee declared that all activity in the state shut down except for essential services. Also on that day, the Unitarian Universalist Association recommended to UU congregations that all worship services and other church functions go online, grounded in our theology that we are all connected and responsible to safeguard each other and the most vulnerable among us.

That week last year, the Board and I were talking about whether to close the OUUC building, how the decision would be made and who would make it. The staff and I were talking about how we would live stream the Sunday service, reviewing equipment and

platforms. We had a guest speaker scheduled for that Sunday, Joe Rettenmaier, who turned out to be the perfect person to have onsite that morning with his calm presence and background in production. We limited the people in the sanctuary to just a few: Joe, Rev. Kari Kopnick, Riley McLaughlin, Troy, Sara, and Bob Sundtrom as celebrant. I watched from home as this amazing crew made it happen and appear effortless. I learned later of the trials and worries and duct tape.

Today is the one-year anniversary of OUUC's first on-line service. It's been quite a year.

As I look back on those first on-line services, I see an unfolding of who we are and what we have become this past year. Volunteers came forward to help with the technical aspects of live-streaming worship, and the Tech Team was born. That Team helped so many of us learn new technology and devices. Many of you learned Zoom for the first time. Troy and I learned how to record ourselves, and Troy learned how to convene the choir community and host a cabaret online. Over time, you can see that the Commons has been transformed into a studio with cameras and cords, chairs spaced 9 feet apart or more to keep all musicians safe. Sara expanded her already excellent storytelling skills online and added to her puppet collection. Darlene learned how to post the Order of Service and bulletin online, and how to best share information with you. Jo Sahlin joined us as OUUC's first Media Specialist. Jobs have changed, lives have changed, the world has changed.

Service topics over this past year have been about uncertainty, being in liminal space in between, and how to hold on to hope. I preached about shared ministry and our obligations to each other. And, when I rewrote our welcome last year to include phrases like "it's about connection not perfection" and "social distancing doesn't mean social isolation" I never imagine we'd be saying those words a year later. And, we've learned new words: pandemic, masking, flatten the curve, Zoom fatigue.

Over this past year, so much at OUUC has adapted and changed. Melanie Ransom led the team for an all online auction last June that was a huge success. Sally Brennan led

the Stewardship Team for an extraordinarily successful pledge drive in October. Mo Canny and Susan Dodson have led a group bringing Books, Brownies and Beans online this year. (Don't forget to start shopping tomorrow!)

Many of you have participated in so many groups: social groups, Covenant circles, classes, discussion groups, reflection circles, and more. Members of the Pastoral Care Team have been regularly calling everyone in the directory for the past year to check in and helping respond to the Sharing each Sunday. The Worship Arts Team has transitioned to online services with calm and grace. Every group and individual has changed.

When I look back over this past year, I see a shared commitment to maintain connection, within OUUC and out into our community, even when it's different and hard.

Our spiritual theme for this month is Commitment. The word has three Latin roots: com-meaning together, mit-meaning to send, and ment-meaning a result. A commitment is something that we choose to do in community toward a shared result. It implies action and choice. It sounds to me a lot like the visioning process we are in right now.

In keeping with our theme this month, I asked you to share if and how your commitments have changed this past year. A number of you sent in thoughtful, humorous and sweet reflections. Thank you all for sharing your thoughts and heart with me. It wasn't surprising to notice some themes emerge.

Some of you shared that you feel even closer to the OUUC community now and that there is a sense of intimacy on Zoom, especially in small groups, that you may not feel in person. A few noted that you can attend classes and meetings, and play games, all from the comfort of your own home without driving at night. A few of you feel distanced from the OUUC community, Zoomed out from work and school, waiting for the day when we gather in person again.

Many of you shared that you feel more connected to friends and family, even co-workers. I've heard stories of reconnection with long-lost friends and relatives, and making new friends or finding new communities, even in a pandemic. Some of you told of being more committed to staying connected to others with regular phone calls, texts and even on Zoom. A long-time member shared that their circle is smaller and tighter.

At the same time, some of you shared your grief at the losses this year, family and friends, OUUC members and friends. For some the isolation has been overwhelming, missing family and friends. The nation has suffered the loss of 530, 000 people to COVID, and some of us have lost loved ones to the virus. The deaths of OUUC members & friends this past year have not been COVID related, but we've been impacted by the loss of our usual rituals of remembrance, taking them online or delaying them. We missed the opportunity to grieve together in our usual ways.

Many of you shared that this past year has caused you to be more committed to self-care, self-discovery, slowing down. Several mentioned that it has been easier to say "no" during the pandemic, and that care for body, mind and spirit is now a priority. Others shared that they are busier than ever.

A few of you shared that your commitment to justice has been strengthened in the past year, empowered by the movements for racial justice and political action. I heard that some of you were active in election work and politics in a way you hadn't been before, and remain committed to this in the future.

Last, many of you mentioned an increased comfort with imperfection. I wrote "it's about connection not perfection" as a reminder for us all, including and especially me, that we don't know how to navigate a pandemic and we won't always get it right, but we will try, together.

This last year has brought enormous change. Some things have changed for all of us, and for some of us, everything has changed: jobs, homes, partners, friends. Some of those enormous changes have become unremarkable: we wear masks, we visit outdoors, many still work and learn from home, the OUUC building is still mostly closed. Some of us have said we are forgetting what normal is. One new member commented that they cringed while watching an old movie, seeing a couple of friends moving toward each other without masks!

What I hear is grief and gratitude, and all the feelings in between. Part of the joy of being in community is that we mark milestones and transitions together, the hard ones and the ones we celebrate. We hold each other, sometimes figuratively and sometimes in person, creating space to feel our feelings, whatever they may be. We mark these transitions to remind us of what has been and that we are still here. It helps us stop to notice the passage of time, our complex feelings, and our own resilience. It helps us open our hearts and minds for what is to come.

The world has changed. We have changed and will never be the same. This week, I invite you to make space for the emotions related to so much change, all of the feelings. Commit to making space for yourself, and for those around you. As one of you said, we are all struggling and we need each other, now and always. We are not done with this transition yet, and the transition is not done with us. Uncertainty remains. We are on our way, heeding the call to be who and what we were meant to be. Together.