

“Becoming Community”

Rev. Mary Gear

Delivered Sunday, March 13, 2022

First reading: An excerpt from the work of The Rev. Dr. Thandeka, a Unitarian Universalist theologian. It is from her adult religious education curriculum, “What Moves Us.” Here Thandeka is speaking of James Luther Adams, a Christian theologian and social ethicist in the 20th century.

[Adams argued that] the church is a voluntary association that attends to the psychological well-being of its members as well as to the organization and direction of their collective behavior for promoting social, political, and economic change in the wider world. Voluntary associations, for Adams, are organizations to which we freely have chosen to belong (rather than those into which we have been born such as our birth family, community, and political state). In voluntary associations, Adams insisted, we gain the power to negotiate our own internal feelings with others and also to gain power as a group to negotiate changes in the non-voluntary associations that rule our lives.

Second reading: an excerpt from “A Covenant Invites Relationship” by Lisa Ward.

A covenant is not a definition of a relationship; it is the framework for our relating. A covenant leaves room for chance and change, it is humble toward evolution. It claims: I will abide with you in this common endeavor, be present as best as I can in our becoming. This calls for a level of trust, courage and sacrifice that needs to be nurtured, renewed and affirmed on a regular basis.

The task of this covenant is to take responsibility for the freedom we espouse. We know that we are interconnected and that what we do creates ripples of hope or despair, of affirmation or negation. What we do with and for one another is powerful and beyond our imagining.

Sermon/Homily: Becoming Community

There is a teaching technique that helps foster curiosity and creativity that I first experienced in seminary. It works like this: you gather in pairs or in a group, name three seemingly unrelated things, like, say, liberation theology, climate chaos, and Muppets, then discuss. This technique came to my mind these past few weeks as I prepared for today’s service. The topics for today are a new monthly spiritual theme of “become,” the Spring Stewardship kick-off, and the 2-year anniversary of the COVID shut-down.

Discuss.

And, of course, I discovered once again that everything is connected.

The spiritual theme for this month is “become,” one of the words in the new OUUC mission to welcome and wonder, embrace and empower, bridge and become. We complete the first “web” of the mission after exploring “welcome” in January and “empower” in February, now “become” in March.

Become is a word with such possibility! There is the possibility of change, of transformation. The possibility of unfolding, uncovering, opening to who or what we are. In this time of Spring, the Earth reminds us of what it is to become as plants and trees bud, and the first flowers bloom—crocus, daffodils, and daphne. Many of us despair with the recent report of the World Health Organization’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change which says that we are at a pivotal time with rising global temperatures, rising sea levels, and increased frequency of heat waves, all caused by human activity. And, yet Spring comes; the Earth becomes alive once again.

Spring reminds us that becoming is a process. Although it might seem like the blooms just pop open all at once, flowers develop over time. They gather and store water and sunlight, forming buds. The buds gather and store energy until they are ready to pop in the glorious coming of Spring. And so, it is with people and communities. There are times when we gather and store energy preparing for when we are ready to bloom. We grow and change over time, and if we are nurtured and supported, we become our best selves, unfolding into what we are meant to be.

As we move into year 3 of the global pandemic, we have learned a lot. We know words like pandemic and endemic. We all know more about how viruses evolve and how respiratory viruses spread. We know that new variants and viruses will be part of our future, just as illness and disease have been part of human lives through history.

We have also learned so much as a community. We have learned new technology and that we can connect virtually.

It was two years ago today that we did OUUC’s first online service after shutting down the building to avoid crowds, and right before we shut down everything to stay at home. Two years ago, just a few people gathered in the sanctuary to cobble together a web camera and a laptop to stream the service. Kari Kopnick helped us figure out the technology and create the Tech Team. We’ll welcome Rev. Kari back into the pulpit in a few weeks, in person in the sanctuary once again.

Virtual services might not be ideal, but they have been a life saver for many and will

continue to be for some. We will continue to offer virtual services into the future as we expand our vision of who we are and who we can become.

Next week after the coffee chat, the Board will ask us to reflect on what we have learned. It has been quite a time and we are not done yet. It will take us years to sort through what this time has meant in practical and in spiritual terms. And now we can begin to reflect on what this time has meant to us as individuals and as a community. We will continue to become community in new and exciting ways.

I am regularly humbled by this virus. The planner in me does not like that the future is uncertain and unpredictable. I've told people that I gave up predicting way last year! I am invited daily to let go of how I have worked in the past, letting go of what has served me well and isn't serving me now. It is a process of stretching and growing for me as an individual, just as we are stretching and growing as a community.

I notice that we have embraced becoming a learning community. We have become more comfortable with uncertainty and imperfection. Notice I didn't say that we all like it, just that we have come to accept more uncertainty and imperfection in our lives and in the world. We've learned that our experience isn't the experience of everyone, and that we can provide empathy and support. We have learned that we can survive tough times and still stay in community.

Just consider all the ways this community continues to show up. The Pastoral Care Team has been a steadfast presence for our most vulnerable members by phone and now in-person. The Worship Arts Team has not only learned but embraced on-line worship, and is learning how to do in-person worship again. The Tech Team continues to support us week after week. The Buildings & Grounds and Adopt-a-Plot Teams have worked diligently to keep things working and looking good. The Faith in Action Team continues to discern the ways that OUUC can support the larger community. Three adults are teaching our junior high Our Whole Lives (OWL) class and Adult Ed continues to offer classes. The Health & Safety Task Force has carefully made decisions about our COVID response as things change with breathtaking speed. The Hospitality Teams continue to welcome visitors and welcome us back into the building. The Board continues to work hard to tend to the congregation and organization. There's an 8th Principle Group and a Stewardship Team and many other ways you serve and stay connected. Many of you continue your good work in advocacy and direct services, like delivering meals to the shelters. And the OUUC staff has remained together, working to support each other and the congregation. All in service to the vision of an interconnected world that is loving, just and healthy. I am humbled and most grateful.

James Luther Adams reminds us that a faith community is a voluntary association, something we join by choice, rather than something we are born into. We choose to be

here, in this community. It is the work of the congregation to tend to the wellbeing of its members, I'd say the spiritual growth of all of us, as we gain the power to understand our feelings and how to be in relationship. It also helps us gain power as a group to negotiate the needed change in the wider world, to put our faith into action.

We do this work together in covenant, how we agree to be together in relationship, the commitments that we make to each other. The foundation of all the work we do is relationships, and we work together in covenant. As Lisa Ward reminded us, we say to each other: "I will abide with you in this common endeavor, be present as best as I can in our becoming. This calls for a level of trust, courage and sacrifice that needs to be nurtured, renewed, and affirmed on a regular basis."

It is also the work of the congregation to tend to the wellbeing and growth of the organization, growth in the many ways that congregations grow. OUUC has been growing for many years and continues to do so, even in tough times, maybe even especially in tough times. Unitarian Universalism has a life-giving message that has been a balm and inspiration to many of us. It's especially in hard times, that we need a community to help us define our values and find our moral compass. It's in uncertain times that we need to know that a community will be here for us, no matter what. It's in tough times that we need a place for our spirits to be renewed so we can return to the world with strength and compassion. We want to share our life-saving message with all who share our values, wherever they may be.

While we come to this community as individuals, what we are together defines us as a community. One of the covenants we make is that each of us will share our time, talents, and treasure as we are able. All are welcome and our gifts are welcome. It is what we do together that is powerful beyond our imagining.

How we organize ourselves at OUUC makes the minister the spiritual leader of the faith community and the administrative executive of the non-profit. I experience both roles as very connected and I return to our shared values as I work to fill those roles. As the executive, it's my job to tell you what resources are needed to fulfill the mission of this congregation. That is what I presented to the Board, and what the Board is presenting to the congregation in the form of the stewardship drive.

Each year we pool our financial resources to support the work of this congregation. During the stewardship drive, we ask for pledges of financial support that will help sustain and grow this community over the next year. The staff and I will develop a budget based on those pledges, a budget that includes funding for staff positions, for all programs, like classes and religious education for children and youth, for our justice efforts, and our worship. Then the budget is adopted by the Board and voted on by the congregation in May.

For the coming budget year of July 2022 through June 2023, we want to grow our capacity for Faith in Action and Adult Ed programs, and we want to grow our administrative support for the work of the congregation. We also want to provide just compensation for the staff that support this congregation.

We are making a big request this year. Some of us can increase our pledges to help reach that goal. Some of us will make new pledges. Some of us can contribute what we have in the past, and others are feeling the effects of these times. Our covenant is that we offer what we can to support the spiritual work of this community.

In the next few days many of you will receive in the mail information about how to pledge. We will also put the [stewardship link in the chat, and you can find it on the website](#).

Many of the Board leaders have pledged their support to OUUC's mission and future. My husband, John, and I have done the same, grateful to be able to increase our pledge as requested because we believe in this faith and in what is possible.

The Board and I invite you to join us in the financial support of this community. We look forward to celebrating that we've reached our goal by April 3.

With our stewardship of this community, we embrace the spiritual practices of covenant, generosity, and becoming. We support growing community.

My hope for OUUC is that this is a place where we can be nurtured, inspired and renewed as we experience our becoming as individuals and as a community. We will emerge from this pandemic time, not with a pop but perhaps more like an unfolding, like the petals of a rose. We might be a bit weary, and I sense that there is also energy we've stored during this time, ready to be released for the greater good as we move into whatever comes next.

The future is unknown, and we can hold on to faith in what we cherish—our values, our connections, our community. We can be bold and courageous as we become who we are meant to be and move into the future.

By our actions may we make this so.