

“Shared Ministry”

Rev. Mary Gear

Delivered Sunday, April 3, 2022

Reading: An excerpt from *Serving With Grace: Lay Leadership as a Spiritual Practice* by Erik Walker Wikstrom

Our congregations are voluntary associations and depend on donations—not just of our financial resources but of our time and talents as well. In fact, even if our members pledge sufficient support that every single task could be farmed out to paid employees, the church would still need volunteers because that’s the nature of a volunteer association.

We also get involved in leadership because it feels good. We meet people and form friendships, becoming more fully integrated into the community. Some of us stop there, of course, satisfying our own need for a sense of belonging, yet at this point, there is also a doorway for service as a spiritual practice.

As Rev. Gary Kowalski put it in a sermon,

“People who come to Unitarian Universalism seeking spiritual goods are likely to be disappointed as long as they have the outlook of consumers in search of material goods. If their connection to our liberal faith is to grow into something more rewarding, they have to give up the consumer mindset and begin to think of themselves instead as shareholders, investors, co-owners in what happens in the church.”

There may be more challenges inherent in serving as a leader in your church than, say, in volunteering once a month in a local soup kitchen.... Yet the greater challenges, perhaps, the greater the rewards. Service within the context of your church means working with a group of people who understand your Unitarian Universalist values and commitments and will hold you accountable to them.

Sermon/Homily: Shared Ministry

Two months from now on June 4, we’re going to have a big celebration and everyone is invited! It’s one of several fun events we have coming up, and whew!- do we need some fun! We’ll have the annual auction dinner on May 14 with an online auction the week before. On May 22 we’ll welcome Sara Lewis back from sabbatical and celebrate her ordination as an interfaith chaplain. And, on June 4 we will celebrate the 70th

anniversary of OUUC and celebrate my installation as your settled minister.

It has been almost 20 years since this congregation installed Rev. Arthur Veini on April 28, 2002. And, we all know a lot has changed since then.

So today I want to say a bit about what an installation is and how we can prepare for it. First, I want to tell a bit of OUUC's story so we have a sense of where we've come from and what we've come through.

First some history.

On Oct. 6, 1952 a UFO was sighted in Olympia, WA when, as part of the Fellowship Movement to expand our faith in the west, the Unitarian Fellowship of Olympia was recognized. A small group gathered in rented space on Sunday evenings twice a month for lay-led meetings that included philosophical discussion and intellectual exploration.

Over the years, the Fellowship grew quickly through word-of-mouth and some publicity. Some people had been members of Unitarian congregations elsewhere and found UFO through the Yellow Pages or newspaper ads. Others were seeking a community and a place to raise their families. Some wanted to explore their own spirituality. Still others joined because of the activism and civic engagement of the members.

In 1968 the Fellowship purchased its own building in Tumwater, for \$10,000 cash, a historic building that is still there. It was not an easy or unanimous decision to purchase a building; some thought it was a waste of money that could be used for other purposes. Church history says it caused a schism, with some members leaving the fellowship.

Members also wondered about sharing the work of the Fellowship with a minister. Some felt they needed more structure and the support of a professional. Not everyone felt this way, but those wanting structure and support won out. In 1978 the Fellowship asked Bill Arensmeyer, a UFO member and trained Methodist minister, to serve quarter-time.

After about a year, the Fellowship looked for a more permanent minister and in 1979 asked Roger Kuhrt to serve them quarter time. Roger was ordained in the United Church of Christ, an intellectual who focused on self-actualization and social activism.

The history from 1982 tells of the first service auction held that November, the precursor to the annual auction we have now.

When Roger left in 1985, the Fellowship did their first formal search for their next minister.

After a year of lay leadership, UFO members invited Donna DiSciullo (de-shoe-low) to

join them. Donna was a new minister, but not new to Unitarian Universalism. She helped the congregation discern their identity and in 1986, the Unitarian Fellowship of Olympia became the Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation. When Donna unexpectedly left the area in 1989, the fellowship once again went seeking a minister.

They found Sandra Lee, also a new Unitarian Universalist minister. Church history describes Sandra as the most complex and controversial minister yet. During her ministry, Sandra brought in professional musicians and helped OUUC become a Welcoming Congregation to the LGBTQ community. She transitioned the organization to a more formal structure and hired the first staff, Darlene Sarkela for the office and later Troy Fisher for music. Both are still here.

The congregation continued to grow and in 1993, achieved the dream of designing and building their own home; the first building on this land. Sandra's husband, Don, is described as finding creative ways to help fund the new building.

With a booming children's program, the new building was soon outgrown, so members purchased the house and land next door, which was immediately put to beneficial use housing religious education classes and later served as the Out of the Woods shelter.

But not everyone was comfortable or happy with Sandra's style, or with Don's involvement in church finances. After months of conflict and controversy, Sandra resigned in 1999. Her departure caused a schism with some members leaving to form the All Souls Fellowship in Olympia, which disbanded just last Summer. And financial matters were more closely monitored and brought under the control of a congregant-led Finance Committee.

In 1999 OUUC invited its first interim minister, an intentionally short ministry to help with transition. Shirley Ranck is described as a calm bridge, helping the congregation become ready for their next minister.

OUUC members called Arthur Veini as the first full-time minister in 2001, just a week before 9/11. Arthur is described as bringing a vision of congregational life and justice to OUUC. He invited a group of houseless people to the parking lot--Camp Quixote. He focused his energies on interfaith leadership, social action, and the spiritual life of OUUC members. The Board, committees and lay leaders managed most of the administrative aspects of church life. During this time, the congregation continued to grow, so in 2010 remodeled and expanded the building to its current size.

With growth, the congregation moved from a pastoral-size with the minister at the center of things, to a program-sized congregation with programs at the center, a shift that continues to this day.

2012 brought more tension to the congregation. A staffer had legal troubles that were not related to their position at OUUC, but affected their position. When Arthur took personnel actions that included placing the staffer on administrative leave, some members were angry at the disruption, angry with Arthur and the Board; some were supportive of the actions, and others left the congregation. The congregation was divided, with some broken relationships and broken trust. When the legal trouble was cleared and the staffer returned in 2013, the echoes of the conflict could still be heard.

Toward the end of Arthur's ministry, the congregation explored a new model of governance or how to share power and make decisions. The congregation voted to change the bylaws to support this new model of policy governance, placing more authority with the Board and more responsibility with the staff.

When Arthur retired in 2014, he was OUUC's longest serving minister and congregants grieved his leaving; some still do. OUUC invited another transitional minister, Emily Melcher, who said the goal of her ministry was to disrupt things. And that she did. Emily moved the congregation even further into the new governance model, disbanding many long-standing committees and the Program Council that coordinated them. The organizational structure changed, and many things shifted in preparation for a new settled minister.

But that ministry was short-lived. Thomas Perchlick was at OUUC for about 7 months before leaving in 2016 as the result of a negotiated resignation, which is a mutual agreement for a minister to leave a settlement. Not only were the hopes of the congregation for a new minister dashed, but there was controversy again. While the new governance model gave the Board the authority to make this decision and to protect the confidentiality of a personnel action, some were upset that the entire congregation was not consulted. Some were happy with Thomas's ministry and confused by his leaving. Others fully supported the Board's decision.

After that, OUUC members invited another transitional minister, Eric Posa, to help further the governance shift, to help make sense of what had happened, and to re-examine wishes for the future. In 2017, the congregation also voted to sell the house and land next door, saying goodbye to the Out of the Woods shelter. Some still grieve that decision.

During this transitional time, the congregation entered an extended period of reflection and discernment about their future and what kind of ministry they wanted. In the Spring of 2019, OUUC searched for a settled minister and on May 5, the congregation voted to call me to minister for the next leg of the journey.

Let's just pause for a moment to take a breath after galloping through 70 years of

congregational history!

When I arrived in August of 2019 following the years of disruption and transition, I heard a longing for unity and cohesion, for stability and calm, for a way forward, a desire to be of purpose and relevant in the community again. Some expressed a desire to return to the sense of purpose that existed during Arthur's time. Others had never known that time and just wanted to feel a sense of moving forward to a new future of calm and purposeful action. I shared that longing for purposeful action, too.

My heart ached as I saw that leaders and staff were understandably exhausted from carrying the congregation through tumultuous change and transition. Many were weary of uncertainty, disruption, and turmoil. Others were weary of waiting for the new minister---there was a long list of things on hold.

Before too long, I noticed uncertainty about the role of the minister and what our relationship would be. There was uncertainty and differences of opinion about how decisions should be made and who should make them. It was unclear who set the priorities of the congregation, who developed the vision and mission, who decided new projects.

I noticed that I had different expectations about roles and how governance could work. So I reached out for help with understanding the history of the congregation, listening to many stories. The Board and I used a consultant to better understand the new governance model and how it worked in other congregations. There were the glimmerings of movement forward, or at least a path. We were beginning to building relationships and trust, beginning to build a shared ministry.

And then suddenly in early 2020 everything changed. With the global pandemic, all our attention and energy shifted from moving forward, to individual and collective safety, and the health of the OUUC community.

Now, two years into this crisis, I believe we have done remarkably well. It's not ideal to connect virtually, but it has helped us stay connected and we have done a good job of doing so. I am so grateful for the many volunteers who have come forward to lead groups and classes, welcome visitors online, and provide tech support. The Board and many teams continue to meet and do their important work.

There are some who have not felt as connected and I hope that will shift as we slowly return to more in-person engagement. We all know the pandemic is not done with us yet, and we are doing a good job living in the between time. That we have some fun events coming up is a testament to some hope for the future.

Despite the uncertainty of the pandemic, some of my uncertainty about things at OUUC has cleared. I still have questions, wonderings about how things can work. I know many of you do, too. I have leaned on other consultants to help me learn more and formed a Ministry Development Team this past year to help imagine how to move forward. I've learned and grown a lot these past three years, and my heart has opened in ways I never imagined. You are my personal spiritual trainers indeed.

What I know is that OUUC is in the early stages of learning a new way of making decisions and sharing power. The process of implementing a new governance model at OUUC was slowed by many minister and lay leader transitions. And, we know more now about how policy-based governance is used in congregations, that each one does it differently and I believe that, over time, we can find a way to make it work here. We took a big step forward last year in creating and adopting a new vision, mission, and goals for the difference we want to make in our lives and in the world. Next year we can look forward to revisiting our congregational covenant. I know we can do this together and that we can do it from a place of love and care.

I also know that the transition from a pastoral to a program-sized church is still in process. We've made progress, and there are shifts in how we do things and how we think about things that remain. In other words, there is good and important work to do, work we can do together.

The history of this congregation doesn't predict the future but we can learn from it. We can see that each phase of the congregation's story gave cause for joyous celebration and had its challenges. We can see that people join a faith community for reasons that last through time: for community and connection, for spiritual growth for themselves and their families, to help make the world a better place. And we can see that predictable things can cause uncertainty and conflict: buildings and space, the purpose of gathering, power and decision-making, ministers, and shared ministry.

And that brings us to the upcoming events on June 4. On that day, we will celebrate the 70th anniversary of this congregation, from UFO to OUUC. And we will celebrate that you and I found each other and our covenantal relationship. While the vote to call me as your minister was a legal act, if you will, the Service of Installation is a spiritual act that recognizes the covenant between a congregation and a minister. Usually the installation service is done in the first or second year of a new ministry. Our ministry together has been anything but usual, so we'll do this at the end of year three with humility and joy.

To me the act of installation is a solemn and joyous occasion. The promises that we make to each other are the container that holds us as we do the important work of the congregation together. And for me, what is even more important than the promises we make is our efforts to live into those promises. None of us can promise that there won't

be different opinions or uncertainty. We can promise to stay in relationship as we work it out.

There is a mighty group of volunteers working hard to create a meaningful celebration on June 4. I am so grateful for the many hands! Zoe Myers is leading a robust group of people working on all the many details for the day. If you are interested in helping, please contact Zoe.

Tim Ransom, Emily Ray and Lee Doyle are collecting the history of OUUC over the past 10 years, planning an event for the afternoon of May 1 to help gather stories of the past and hopes for the future. No matter how long you have been part of this community, you are welcome to add your part, so look for more information in the weeks to come, and look for the 70th anniversary display on June 4.

Over this next month, you are invited to reflect on and share your thoughts and feelings about your relationship to your minister. Neil Weinberg, Martha Nicoloff, Helen Henry, and Don Melnick will offer opportunities to gather and discuss. The dates for those opportunities are in today's order of service and will be on the OUUC website calendar. Today's reflection questions are the start of that process.

And, again on May 1, right after the service, we'll have a time for congregational input into our shared ministry. Out of that sharing of our hopes and dreams, members of the Worship Arts Team and I will craft the promises we'll make to each other in our Service of Installation on June 4.

As we move into the next phase of OUUC's story, we can continue to be in relationship and build trust in new ways, exploring our shared ministry. We have been doing that all along, of course; that's an on-going process that never ends. I am grateful for what you have taught me and I look forward to growing together. I am honored to be with you for this part of OUUC's story, and I offer blessings for the future of this congregation and at least another 70 years.

Our spiritual theme for the month of April is "wonder" from the OUUC mission. Over these next weeks as we reflect and emerge, I invite us to cultivate a spirit of curiosity and wonder. Who knows what might arise to surprise and delight us.

Let's take a breath together. And another breath as we move into a moment of silence together.