

## Nothing Stays the Same – The Rev. Linda Thomson

It has been an extraordinary 4 years. February 2020 almost seems like a dream to me. I remember being on a family vacation with my daughter and grandson, and the conversations she and I had about a virus that was making people ill. As we watched him play, we wondered if we shouldn't have cancelled, and then shrugged it off. Little did we know that cancel and pivot and reimagine would become so central to our vocabularies. Little did we know that the rotating teacher strikes that were disrupting his Jr. Kindergarten year would, so soon, seem insignificant. It has been an extraordinary 4 years.

It has been personally and organizationally extraordinary. I know from my vantage point as one of the Congregational Life staff of the CUC, is that every single congregation and UU community has some bruises and tender spots today that weren't there 4 years ago. Yes, we all became more familiar with Zoom, we've struggled through meetings, and we've done some good and important work. Our congregations needed to work harder. And we needed to do it without the glue, that potlucks and coffee and doing dishes, and parking lot conversations had previously provided. Our congregations lost some people, some moved, some found on-line didn't work for them, and others died, and in large part, some of that happened almost invisibly, without the attention and rituals that often accompany departures.

It has been an extraordinary 4 years. And I suspect I'm not alone in saying, "I'd rather not do that again!"

And while things have changed, there is a desire, a hope, to return to familiar and comforting patterns. It is good to sing together, to drink coffee together. What a relief to arrive out of many singular rooms, walking over the branching streets. Coming to be assured that siblings and friends surround us, to restore their images on our eyes.

I want you to stop and think for a moment.

Why are you here today? Why do you choose to make this congregation part of your life? What deep need does it, or do you

hope it, can meet?

Recently, I was at a UU event and gave a presentation, on this same topic and I asked the participants to discuss similar questions and the answers I heard reaffirmed for me why we do this. People want to live lives of meaning, to consider how to live with integrity, to cultivate compassion, and to know that others care about them and the journey of their life. We come together because we need one another and because our human stories are sometimes ones of loneliness and fracture and hurt, and because we know that others can help us navigate those choppy waters.

There is a hard truth that I think we all know, but that we, or at least I, spend a fair amount of time denying. Change is inevitable. Change is inevitable and at times it is profoundly uncomfortable. My observation is that most people want to believe they are ok with change. We all want to believe that we're secure enough, or hip enough, or enlightened enough to tolerate, if not embrace change. And, the truth is we probably are, some of the time, about some things.

Let's face it, if we are honest, the idea of a "who-knows-what future" can be frightening. And for some of us, those living closer to the edge, those who are facing a lot of loss, change can feel even more threatening. So, it is no wonder then that organizations facing change sometimes find themselves meeting resistance and confusion.

Change is inevitable. Our very patterns and expectations of about community have changed. The time is right, I think, to ask ourselves if getting reacquainted means doing things the way we did before the pandemic. If we've been changed by the past four years, and our communities have been changed too, maybe we need to revisit some of the habits we've held on to. This is a time, perhaps more than any other when we can fruitfully ask ourselves if the forms, the habits, the patterns the customs we've established serve the function of your congregation.

My husband and I came to the First Unitarian Church of Hamilton in 1983, with two small children. He and I had both attended churches, in mainstream protestant traditions, as children. I remember feeling relief that I was able to combine the 'coming home' feeling of being in church without a theology that I found problematic. I was happy to find a Sunday School program for my daughters, one that would help them develop a faith-based grounding for their lives.

There is a tendency in me to make assumptions when I see people come to church now, with their 3- and 5-year-olds in tow, as I did. But as soon as I start, there is a very real danger that I will get it wrong. I can't assume they have 'church' experiences or expectations as I did. I can't assume that they want a class-like program for their children, I can't assume they are cis-gendered and that their families are nuclear or monogamous. Things have changed, families have changed, the world has changed.

In the Christian scriptures there is a recounting of Jesus teaching about new approaches to faith and its teachings, "No one tears a piece out of a new garment to patch an old one. Otherwise, they will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old." I know, I know, because of my age and my life experience, that there is much in the way we used to fashion congregational life, that was familiar and comfortable. But If I expect newcomers or potential newcomers to fit my 41-year-old expectations of congregational life, I'm doing my best to patch the old with the new. If we care about the living tradition which Unitarian Universalism claims to be, if we care about the deep human need for meaning and connection we are obligated, and I don't think obligated is too strong a word, to remember a few things.

If you believe as I do, that the human need for connection and meaning-making are universal, even as the ways we seek to meet those needs have changed, you'll agree that it is time to be courageous and to remember that congregational life isn't intended to make me comfortable but rather it is about building a community where we are all challenged to explore together, even as we, at times, do our best to ease the hurts of some, while celebrating the joys of others. This won't look the same today as it did 40, or even 4 years

ago.

Changes in our culture, over the years, exaggerated by the pandemic have led to fewer opportunities for cross-generational relationships. Ours used to be a highly age-integrated society, and now the opposite. A recent study asked people over 60 to think about people with whom they had discussed important or meaningful topics. Only 25% of the people with whom they had meaningful conversations were under the age of 36; when family members were removed from the mix, that percentage dropped to just six.

This is the context in which we are working to reestablish our connections with one another and to revitalize communities. Many of us are coming out of a period of isolation and its associated challenges, and we are looking to ease our sense of dis-ease and to reestablish meaningful relationships.

Sociologists think in terms of 3 places where people have routine social interactions. Home and Family is the first. Work is the second, and other settings, like clubs, barbershops, and churches are the 3<sup>rd</sup>. Arguably for many people home and family life was disrupted. Sunday dinners, or regular afternoons with the grandchildren disappeared for many people. While there are real advantages to home-based work, which is still more prevalent than it was before we'd ever heard of COVID-19, there are disadvantages too. Without the informal water-cooler connections that physical proximity makes easier, the connections of the 2<sup>nd</sup> place weakened. 3<sup>rd</sup> places literally closed during the pandemic, and they are, in general, becoming less and less common. No wonder so many people are feeling lost, lonely, and out of sorts. Those of us with connections to a traditional 3<sup>rd</sup> place, a faith community, consider ourselves lucky. We are looking to become reacquainted with each other and to revitalize congregations.

But this is not easy. Our faith communities find it surprisingly difficult to fling open their doors to include others. One of the criteria for the third place, even as it exposes us to greater diversity than we might otherwise encounter, is that it provides a feeling of inclusiveness and belonging. Too many new people, too quickly can

leave us with the sense of disruption in our third place.

I've seen this in congregations. We've all been alive long enough to know that change is inevitable, but our affection to our congregations and communities can make us resistant to change. Many, if not most UUs have found their community as adults. Raised in another tradition or without a faith tradition, people become very attached to some of the familiar routines and traditions. It works for us, sometimes it feels absolutely life-changing! No wonder significant shifts feel scary or unsettling. I remember hearing a UU minister remark that in our communities, where we don't have a common doctrine or set of beliefs, we attach ourselves very strongly to some of the common practices. You only need to have observed a congregation try to shift their practices around Joys and Sorrows to know what they meant. I've heard good people remark, "But, new people want to change things!" In theory, we like the idea of new people. It is harder in practice. I confess I cringe a bit when I hear people get excited about communities of like-minded people. I think we can do better than that. We don't need to hold the same views about a deity or an afterlife (or not). I think our congregations would be diminished if they did. Personally, I am glad to hear views that are different than mine, views that challenge me to consider other possibilities. To be sure, to fit into a UU congregation you need to be comfortable with views that are different than your own. If like-minded means we are curious or open, I can live with that descriptor. However, too often I think it means we share a tendency towards a certain theological or doctrinal outlook.

Never have I heard an organization say its purpose was to become obsolete, or that its values were to make people feel safe and comfortable. Congregations and most communities exist to make a difference – both in the lives of their members and in the larger communities they serve. A quick scan of the websites of the Canadian Unitarian Council and some Canadian congregations leads to an understanding of how we want to be in the world:

-we envision a world in which our interdependence calls us to love and justice,

- empower people to live with greater depth, meaning and purpose.  
We welcome all to our caring community,

- inviting all people to rest, grow, and serve the world.

Yet too often our actions don't align with those statements. It seems the gap between values and purpose and action is common.

Edwin Friedman, a rabbi who applied Family Therapy insights to organizational structures reflected that too often leaders spend their time trying to do the safe thing, instead of the thing that will move them further toward realizing their goals and values.

These are trying and troubled times. There is much that makes a retreat to old patterns and their perceived safety seem compelling. But we know that these trying and troubling times call for new responses. We don't want to spend our time shoring up structures that don't work anymore. Loren Mead, another organizational consultant who specialized in religious community, said, "Every generation is tempted to preserve the structures rather than the insights of the previous generation...the critical task is to break through the structures and help the insights—if they are still viable—find structures more adequate for a new time."

So, what is a leader to do? Organizations resist change, even when the change is an ever-present reality. There is no staying the same, try as we might. It is hard, and for many of us, the answer is easily found. Open your website, look at your brochure, read your mission statement. Almost all organizations have already said what they want to do and achieve and how they want to be in the world. The work of the leader is to remind people, likely starting with themselves, of where it is they intend to go. And then, take a breath, together, and begin the work of being the congregation that you know you want to be. Outcomes are not certain. The work of change, of living into ideals is hard, because even as you start, having assessed the situation, things will change again. It is an adventure, and in my experience, adventures are better undertaken with friends.

