

The State of Our Union

A Sermon in Two Parts –

by Rev. Kathleen Rolenz & Rev. John Crestwell

Sunday, December 8, 2019

The State of Our Union is Strong – is the line that almost every President says during their State of Union address – and then will go on to elucidate exactly how strong we are. Today’s homily will be no different, in that I want to talk a little bit about what I’ve experienced as your interim these past two years. I really do believe the state of this union is strong - but the bigger question is - strong in what ways? In what ways have you grown? In what ways are you still growing? What is your identity now? What are you ready to embrace? What are you afraid of embracing? These are the kind of questions an interim minister thinks about and reflects on. So this morning, I want to be candid with you about what I have seen in the past and what’s happening currently in the present and then turn it over to Rev John who will share with you his hopes and dreams for UUCA’s future.

I’ve serve three congregations as an interim minister, and each time, I discovered how difficult it is for congregations to fully understand what an interim minister is and does. It’s nobody’s fault – because when you’ve had a settled minister for a long time, that’s what you know and that’s what you’ve either come to love or endure – depending on your relationship that minister. When I think about interim ministry, the metaphor that comes to mind is that I’m a kind of house inspector. If you’ve ever had a home inspection, you know that the inspector is looking for both minor repairs and structural integrity. So they look at everything; some of it trivial, some of it substantial. It’s the interim’s job – and responsibility to peer into every nook and cranny of the church to reveal the relatively minor problems like old carpet or an outdated kitchen vs. structural damage to the foundation of the house. So, I fired up my interim flashlight and begun to examine both the I-Beams of

your infrastructure as well as to dig deeper into the closets of your history to see who you who have been in the past and how that has shaped who you are now – in the present. I am happy to say that the foundation of your church is very solid.

What I discovered is that the State of Your Union is Strong, because of your commitment to ministry, to the Principles which frame our faith and to one another. Let me unpack that a bit. When I say a commitment to ministry – I mean both to professional ministry, as experienced with Rev. Fred, Rev. Christina and Rev. John, as well as the ministry of your staff and your all the church volunteers who make this place run. You are one of the most industrious, hard working, earnest-in-the-best-sense-of-the-word congregation I have ever had the pleasure serving. You take your commitments to social justice seriously and strive through your various ministries to live out the Unitarian Universalist Principles; all seven plus one, in this church, in this community and in the wider world. You’re insistent– whether demanding same-sex equality in marriage, or that Black and Brown and Undocumented Lives Matter; or that our imperiled planet needs saving – you are on the front lines of justice and liberation. Your voice is heard beyond Annapolis – beyond Anne Arundel County even. As you move into your next chapter of life -there’s nothing that can prohibit you from becoming the congregation you dream about..well, I take that back. I think there may be a few things you still need to clean out of your metaphorical closets before you fully can move forward into the future. Let me tell you what I mean.

Every congregation has its own culture. When I lived in Knoxville, TN I was frustrated by the fact that people wouldn’t say what they meant directly; they would frame their message to me with things like “that was a really nice sermon, bless your heart,” which I later discovered was not really a compliment. However, when I read YOUR history and heard stories about openly hostile and confrontational behavior from your past, I wondered what I was getting myself into. What I’ve discovered is that

today, that the culture of openly hostile behavior is no longer tolerated. I really applaud you for that. You have taken seriously your Safe Congregation's Covenant and attempt to live that out in all you do. The church feels like a healthy and safe place to be.

But there's a curious flip side to this equation. More than once during my tenure here, I've experienced a culture that is conflict averse. I've heard about rumblings in the congregation about the interim – something I've done or said - but seldom have those with concerns come and spoken directly with me. I've heard about them through Rev. John or President Heather Millar. I get that because you don't know me you may find it easier or more desirable to talk to someone you do know. But I want to challenge this pattern and encourage you to practice on me in preparation for your next minister. Because you won't know that person and because you may find them intimidating or perceive them to be inaccessible – you will perpetuate a culture of back channel communication. That kind of communication is not only hostile, but creates a toxic triangle for any and every institution. It also will put Rev. John in an awkward situation; of wanting to be pastoral to you and to be in a covenantal and honest relationship with his colleague. So please, if you have questions or concerns go directly to the person with whom you have a concern. It will make the State of Our Union stronger and healthier.

The second thing you can do to support the I-Beams of our Union is to continue to embrace change. Often times when an interim leaves and a new minister is called and installed, the congregation feels like “at last, we can go back to normal.” This interim period is just the beginning of a new normal. I can understand how overwhelming these past two years have been. Since 2018, you have witnessed the departure of eight staff members. The reason for each departure is unique and cannot be attributed to a single cause. At the same time, I understand that stability in staff and predictability are comforting to church members, especially during period of transition. So while we can appreciate the

contributions of all of these former staff members, we can also celebrate that which is still here – and to embrace the changes which are going to continue to come! I see people coming to church and laughing and embracing one another. I see children engaged and connected; I see a building that gets more and more vibrant. I meet new people who have fallen in love with this place – who can't believe they found UUCA. You are thriving in so many ways – and I believe you will continue to thrive only if you continue to fully embrace the changes that will continue to come.

And speaking of changes, perhaps one of the biggest changes for me has been the shift from Interim Senior Minister to simply Interim Minister. When I was hired as your Interim Senior Minister, I was expected to supervise and evaluate Rev. John. Within short order, that arrangement began to feel weird to both of us. While some churches do still have Senior and Associate ministers who are called, they are all too often fraught with the tension between two ministers of equal standing in our Unitarian Universalist Association on the one hand; and a subordinate relationship as Senior and Associate. Not to mention the fact that Rev. John has, by virtue of his tenure here, has more actual seniority in this system than I do. So, at Rev. John's urging, we began to explore a different model of ministry; one where we were co-equals with different portfolios. It's a work in progress, but I have to say, it certainly feels better to me AND is consistent with your history of bold and courageous innovations--which I believe is one of your greatest strengths.

I'm so proud of the leaps of faith you have taken; whether to add and live out the 8th Principle; to challenge your concepts of ministry; or to listen thoughtfully to my humble opinions and sometimes embrace and sometimes discard them – you have done all this and so much more with strength and grit and grace. As an interim I don't often get to show you my love and affection for you, but I hope to do more of that in the remainder of my time here. It is – and will continue to be – a great privilege to serve you. In

June 2020, when I pick up my walking stick and say goodbye, I'll offer a final reflection on these last six months and predictions about your future – and mine – but for now - enough about me! In the immortal words of the character from Monty Python and the Holy Grail, "I'm not dead yet!" so, with that, I'd like to invite Rev. John to share what he sees as the future of UUCA. Take it away, Rev. John!

THE STATE OF OUR UNION -II

Rev. John T. Crestwell, Jr. / December 8, 2019

IMAGINE... It's Sunday morning in the year 2023 and there's a buzz in the air. The UUCA building smells and looks clean—because it is! Everything is where it should be. The building-addition has been built and there are one or more FULL worship services. The overflow room is utilized for people who are late. There are monitors around the church that show the worship service; there's a quiet room for parents and babies, if needed. Faith Formation religious education has new spacious rooms. Children are everywhere, and they LOVE coming to UUCA because the programs are modern, exciting, challenging and fun. There are over 200 kids in the program! Our Faith Formation children are all hues from the many multi-racial families that attend.

The two ministers have huddled before service, said some prayerful/meaningful words together, and are off to greet the people coming through the door. These two are the perfect complement of charisma, intelligence, compassion, and authenticity. They understand the theological/sociological/psychological balance needed to lead; and they lead with their hearts and heads. They have fun, laugh a lot, and inspire the staff and members. People want them to be in their presence. That infectious spirit of invitation ripples through UUCA and the local community. They live beloved community personally and professionally.

IMAGINE...In the Narthex there are hugs, smiles and laughter. The people (kids included) look young and old; are black, brown and white and all shades in

between. It looks like a United Nations meeting but these are residents from mostly Anne Arundel and Prince George's County, MD.

IMAGINE that there are many new services at UUCA... Our elderly, people with disabilities, and the "transportation insecure" have a transport service that brings them to and from church. We provide new ministries for those in a life-transition; those going through divorce; those in recovery... Programs, specifically, for parents with children (especially moms) who are stressed out; and a new GBLTQ+ support group that cares for youth, teens and adults, to name a few. 50% of our members are in a small group; and all of these groups will practice being in right-relationship because we are a relational, self-aware, emotionally literate congregation—meaning the church has a spiritual practice of covenanting and talking to each other and those in the community, regularly. We practice deep-listening—call it a "presence ministry". We will come to be known by this simple but effective way of growing our souls and spreading our UU message of inclusive love, because that is who and what we are—a body of faith, hope, and love.

IMAGINE...Worship services that are intellectually stimulating and spirit-filled; there is hymn-singing; new UU hymns; lots of eclectic music throughout worship. It's not uncommon to hear Mozart and Kirk Franklin in the same service. Our members love the diversity. "We have folk, gospel, pop, and Bach! There's no place like this!" And there isn't! There're instrumentalists within the congregation who provide support to the music program. The UUCA choir is LARGE 50+ and racially and demographically diverse just like the congregation.

IMAGINE...UUCA is now 30% racially diverse. 3 in 10 are people of color, including the kids. The staff, committees, and small groups are racially and demographically diverse. UUCA is a model congregation in the UUA and many UUs want to know how we are succeeding when so many UU faith

communities are polarized and struggling to become more racially diverse. We tell them that “it’s because we are having difficult conversations through covenanting and right-relationship building.” We say, “We have talked and talked about race & racism and now it has less power to paralyze us from doing the work of moving ourselves and each other toward beloved community. We know that ‘BC starts with me!’ Beloved Community starts with me. ‘As within so without.’”

We build relationships inside (self-awareness) and outside our doors in the community one person at a time, because we are a relational congregation. The Middle Hour/After Hour programming, including the Mixers is still a smashing success! We realize we are creating a new model for church in the 21st century—because we are!

UUCA becomes known (even more) for its authentic relationship-building, friendliness and welcoming nature. I hear all the time: They’re just nice people inside and out.” “Those UUs are some cool folks!” We embrace the both/and instead of the either/or as congregation. “It’s not us versus them but us AND them. We are ONE.” We value quantum ideas and not just linear ideas because we know the world is complex and requires a multi-dimensional approach. Therefore, you will hear sermons from our deep theological library (EVERY BOOK EVER WRITTEN). Sermons on current events, world religions, Jesus or Buddha or Darwin or The Tao of Pooh; sermons about science and religion—covering topics from addiction, marriage, and relationships, to social justice, environmental justice and human rights. Members love the eclecticism—because that’s who we are. We embrace the “middle path”, or balance, or homeostasis—accepting that there are many paths to LOVE. God is a metaphor to some and literal to others; and for some not important at all. Why? Because LOVE that unites is our focus.

IMAGINE that we are the religious and social mediators in our community. People come to us to settle hard disputes. Why? Because we hold

ourselves and others accountable to their “stuff” in every co-creative process. We want everyone to be 100% responsible for their part of any relationship because being beloved community, in part, means less projection and more introspection. We help those inside and outside our doors embrace and face their shadows.

What about social justice? We are still leaders in the community. ACT (Anne Arundel Connecting Together) is a primary place for this work—but not the only place. ACT has helped us learn that “We do not do for others that which they can do for themselves.” So, we no longer participate in things that we perceive to be toxic charity (which does more harm than good); but we focus on “empowerment charity” because religious liberalism (in the purest sense of the word) means freedom—we are working to free people physically, mentally, and spiritually from the illusion of separateness and that work is for the rich and poor alike. So the work is really SHARING our co-creative message about being responsible creators on this planet we all inhabit. We are not an issue-based not-for-profit; we are a religious community—a church. And as a religious community our goal is to model beloved community through accountable interpersonal relationship development. This doesn’t mean we don’t call out the social, religious and political evils and abuses in the world, but it means that we always come back to our center of love for humanity, guided by our 8-principles. We are bold and compassionate in our approach to everything.

Lastly, IMAGINE an abundant and generous people where money is an instrument for social change—that our congregation gives 10% of its total budget away for social justice. I IMAGINE that that’s \$100,000, annually, of our over \$1-million-dollar budget from over 600 members.

In addition to this generosity, members are building a local business to employ marginalized people. We are also social entrepreneurs learning from Elizabeth Kinney’s example with the Light

House Bistro (she and her partners raised \$6-million to build the restaurant that employs the underrepresented). She along with Father Greg Boyle, author of *Tattoos from the Heart*, are showing us that the church can advocate and create jobs for people in need. IMAGINE that UUCA has several summer camps and a pre-school for 2 to 4-year-olds; and that all our ventures are very profitable (and racially diverse). The resources from these businesses not only support staff but also our philanthropic spirit. We have more money than we need, so we give more money away. We are fortunate and blessed and are an example of what institutional church and the planet can become by following our example. We become the living embodiment of beloved community.

I IMAGINE that our ancestors and UU forebearers will look upon us with a smile and say, "Well done, good and faithful servants of humanity." This is my personal vision. Imagine...Imagine...Imagine it. Amen.