

The Light of Days Remembered

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50th Anniversary of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Las Cruces

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50 years seems like a long time, yet many of us, can indeed recall events from fifty years ago and more. Some of our memories are shrouded in forgetfulness, and others are sharp as yesterday.

It has been a joy to hear the memories of those who were interviewed for the video. They may be fuzzy on some of the details, but they remember clearly why they came to a Unitarian fellowship and what they hoped for among the people with whom they journeyed.

In a sense, we are those who have gone before. The rituals, the values, the ways we approach problems, the way we deal with change, these are all the history of this church, and we live it every day whether we were here at the beginning or not. Those who enter bring themselves and their pasts to change the whole, but they are also subsumed in the whole of what is already here.

And yet, this is not the church it was 50 years ago, not only because its name is different or its place is different, but because we are different. A former colleague in ministry retired after serving the same church for thirty years. In those years, he commented, I have actually served three different congregations. Churches change over time because the world around them changes, because new and different people make up the congregation, new and different ideas emerge and are implemented.

We grow and change according to what has been and what we hope to become. Those who were here for the first fifty years show us the way to our own accomplishments, our own hopes and dreams. And we become uniquely our own. We stand in their light today as we celebrate the past and look to the future.

Fifty years from now this church will be very different from its present state. What we hope for and dream of today will light the way to that future. What do we imagine it to be like? And can we dream wide enough and long enough to help that future happen?

There are those among our Unitarian Universalist fellows in other parts of our association who fear for the future of Unitarian Universalism itself. They fear we have lost our way as a movement and as a denomination. Michael Durall, in his book, *The Almost Church*, points to the uncanny ability of many UU churches to remain hidden, to overlook budgeting for outreach, hold astonishingly low member expectations and maintain a general inward looking vision.

If these things are true of most of our UU churches and fellowships, Unitarian Universalism is indeed in line for extinction. But if they are simply part of a general maturation process, then there is hope.

One of the attributes of a new young congregation is a general enthusiasm, a belief that the church and the group will somehow make lives better, and a permission granting atmosphere where new ideas are welcome.

Some of the ways new congregations can trip up is by poor or nonexistent planning, and the unwillingness to create and stick to boundaries. UUs often allow our value of individual freedom to over ride and tromp over our value of community and cooperation.

I have no doubt that this church has fallen into some less than helpful behaviors in spite of its enthusiasm. Every church does. I am sure that this church has slipped down the slippery slope of compromising its values for the sake of personal agendas. These are all a part of growth and learning, a part of maturing.

I am equally sure that this congregation has taken risks, has learned from its mistakes, and has dared to dream. A look at our membership will show us that, for many, church has been a revolving door, but there are those here today who have stayed the course, have found meaning and purpose here and have made the world a better place for having been a part of this church.

The hope for this church is that it is a learning and growing church. Today's congregation has learned from the successes and failures of the past. We haven't got all our problems solved yet, and there is still much to learn, but if all UU churches were showing the promise that this church is showing, people might be a little more hopeful about the future of our UU movement.

If we can take a lesson from the early days and continue to be a "permission granting" church, we will be healthy and vital long into the future. A permission granting church is one whose mission is to allow and support new outreach efforts as they emerge from within the congregation. A mission such as ours, which calls us to live and to spread our values, is a mission that empowers people to do what they are called to do in the world.

And as we equip our people for their spontaneous personal and small group ministries, we can realize that we are not the same as that UU Fellowship of 1955. We will have clear lines of accountability, plenty of funding available for worthy efforts, and an openness to new ways of being. The enthusiasm and hope those people had 50 years ago need not fade over time, but can become brighter and sharper with clearer guidelines and intention.

If we can conceive of our church as a place where our lives are changed for the better, then leading lives of meaning and purpose will be the norm. We will create more and more opportunities for members and friends to come together for meaningful personal engagement, the kind of engagement that rarely happens in other settings, where people talk about their questions, their doubts, their hopes, and their faith and what is truly meaningful in their lives. The talk will be followed by the walk, as people live according to the meaning and purpose their church has helped them discover.

Last week Barbara Hall read a piece from an early newsletter of the fellowship where every member was called upon to take their turn at serving on the Board. While we can be inspired by the expectation of commitment on the part of the membership, in our future

everyone will be doing what they are called by their lives to do, not just filling a slot because no one else would do it.

We will be well known in our community for our effective outreach ministries, because each person will be given opportunities to use their personal gifts for the good of others. Ours will be an outward looking church, one that knows that the purpose of a church is to make a difference.

In the final chapter of his book, Michael Durall describes his vision of the UU church of the future. It is a church, which some people here today would not be happy with, but then it is his dream not ours. Our church of the future will be like us. It will be created from the strength and commitment we pour into it today.

Our church of the future will surely incorporate different rituals, different types of gatherings and different styles of leadership and followership. But it will also be grounded in traditions brought forward from the past. It will be based on a strong desire to provide quality religious education for children and adults, it will have a strong music program utilizing the talents of many types and styles of musicians, it will be committed to making a difference in the world. Surely it will include plenty of good discussion.

If today, we do the things we do well, if we build on our strong desire for learning and understanding, if we continue the tradition of generosity and attitude of abundance which has been nurtured in recent years, and keep open to new ways of doing church, we will not only continue to grow, we will be a powerful force for good in our community, a center of ideas and change and action.

In the overall scheme of things 50 years isn't long at all. If we look through the telescope at the stars and planets, as Clyde Tombaugh taught us to do, we realize that our time together is a mere breath, not even a blip in the life of the universe. And yet we are here, together, giving our lives purpose in this brief flash of time.

Our church of the future will be ignited by the past, illuminated by the present and will be sprinkled with the glow of star dust wherein the past becomes the future, as we gaze up into the night sky and wonder.