

Love, Learn, Live
Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo
Sunday, May 20, 2012
Rev. Margret A. O’Neill

We come to church to love, to create and nurture a beloved community. We celebrate the loving connection in this Sanctuary when we welcome our children into the care of this community, dedicating ourselves to them. We celebrate love when we welcome our older children as they come before us with statements of belief and commitment, homilies on how they have grown up in this community. We celebrate the loving connection here when we welcome new members into the church, as we will again in June. Church is where we love.

We come to church to learn, to understand our history as a people of faith, and the courage and commitment of those who came before us. We come to understand the world, to broaden our horizons, to know our connection to all of humanity, to all of life on the planet, to the ultimate nature of the universe. We come to church better to know ourselves, to deepen our understanding of our motives and our values, preparing to live consciously in the world. Today we celebrate the teachers and the learners in our lifespan religious education program. Church is where we learn.

Today we acknowledge, thank and celebrate all those who teach and volunteer in our lifespan religious education program, creating a learning community for those of all ages here. Today we celebrate the wonderful achievement of our newly Credentialed Religious Educator, as Sonja has invested five long years of study and preparation to qualify for that credentialing. Sonja’s achievement speaks well not only of her intelligence, wisdom and commitment, but also to the intelligence, wisdom and commitment of this church. Two years ago you took the courageous step to invest in creating and funding an expanded position, and you searched carefully to find a well-qualified person to serve you as a full time professional lifespan religious educator. We have all supported Sonja as she has completed her credentialing requirements, as she has stretched to become the best she can be in her role. Learning and development are important for all of us in our faith journeys. As we continue to strengthen our faith development programs here, this church deepens its capacity to be a community where we learn together the lessons for a life fully lived.

The loving and the learning are all in preparation for us to live, as church provides the foundation and the means for us to act upon our values in the world, and to engage with others to create the world that might be. Today we celebrate the graduating seniors who have been nurtured in this church. Some of them might say that they were “born in this church,” though that always makes me wonder where our labor and delivery suite might be located. Others among them did not find us until they were in grade school or high school. In a few minutes we will celebrate the graduation of Jesse, Kali, Ben, Helen, Susan, Sicily, and Leah (though not all of them can be with us today, we do celebrate them all!) as they move forward from the spiritual and religious foundation we have provided for them in our youth program, crossing the bridge into adulthood. Church is where we live and from where we are launched into life.

The bridge is an apt metaphor for the support that a church, a faith community, provides to our journey through life. The function of a bridge is to take us from one place to another, from where we stand on one side of a ravine, on one bank of a river, on one shoulder of a superhighway – a structure that is strong and resilient, challenging and reliable for us to move from one side to the other, safely carrying us over and across to our destination. That movement might be in our beliefs, in our commitments, in our sense of who we are, or in our understanding of how we might live out the change we want to see in the world. As a bridge, the church provides the connection from where we are to where we want and need to be. The bridge is important to who we are.

In this church we experience being part of history and tradition – we understand more deeply the ways in which we are part of the ongoing stream of Unitarian and Universalist tradition that we live here.

In this church we find our ground of being, perhaps our inspiration; we center ourselves so that we may live a richer and more satisfying life.

Here we build relationships, connect with others, create our lives in community; we find kindred spirits, we forge lifelong friendships, we build a network that sustains us and challenges us to be our best.

In this church we learn to live together well in a diverse environment, growing into the difficult lessons of accepting one another, doing the sometimes difficult work of respecting and loving each other in all our diversity, and in all the ways we are fundamentally alike.

And in this open and affirming community of faith we live in the weaving of the interdependent web of all existence, committing ourselves to be present to the ways we can cultivate a practice that makes the world a better place for us all. We are all part of Lifespan Religious Education program here in this church – the congregation is the curriculum, the congregation is the teachers and learners.

As we continue to build a strong Lifespan Religious Education program for this church, it is central to the program, central to the health of this church, that we have bridges going both ways to link the separate parts of our church community. It is important that people involved in other areas of church life also commit to a role in our educational programs, whether teaching something about which they are passionate, or helping with Children's Worship, or assisting in the many activities you see listed on the insert thanking our volunteers.

At the same time, it is vital that our children be nurtured by teachers and volunteers who model what it means to be a great church member – teachers who are active and involved, committed and knowledgeable members of this faith tradition. Teachers who not only volunteer and give freely of their time and commitment in the classroom, but who understand what it takes to create a church, who attend church events and meetings, and who make and fulfill their financial pledges to do their part in supporting the church as a whole, who attend worship services when they can.

Children will best learn what it means to be part of a church from teachers who know what is going on in the rest of the church, who read the announcements, e-mails and newsletters so they can participate in the life of this amazing church community. It is important that those who teach our children be a part of the church, that they know how a UU church works, and that they are active in helping the entire church work better, so that this church is strong and capable when our children are ready to step into their leadership roles here.

Sonja and the RE Committee and I have been talking about some ways to build those bridges within this church so that the community has a chance to be connected with the RE program, and all the teachers and volunteers have the opportunity to be well integrated into the larger church community. The new program plan that we hope to put in place next year will provide time in the classroom for age-appropriate learning experiences, along with monthly opportunities for multi-age children's worship and social justice activities so that our children learn how to participate, how to sing, how to listen in worshiping community, how to create more justice in the world together. From the earliest age our children can grow to understand that church is not just about being together, but that it is also about us working together to make the world a better place.

This will also mean that our classroom teachers will be able to be here in the sanctuary with us at least a couple of times a month while the children are doing other things. And that also means that the people who are regulars in the Sanctuary – yes, maybe even some of the choir members – will be able to volunteer once or twice a month to be part of the activities with our children and youth.

And then there are all the adult learning opportunities: I plan to lead a rich and inviting leadership development curriculum next year, we certainly want to offer the amazing Building Your Own Theology classes again, and I know there will be other adult workshops and courses we have not even imagined yet. Opportunities abound to be part of this loving, learning, living community.

As we build our lifespan curriculum for spiritual development, we are deepening our connections to each other in beloved community; we are creating the teams of wise and generous

adults to guide our children as they grow in knowledge, understanding and judgment, and we are building a resource that will carry this church forward into the future.

And now, we turn our attention to the final event of this morning's service, the Bridging Ceremony. Now we honor those young women and men who have been children and youth participants in our Religious Education program here at church for lo these many years, and who are now graduating from high school, graduating from our program here at church, and are at the stage of their lives to head out for new adventures. I invite the bridging seniors along with all the members of the youth group to come forward, bringing with you the insert from the order of service that has in it the words we will read together, and stand over here on the left side of the bridge. And now is the time for the young and young-at-heart adults who have been invited to speak for our adult community to come forward, also bringing the insert with the words, and stand at the right side of the bridge.

Sonja will be one of those on the adult side to welcome each bridging senior with the gift of a rose. When we dedicate our children in this church we give them a rose from which the thorns have been removed, to provide a safe place for that child's life to unfold in grace and beauty, like a rose. When our no-longer-children cross over to the adult side, we give them a complete rose, thorns and all, symbolizing the reality that life has both safety and risk, and that their continued unfolding will be a journey with elements of beauty and also of pain, as is truly the nature of the world.