

## **“The NEXT 150 Years of Reason and Compassion in Action: Got Vision?”**

[Ought to have been titled: “Road Trip!!!!”]

**A sermon delivered by the Reverend Gail Ruth Geisenhainer  
for the First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Ann Arbor.  
On April 12, 2015 on the occasion of an “Our Story” Sunday  
as part of our year-long celebration of the 150th Anniversary  
of the founding of our Congregation.**

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### **My Sound Track:**

My work today is to set out before you an invitation to join in co-creating with me, and with one another, a vision for the next chapters we will write together in the life of this Congregation. Looking ahead is much like driving at night on dark and curvy roads. The headlights of insight show only the next 200 yards..., never the long-view. The headlights may show the immediate potholes and obstacles..., but never the troubles and never the beauty that lies way ahead. That view is found only in moving down the road together.

My reflections for our future are grounded in and inspired by two hymns. The First, Hymn # 145, As Tranquil Streams, has been often quoted this past year. The 150th Anniversary Planning Team chose a line from this hymn as our inspirational focus for the entire year of our Anniversary celebrations. You will find this phrase in verse three of Hymn # 145.

“a freedom that reverse the past,  
but trusts the dawning future more.”

In all our celebrations of this year, we have been guided by the affirmation that our past is to be revered, treasured, harvested, and celebrated..., with limits. We have pledged to put our trust in the future.

The hymn speaks of building a church that frees the mind from bonds of “narrow thought and lifeless creed,” of building a church free from a “social code that fails to serve the cause of human need,” and “bids the soul in search of truth, adventure boldly and

explore.” And with all that, we are to “go forward in the power of love, {to} proclaim the truth that makes us free.”

How can we trust the future, the unknown and unknowable future..., more than we can trust the known and familiar past?

The second hymn that has taken up residence in my mind is one from the Teal hymnal, transcribed by Ysaye Barnwell in recent years. Hymn # 1020 is titled “Woyaya.” “We are going, heaven knows where we are going, but we know within. And we will get there, heaven knows how we will get there, but we know we will.” It goes on to describe a path muddy and rough..., and repeats, “we will get there, heaven knows how we will get there, but we know we will.”

The hymns are both mandate and companionship. The first offers a guiding vision. It is a good plan for a church that treasures free thought, demands just and compassionate social codes, and pushes the seeker out beyond the bounds of the familiar. The next, the whimsical and tenacious companionship of a real traveler..., one who knows rough roads, one who plows through the mud with the equanimity found in the refrain..., “Woyaya...,” Which translates as ‘we are going...,’ Woyaya...., Woyaya...., Woyaya....”

What comes next for us? After all our reflection on the history of our Congregation..., what comes next? Who are we now? What elements of our past will we retain? What will we strengthen? What will we relinquish, what to put on hold?

With grace..., we are like the traveler in T.S.Eliot’s *The Four Quartets*. An excerpt from those poems is reading #685 in our hymnal. It concludes with this:

“We shall not cease from exploration  
and the end of all our exploring  
will be to arrive where we started  
and know the place for the first time.”

### **The Big Questions:**

Today, as part of our 150th programming, we are considering what we call our Big Questions. We have more events coming along in May: festive, reflective, raucous, and

quiet.., we plan to mark the actual day of our founding with vespers, candle light, then the rousing exchange of ideas.., and ending with a service of commissioning our future. The invitation today, written on the insert in your Order of Service, is for us to join in thought, join in questioning, join in visioning just precisely how we intend to move toward establishing the beginning that this ending makes possible. We begin, today, with writing the next chapter of our story.

In full and resplendent Unitarian Universalist character, some have already questioned the language we are using to frame the “Big Questions.” Surely, I am told, the Big Questions are not about what is the future of our Congregation? Surely, the big questions are about the meaning of life? And I agree... though, in defense of the language here.., I might call those the Larger Questions.., of which, our Big Questions are a particular sub-set.

The Larger Questions, with which the church is always engaged, are the questions about meaning and purpose.

Human beings gather in religious community to ask:

What is the meaning of life?

When did life begin?

What happens when we die?

Why does life exist?

What response can I make to evil?

How can I generate hope for others?

### **As a Sub-Set of those truly Larger Questions..,**

We are all invited together today for the first of many conversations about the Big Questions particular to the life of this Congregation. The questions with which we will start are listed on the insert in your Order of Service.

### **Next Steps and Strategic Directions:**

I offer you, here, the abridged version of my own list-in-progress of what I believe are necessary steps and strategic goals for the next chapter we will write together in the story of our Congregation. This is by no means the whole list, not at all. To quote the Face

Book meme, “not my circus, not my monkeys.” My list is not THE list. Mine is to jump start the process of visioning. I flip on the headlights on the dark road. We create this road trip: together.

### **Three Traffic Alerts:**

As we roll out, I offer three traffic alerts..., definite obstacles to our smooth travels. **First**, we need to recognize that all programs, all fresh ministries, all the activities of a church have life cycles. At some point, all programs need to be put on hold or put to rest. To survive into the 21st century, churches must learn which ministries to revise and which ones to relinquish.

**Second**, we must become vigilant about ATAP..., the expectation and practice that our ministries, our outreach, our programs are All Things to All People: ATAP. It is like a box of nails thrown out onto our roadway. They create holes in our tires..., deflating our energies, blocking our progress. ATAP. The passionate desire to assure that our church commits to the vision of being all things, on all issues, to all people. To counter the hazards of ATAP thinking, we need to focus, assess, reflect, reconsider all of our assumptions so that we can ensure maximum effectiveness, ensure we are living within our means, and ensure we are not diluting our strength.

**Third**, it is time to take on something that has vexed this Congregation since 1865. Together, we need to learn how to fund this Congregation. We started as a mission church, supported by the Unitarian Association. Most years we fail to adequately fund what we set out to do. Please, please..., do NOT hang your heads or look away. If this were simple or easy we would have figured it out by now. You all are generous and engaged. We have made huge strides toward paying down our mortgage..., but we still have not found a way to fund the upkeep of our buildings, to support the staff we clamor to have, or to fund the many ministries we envision as ours.

I offer a shout out to our Board of Trustees. For several years now our Boards have been working to find ways to fund our aspirations. This year’s Board has asked us all to engage in the questions of who we want to be and how we shall go about funding those visions. We need to do this for ourselves and for those who come after us.

### **My Trip-Tik: Where I think we could start moving forward:**

Here is my list of where I think we are ready to start moving forward. Six ideas about how our church needs to adapt to become more sustainable and effective.

**First**, our ministries of religious instruction were so important to the founders that they were mentioned explicitly in the Articles of Association. We have been successful in restructuring, revisioning spiritual growth and development to become even more deeply effective in the lives of our children and youth. In the deepest of ways, I wish all of our ministries could resemble what happens in SGD. Through our programs of Spiritual Growth and Development we give deeply of ourselves, thousands upon thousands of volunteer hours, we give deeply of our resources of time, the building, our staff..., and we give all that away. Like clockwork, years after year, we give it all away to folks who leave. This is not a surprise. This is not a failure. From the moment the littlest ones come into our nursery, we all agree on the hoped for path. Give deeply, deeply of who we are and what we have. Create an open spigot. Our life energy flows through those kids and out into the world. We give, the youth leave, and we have given our best aspirations and efforts, freely given, out into a bruised and hurting world.

Now is a time for us to assess other ministries with that same template. Are we sending Unitarian Universalism out into the wider world?

**Second**, the way we offer worship and preaching needs to change to keep up with the blazing speed of change in our culture. The models we use now were shaped centuries ago. To paraphrase Shug from Alice Walker's book *The Color Purple*, folks no longer come to church to find God. They bring God with them and we need to honor that, empower that and listen to that. Preaching needs to change..., worship models need to change..., what abides is this. Church and worship need always to be here to comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable, each in gentle measure.

I often wish we could expand our whole model for how we do Sunday mornings. I wish our two sessions of SGD could be expanded to include Adult Programming. Reliance on a Sermon for the whole of Adult Spiritual Growth and Development is a centuries old model which translates poorly into an internet connected world. What could it look like to have more lay voices in the pulpit, to have clergy teaching in smaller groups on Sunday

mornings? What if worship were less sermon focused and more relationship focused? What might that look like?

**Third**, we would be wise to reconsider how it is we envision our work for Social Justice, the Action part of the Love and Action we seek to weave each week. We are learning important paradigm changes as we come to terms with the privileges we do have. We are learning to listen, to empower, to share, and to collaborate. I am proud of the shifts we are making from offering less patriarchy, where the privileged people enter each situation talking and telling others how things should be done. We are offering more partnering. We are learning to use our privilege to become allies. We are learning to partner with traditionally marginalized groups to create new paradigms.

What could it look like if we had weekly programming, classes and discussions, learning to parter more deeply with others in what Erv Gaede, called the “crucial social, political, and philosophical issues of our time?” What could it feel like if every ministry, committee, program and group within the church included an annual service project the way our Chalice Circles are structured now?

**Fourth**, our Pastoral Care and Small Group ministries will also benefit from a time of reflection and focus. What do we need now? How has the world changed in the past twenty years? What does that mean for the needs of our folks for these ministries of intimacy and support?

Within our Pastoral Care and Small Group Ministries, we employ the same weary models of ministry that have grown stale within worship and religious education. That one, central minister model is inadequate in a world connected by the internet of everything. The minister is no longer the most educated person in the room. We would do well to think outside the 19th century box that expects only the clergy to preach and teach, only the Pastor to be present in times of need.

Nothing in the 19th century model can equip us for large church ministries. We are living with 21st century demands, 20th century communication structures and 19th century ministry models.

For my part, I find all this energizing..., I would like to work on this with you over the next few years. I'm ready for the road trip..., !

**Fifth**, always, we need to ask, what is necessary, and what is aspirational? Our founders knew that the core work of the church was fellowship. They articulated the need for religious instruction, they recognized the necessity of the temporal concerns of the organization..., and they named the need for fellowship. The core work of the church is to nurture our capacity for relationship. Some religions favor relationships of ultimacy, others favor relationships of intimacy. I believe we are here to nurture both..., and more. We are here to grow in our capacity for right relationship, with God, no matter how you unpack that word. We are here to grow in our capacity for right relationship with God, with ourselves, with each other , with our planet, and with our future.

**Finally**, a word about the future. Our world needs change. Our planet and atmosphere are desperate for human beings to change. Our systems of race relationship, gender expectations, class imbalance..., all of those systems cry out for deep, systemic, effective, immediate change. I believe the First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Ann Arbor is called to grow Leaders of Change: grounded, wise, patient, savvy, effective leaders of hopeful change.. I believe our work also includes the cultivation of Civic Leaders. We need to equip singers, painters, poets, engineers, teachers, mentors, chaplains, administrators, financial planners, architects, dreamers, scientists of every focus, doctors, healers, nurses, lawyers, fire fighters, stay-at-home parents, police, bus drivers, letter carriers, delivery drivers, baristas, librarians, custodians and CEOs..., engaged human beings in every area of community life who are equipped to lead groups of people into deep and effective change.

Every corner of our world is in bleeding need for hope and change. Naming what is needed is nowhere near enough to being helpful anymore. If it were, we would have no racism, no climate crisis. Our world needs fast change, broad change, change embraced by lots and lots of folks. Our world needs change..., and change needs leaders. We can learn to listen to emerging leaders..., we can teach one another how to be effective leaders of change.

Oh, Prophetic church, the future waits, your liberating ministry!

Go forward in the power of love.

The power of love.

The practice of love.

The experience of love

Go forward in the power of love...,

and change the hell out of our irreplaceable world.

Change the Living Hell right out

of our irreplaceable world.

Thank You.

### **SING: 131 Love Will Guide Us**

### **BENEDICTION:**

When our Congregation was one hundred years old,

our tenth minister, Erv Gaede,

taught this about the future...,

“all of us will be challenged

to think deeply,

to work creatively,

and to love bravely.”

The years before us will ask no less

“Think deeply

work creatively

and love bravely.”

Go In Peace, My Friends,

Amen and Blessed Be