



A Reflection in Gratitude

A Sermon by Becky Hoort, presented at the First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Ann Arbor May 14th, 2015 honoring the 150th anniversary of our founding May 14, 1865

How grateful I am to be here in this very place, on this special evening, with all of you. For me, tonight is one of those occasions in life when I clearly find my place in the great web of existence. I feel the threads, attached to me, but stretching back, back in time and, then, waiting to move through me into the future that, with each moment, becomes the here and now.

I've been thinking back on the twists and turns in my particular journey through life, and also in the long history of this congregation. How unlikely and amazing, but how right, it seems to me that this is the spiritual home where my feet are now planted and my heart has taken root. I know some of your stories, and I think that when many of you reflect upon your own journeys you might feel something similar. So, how grateful I am, first of all, for this life that has given all of us the physical and spiritual components that brought us here tonight, what Mary Oliver speaks of as "gratitude (for being) given a mind and a heart and these body clothes, (and) a mouth to give shouts of joy".

While I'm not much of a shouting person, tonight I certainly feel joyous gratitude for our forty founders whose names you've just heard. In my mind's eye I can picture them 150 years ago, the women in their crinolines and voluminous skirts, and the men in their business frock coats, each signing their name in support of the Articles of Association they had crafted to form our congregation.

It had been a time of terrible loss, but our founders must have felt renewed hope and vigor with the end of the Civil War, just weeks before. It must have taken both hope and fortitude for them to establish such an innovative, many would say heretical, way of being religious in our young, western university town. After all, they had inherited the Unitarianism of the Transcendentalists; Mr. Emerson's idea of the Oversoul, which he described as "breaking through our intellect as genius, breathing through our will as virtue, and flowing through our affections as love." What beautiful language, but how strange such concepts must have sounded to many Ann Arborites of the time. Still, our founders continued on, exploring the ways in which religion and reason could come together.

I wonder, did they think about the ripples of their actions that would be carried forward here in Ann Arbor and beyond. Did they think about how those who followed would pour out inspiration, work and sacrifice to keep our congregation alive, growing and giving? I have witnessed some of your personal responses to adversity, and used them as a model for developing resilience of my own. And, throughout this year we've heard the story of our congregation's resilience in the face of challenges. I think about the German poet Rilke and his metaphor of a bell being rung in the darkness. He says, "What batters you becomes your strength." At times in our congregation's history we have been battered and then become stronger. At times we have become strong enough to take that "Journey of Faith" described by Sister Simone Campbell as "walking toward trouble in order to touch, embrace and heal."

The journey of faith begun by our founders has brought us together tonight in this beautiful sanctuary. What would our forebears think if they could see this place, this brick and mortar "cradle" for our work together? Would they be astonished at its size, and to know that we have 47 surrounding acres to incorporate into our many ways of being religious? Would they feel proud to learn about the many programs and ministries of our congregation, or to know that more than 300 children and youth take part in our much-loved Spiritual Growth and Development programs? I know that I am very grateful for these beautiful, inspirational physical surroundings, where manifest love now leads ME to aspire to be my best and truest self.

And how grateful I am for all of you, for our congregational community of today. Bishop Desmond Tutu has said that "a person is a person (only) through other persons... We are all made for a delicate network of relationships, of interdependence." The interdependence of community has to do with many things - it has to do with learning together, working together, helping one another, and, essential for all of those is listening to each other.

Women's rights activist, Nelle Morton, first coined the phrase "hearing to speech". For this introvert, that phrase means knowing, down in my bones, that those around me are willing to take the time to allow me to formulate my thoughts; to take the time to really listen, to deeply listen to what I have to say. You continue to transform my life by hearing me into speech, and how grateful I am for that deep connection to you.

Reverend Galen Guengrich, Senior Minister at All Souls in Manhattan, who visited our congregation last year, writes in his book, *God Revised*, "The experience of worship within a community of faith helps save us from the sin of separation by instilling within us a discipline of gratitude - a sense of our connection to and dependence upon everything: all that is present in our world and universe, as well as all that is past and all that is possible. Our commitment to others within our community models the ethic of gratitude that ultimately characterizes our commitment to everyone and everything."

And how grateful I am for the discipline of gratitude we continue to cultivate here - for the power and resolve of this large, resourceful congregation to carry the good we nourish within and among ourselves out into the world. Think of the stories we've heard this year about the work of our congregation throughout our history. Think of the ministry or program that most touches your heart and sets your mind and hands to work. How many lives have been touched, indeed transformed by that ministry? What wonderful fruits have been reaped when our congregation fights the "sin of separation" and cultivates an "ethic of gratitude"!

How grateful I am for what binds us back to our founders and carries forward into the future, the living tradition of Unitarian Universalism, this beautiful faith of ours, where we always look for new ways to be religious together. It is OUR work to create UU responses for the challenges of our time, but we draw on the thinking and the actions of our forebears. Here are words from Wallace W. Robbins, a Unitarian theologian of the mid-20th century, that continue to resonate with me:

"Ours is a church of reason-not because the mind is free of errors, but because the dialogue of mind with mind, and mind with itself, refines religious thought.

Ours is a church of moral work-not because we think morality is a sufficient religion, but because we know of no better way of showing our gratitude to God, and our confidence in one another.

Ours is a church of conscience-not because we hold that conscience is infallible, but because it is the meeting place of God and the human spirit.

Ours is a non-creedal church-not because we have no beliefs, but because we will not be restrained in our beliefs."

Here is how this faith of ours continues to transform me. Instead of walling me in with creed or dogma, I am gently being led along a path of discovery - discovery of the beauty and power of human connection with transcendent good; discovery of my own potential to find and act according to this good; that life can be filled with deep meaning; that even when I am alone, I am not isolated. This faith teaches me that I am part and parcel of the very ground of being, made fruitful and joyful through love and care.

My husband tells me that I have changed since joining this congregation, that I have become stronger and more centered. I think this is because I listen to what our faith has to teach me. It is because you act as an example for me. It is because you hear me into speech. And I tell you how grateful I am to be transformed, as I hold onto those strong threads that run from our founders through me, through all of us at First UU of Ann Arbor, out into a future that we, here, now begin to shape.