

Coming Home, Again

(Version 2a)

A Sunday service led by the
Reverend Michael Walker, Interim Minister

Presented on Homecoming (Ingathering) – September 13, 2015, at the
Unitarian Church of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

CALL TO WORSHIP (by Rev. Michael Walker)

Each of you is invited into our circle of friendship,

Where we are gathered in community and caring.

Where we are gathered... in the light of our

Flaming Chalice, the Lamp of our Fellowship.

Some of us were away for the summer,

Some of us are brand new here, today.

Each of you is invited in...

Whoever you are, wherever you come from,

However long or short your time here has been,

You are invited in, today and always.

That is what this flame symbolizes – a welcoming.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

CHILDREN'S MESSAGE

Down the Winding Road, by Angela Johnson,

illustrations by Shane W. Evans (NY: DK Pub, 2000)

PASTORAL PRAYER (by Rev. Michael Walker)

Some of us pray to All-That-Is-Holy,

An ineffable connection to life and to each other,

That we call by many different names —

A holiness that we find in the eyes of a child,

In the hearts of those we love, and within ourselves.

We lift up all the joys and sorrows of those here,

To the holiness within, that we may all share

The fruits of joy, and also the burdens of sorrow,

So our friends do not carry these alone.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

Coming Home, Again

Reverend Michael Walker

I have a lot in common with folks who are new here, because I just began working here a little over a month ago. Today, I'm going to talk about the aspirations of this community of seekers, gathered here in this spiritual home.

I see before me so many people seeking community and friends; others seeking justice for those who live oppressed lives; still others who are looking for the Spirit of Life as a guide. This church can offer all of this, and more. We have it in us, to be the beloved

community that so many came here seeking. We have it in us, to reach out to the outside world and express our views and values in places we see injustice. We have it in us, to bring together all who are seeking a relationship with all that is Holy in their lives, without resorting to dogma that has pushed some of us out of some other churches. We have it in us, to ensure that this place is one that we can all call "home."

And this day is our **Homecoming**. It does not matter how many times you have crossed that threshold – once or a thousand times. Our sentiments are the same. To each of you, every time you come here, we say: *Welcome home!* This spiritual home is more than a place

or two places; it is a community. Your community. A beloved community. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., once said:¹

Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives.

I speak now of beloved community, because I believe it is as much, or maybe even more, our spiritual home than is any particular building.

On the other hand, the 18th Century author, Margaret Elizabeth Sangster wrote, *“There's nothing half so pleasant as coming home again.”*

¹ From a sermon by Martin Luther King, Jr. “Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom”, delivered May 4, 1966. Accessed at

Homecoming implies that one has been away, or engaged in other pursuits, and now it is time to come home and find renewal and rejuvenation. That is our hope here at UCH, as well – that this be your spiritual home and that you can always come here for renewal and rejuvenation.

Sometimes, after being away from home for a long time, it finally sinks in that we are coming home as we drive along our road and see the trees and flowers in bloom, and can smell the smells of our home place. Sometimes, it is walking in the door and seeing old, familiar faces of our beloved family and friends. Any type of homecoming may be accompanied by feelings of nostalgia and happiness. It may also be accompanied by a feeling of regret for words spoken, or perhaps left

unspoken, to someone we care about. Homecoming is a complex moment in one's life, full of feelings and images of days gone by.

In John Irving's novel, Cider House Rules, he wrote:²

When time passes, it's the people who knew you whom you want to see; they're the ones you can talk to. When enough time passes, what's it matter what they did to you?

In that book, Irving was writing about an orphanage and a time in the character's life that was full of pain. And, it's possible that some of us may have experienced some pain when going back home, wherever and whenever that was. I want to acknowledge that, yet knowing that time

² Irving, John, *Cider House Rules*, NY: William Morrow, 1985.

heals wounds and sometimes we find ourselves returning to that old place, and glad that we did.

A few years ago, I was asked to return to my hometown in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in California, to officiate at the wedding of one of my oldest friends. He was getting married again, and he and his new wife wanted me to officiate. So, I went home for the first time in over 20 years. My family had long since moved to Oregon, so I had had little reason to return. Or so I had thought.

I experienced a lot of nostalgia, happiness, and a tinge of regret, as I drove past my old house, and down Main Street in Georgetown – *which actually has a stoplight now!* – and saw random people walking around that I actually still remembered seeing in my childhood.

After the wedding, I got to talk with so many old friends who led amazing lives since I had last seen them, and heard about their children and grandchildren. It's hard for me to accept that some of my friends from high school now have grandchildren in college. I also heard of others who had had a much harder time in these last many years. Overall, it was a good experience for me, but I was not expecting my whole childhood and adolescence to come rushing back to me as I drove around the area. Memories long forgotten or buried. Sadnesses and joys – they all came back. I had no idea it would be like that.

Returning to the here and now, as we welcome everyone in, it seems to me that the growth of any

spiritual community is not just a matter of numbers; an issue of population or dollars. Growth is also how we each develop, as we walk on our journeys through life. And here, we walk together, helping each other along the way. If I stumble on the path, one of you will surely reach out your hand to steady me. And if you stumble on the path, I will surely reach out to you, as well. We are here for each other. This is the nature of our covenantal relationship. As another UU once said to me, *it is not enough to simply show up every Sunday*. I agree. We are in relationship with each other, we support each other, we help each other, and we care about each other – *even* if one of us is mad at another. We can work through it, because this is the very root of what it means to be a covenantal community... a beloved community.

This is our spiritual home, *and* in this home resides a community that *affirms and promotes justice, equity, and compassion in human relations*.³ One way in which we do this is with our outreach and soup kitchen programs at Market Street. I go there weekly and walk around talking to folks, and this is what I see: people from all walks of life, side by side, serving and eating together. You know, we have an age-old tradition, found in many cultures, of breaking bread together as a way of relating to other people and coming to know them. And so it is here. Some people may have arrived hungry, and may have come from any number of possible backgrounds in which they have less than they need.

³ The 2nd Principle in the UUA Principles and Sources.

And here, we have members who donate time, energy, money and food, to help other people in need. This is a very good thing.

This congregation is also present in the surrounding community, by having a booth at Pride events and other places, bearing witness to the victims of violence, and by participating in political discourse to promote our values. This is part of who we are – an outspoken, maybe even uppity, voice of a community of people who feel passionately and strongly about our responsibility to seek justice for those who are without a voice in the world. We are uppity – and proud of it – because we know it is our duty to speak truth to power.

When we see people are hungry, and our

government could do something about it, we feel it is our responsibility to tell them so. When we see that some class of people is accorded different rights than another class of people, we speak out. We know, we feel, we act for justice. And I would not have it any other way!

Another purpose of church is to welcome people into our spiritual home, wherein we are meant to help them find a spiritual understanding of life and the world. It's interesting how any mention of God has disappeared from many UU churches. But, as new people come into our churches, there has been more and more desire for what my colleague, the Rev. Bill Sinkford, has called a *"language of reverence."* I have heard this same desire

spoken here, as well, so I imagine I will have occasion to speak of All-That-Is-Holy, or the Spirit of Life. It feels good to be back in a spiritual frame of mind. I'd like to share a perspective on the Spirit of Life, which rings true for me. The Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu, wrote this:

Something infinite.

Older than heaven and earth.

Silent, solitary, and vast.

Eternal, unchanging, yet ever evolving.

Throughout ten thousand things.

Not knowing its name, I call it Tao.

The basic premise of Taoist teaching is to live one's life in balance, and I think that is one basic mission of our church, as well – to help people find a balance in their

lives.

Sometimes, people first seek out a church when they have some difficulty in their lives. They need to find a new *home*. So they come here, and then there are so many reasons to stay, even after the difficulty is over. Perhaps that is the reason some of you walked through our doors, in the first place. Or, it may be that you have been part of this community forever, and some difficult thing occurs, and it is this community that helps you through it. This is what makes churches special – we are spiritual communities of caring people, and we create within our sanctuaries a spiritual home. And, you know the old saying: *home is where the heart is...*

Returning to the words and work of Dr. King, he had much to say about Beloved Community. He taught that:

*The Beloved Community is the framework for the future. The nonviolent concept is an overall effort to achieve a reconciled world by raising the level of relationships among people to a height where justice prevails and persons attain their full human potential.*⁴

Is this not why we are here? Building relationships and a society in which justice prevails. Living in a world in which each of us is working to achieve our full potential, and having the freedom and opportunity to do so. A mentor of mine said, years ago:

⁴ <http://www.thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy>

*The goal of a religious community is to heal ourselves, so that we can each go out and help to heal the world.*⁵

I believe that faith communities of all kinds and creeds, synagogues and sanghas, covens and congregations, exist to better the world, and us with it. Our beloved community is not simply a social club; it is so much more than that.

We start small. We start here. We begin by building strong friendships with those around us, sitting in this room or in our extended community, even if they are not here today. In the process of building strong relationships in a congregation that has such a very

⁵ Paraphrased from Rev. Dr. Arvid Straube, First Unitarian Universalist Church of San Diego, 2008.

visible social justice streak, as we do, then we do as Dr. King advised: “*We raise relationships to a height where justice prevails.*” Yes, we start small, we start here at home, channeling our concern for justice into the relationships we build here, and on into the relationships we build outside of here, which is then passed from person, to person, to person. We invite all people into our spiritual home, into our beloved community.

Coming home again is a moment in time, full of feelings about the past, but *also* – wonderings and imaginings about the future. Home is home: what will happen in this home, in the years to come, you might think to yourself... *Who is yet to be born, who will carry on the family traditions? Or, who will join our family or*

*circle of friends, bringing new ideas and new energy?
Will this house still stand, long after I am gone? Will
there be laughter echoing from these walls? Will all that
I have done, make a difference? — you may ask yourself.
Will all that I put in store, saving for another day, be
there for those I love?*

The future is, by nature, a time of uncertainty.
And yet, the present day rolls on, and the future becomes
the past. We can look back and see that life unfolded just
as it was meant to, or perhaps we look back with the
clarity of hindsight. These are the thoughts that cross our
minds, when we come home after a long absence. We
have reason to remember home – to always remember
our **home** – and give it special significance in our lives.
There is a deep and profound reason that we often say,

home is where the heart is. And so I will close by saying
to you, *welcome home.*

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

OFFERING

This congregation offers a liberal spiritual home to
seekers from all walks of life. We are proud of the work
we do in the community, the classes we offer for children
and adults, for the care and concern provided by this
community and it's staff, and for these two beautiful
campuses that have each become a spiritual home for so
many.

If you are here for the first time, we invite you to
let the offering basket pass you by. You are an honored
guest. And if you have made this your spiritual home,

we thank you for your continuing generosity.

Every month, we also collect donations during the Offering, to support a worthy cause. *The Circle School*. *This school is an independent, private school nearby, that balances educational freedom and responsibility in a self-directed, democratic community.*

If you are writing a check, please specify on the Memo line whether this is for your Pledge, an offering to UCH, or for the Share-the-Plate recipient.

Thank you, all, for your generosity. This morning's offering will now be received.

BENEDICTION (by Rev. Michael Walker)

O Spirit of Life – the Holy immanent in Community,

The Part of Us that links us to all others,

Especially others here...

To this spirit of our community,

We raise our hands in solidarity and gratitude.

We are grateful for our Community and Spiritual Home

That provides us with such joy and fulfillment.

Let us take these feelings with us,

Out into the world in the coming weeks and days,

And share joy with whomever we can.

Let us find a Holy connection with others outside of here,

And bring them back with us when we return.

We are here together, as one, working for a better future.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!