The Ties that Bind:

Celebrating Our Connectedness

(Version 3a)

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

Presented on September 4, 2016, at the
Unitarian Church of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania
CALL TO WORSHIP (by Rev. Richard S. Gilbert)\(^1\)

We bid you welcome, who come
with weary spirit seeking rest.
Who come with troubles that
are too much with you,
Who come hurt and afraid.

We bid you welcome, who come
with hope in your heart.
Who come with anticipation in
your step,
Who come proud and joyous.

We bid you welcome, who are
seekers of a new faith.
Who come to prove and explore.
Who come to learn.

We bid you welcome, who enter
this place as a homecoming.
Who have found here room for
your spirit.
Who find in this people a family.

Whoever you are, whatever you are,
Wherever you are on your journey,
We bid you welcome.

\(^1\) SLT # 442.
MEDITATION (by Rev. Michael Walker)

You are invited to join together in a few moments of quiet reflection.

Imagine, if you will, the people who are important to you in your life. See how you are connected to them, metaphorically. Maybe your connection is a line of light, or a ribbon, or the holding of hands. Whatever works for you. Ask yourself:

- How did they become so important to you?
- What do you do to foster that connection?
- If there is a fraying of your connection, if they are starting to seem distant, how can you repair that connection … that relationship?

- Have you told them lately how much they mean to you? If not, what are you waiting for?

When you are ready, come back to this time and place.

Today, we honor the connectedness of our lives, and all the people who are a part of it.

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 its 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, because you are our 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. This month, our Share-the-Plate Recipient is ________________.

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.

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When I think of my spiritual identity as a Unitarian Universalist, I tend to describe myself as a “Seventh Principle UU.” Perhaps not everyone here is familiar with the UU Principles, but I’m not going to go into all of them just now. The one that is most meaningful to me, the Seventh Principle, states that we as a spiritual people respect an interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part. As we look at relationships that exist between us and nature, it is helpful to keep this principle in mind. However, I’ve always believed that this principle is so theologically deep and applicable to many areas of life, not just ecology, as is often assumed about this principle. The interdependent web that I want to speak of today is our community, and the ties that bind us together. As it happens, our Worship Theme for this month is Community and Connectedness.

I find this principle to be a better way of relating to the ties that bind, than the origin of the phrase. Here's a bit of trivia you might not know. The phrase, the ties that bind, originates in a popular Protestant hymn, that speaks of the ties that bind our hearts together in Christian love. Well, now, I don't know what that really means, but there's a different quotation, used by fraternities on many college campuses, that seems
explain the idea in a way I like better. They say: “The ties that bind me to my Brothers [and Sisters] are not wrapped around my wrists, but rather are fastened to my heart.” I think that helps us answer the question, ‘What is it that brings us to this place, week after week?’ It is not just to be in this sacred space, although that is a good reason. What really brings us together is our community; a fellowship of like-minded people who share our values, our desires for a better world, and for equity in how we are all treated.

The obvious reason for you arriving here this morning is that we each seek to retreat from our daily grind. There is also another reason we come here. We seek sanctuary. What I mean to say, is that it's more than just leaving behind our life outside of here, but also that we seek to connect with something here that will help fulfill a deep need within each of us. These two ideas, retreat and sanctuary, go hand-in-hand, and, I believe, bring us back to the mechanism that provides us that fulfillment we seek. That being the community gathered here today, that shines a light into the dark places in our lives, provides a mirror to reflect our best selves back to us, and to love us for who we are.

My partner told me once that a reason he likes to retreat to such a place as this, that offers sanctuary and community, is that those who come here share a commonality of purpose. I agree – I think we all arrive
with the hope that our time here will be fulfilling; that we will leave here lifted up and better prepared for next week, or month, or year; and that we will have connected with others who have come here for the same reasons.

Some of you are here for the first time, and some have been coming to this place year after year. Our challenge is to find ways to connect the old with the new, and to make newcomers feel welcome. The easiest way to not do this is to create an experience that is too full of what some ministers call "insider language" – using terms and acronyms that only long-time attendees would know. Like when I mentioned the Seventh Principle. So often, one might just say that name without any explanation, as a shorthand that many people here will understand. But, invariably, there will be someone here who has never heard of the UU Principles, so would have no clue that the Seventh was about *interdependence*, if I had not said so. I challenge us all, myself included, to be conscious of insider language. Consider how we might welcome newcomers to this sanctuary that we hold sacred and really want to be able to share with others.

Another result of this community gathering with a common purpose, is that we further build our community. This is a two-fold process: *first*, we are strengthening the ties between old friends who are reconnecting with each other today; and *second*, we are creating new ties – with new friends – who have just arrived here and are seeking the same, supportive
community that has been the sanctuary of so many of you for so long.

Building community is not something that happens just once, and then it's done, like building a small house. No, building community is an ongoing process, and we should never stop striving to build onto our community, as that is what will keep it healthy. Some might fear that if we keep building and building, like the Winchester mansion, it will become so big that we won't be able to find our way around; we won't be able to find our friends. Well, like any well-built house, there will be a particular place where this small group of friends might gather, and another place that another group can gather, and so on. Not to take my metaphor of a big house too far, but we can continue to strengthen our bonds with each other, as well as growing our numbers, without losing the long-time attendees in some back-room, somewhere.

Whenever we contemplate the virtues of building community, perhaps we should also bear in mind one thing... I believe that the **weighty preponderance of history** is a *handicap*. It is always good to remember where we have been, but it doesn't help us to get where we need to go, if we keep sitting in that same place where we have always been. We've got to get up and move—but not right now! Let us remember our history, and also be open to trying new things and cultivating new relationships, in order to promote the wellbeing of this congregation.
This is a great family. Like any family, it is not static – it changes over time, as new members are born and older members pass away. But it remains a family, and the ties that bind those family-members together – I'm talking about all of you – are never negated by the changes that occur over time in the family.

I try not to promote change just for the sake of change – there needs to be a good reason – but there have been times in my life when I got frustrated by the tendency of groups in general to resist change at all costs, because whatever is being proposed is "not the way it has always been done..." This tendency is unhealthy – a family that does not change or grow over time will eventually die out. That also holds true for churches and other tight-knit organizations.

I've talked a bit about families, and need to be clear that I mean this word – *family* – in its broadest possible sense. I understand that the word may have some baggage for some people. As much as I love my own family, I know it's not perfect. But, I love them. On the other hand, I've found that it's pretty common for people to develop a "family of choice", in addition to their family of origin. If someone came from a family that rejected them for who they were, then they may be more likely to fulfill the need for such a family bond with people other than their family of origin.

Another place we can find families of choice is in
the military, about which the term "band of brothers" is often used. Well, we have two genders in the military now, so let's use the term 'brothers' loosely. However, the sentiment of a close bond between people who serve together is very apropos. People who share the good days and the bad, who share a commonality of purpose, who share lives, become very close. I served in the Navy for eight years and experienced that first hand.

As for the more traditional family, it has been said that there is no stronger bond than between a parent and their child. Perhaps that is true. However, as wonderful as this blood-bond is, I have also seen families that are bonded by adoption, and that bond seems to me to be just as strong.

I would be remiss if I did not discuss the ties that bind in the form of wedded bliss. Of course, this phrase is often used in regards to weddings, which is a hold-over from a time when handfasting – that is, using a ribbon to tie together the wrists of the bride and groom – was a common practice in medieval, and earlier, European weddings. This is also the origin of the phrase, tying the knot.

Many couples have asked me to officiate at their weddings, experiences which I have found to be quite meaningful. I've even been known to say that weddings are my favorite act of ministry to perform. With that said, I also came into my own in a community in which couples were not allowed to marry. Gay couples. I must
confess that I have had mixed reactions to the LGTBQ community's collective efforts to legalize the tying of bonds amongst us. (Ah! More insider language, an acronym that I just assume everyone knows… For any who may not know, LGBTQ stands for the Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Transgender and Queer communities.) During the long struggle for marriage equality, I've gone out to support my congregations as they protested in front of courthouses, manned the phone-banks, in their efforts to achieve marriage equality.

At the same time, some of my peers have commented that this didn't really seem to them like the right issue to catalyze LGBTQ equality. Some would have preferred we put our efforts into ensuring equal treatment in the workplace and housing, instead. It may be heresy to say this, but I tended to agree! However, that ship has sailed, and I learned to support my community in achieving the goal they had been working on for many years. Come to think of it, that's how family is: we may not always agree, but we still support each other in the other's time of need.

And it is in a dire time of need for any of us when our bonds are tried, and we hope that those ties that bind won't be broken. Many years ago, while in the Navy, I was like many of my peers and coped with that lifestyle by drinking too much. Then, I experienced a traumatic event, coming face-to-face with my addiction, while I was overseas. I returned to the States, to a town I had
previously lived in, hoping that my friends there would be the support system I needed. I learned rather quickly that some of those people wanted friends to party with, but weren't willing to be there for a friend-in-need. I learned who my real friends were... People who are, to this day, part of my chosen family. A pearl of wisdom from 12-Step programs says: "As long as the ties that bind us together are stronger than those that would tear us apart, all will be well." Someone was asking me about this the other day, so it's on my mind and I have never really shared this here before. When I ended my naval career, I – with much support from those I care about – made the decision to become sober and have been ever since 2003.

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Enough about me. On many a day, someone will come to me to talk about some deep sadness or horrifying event that has happened in his or her life. Sometimes, they just need to talk about it. At other times, they need referrals to those with specialized skills to help them with whatever is happening. Regardless, like many of you who are unofficial counselors to your friends and family, it is my role to be a good listener, to care about that person, and to help them however I can. I know that many of you do this for others, too. And it's a good thing to care for others – that, in itself, is reward enough. However, at some other time, you might find that you are

2 Little White Booklet, Narcotics Anonymous.
the one who needs some support.

As you may know, it is oftentimes some trauma that brings some people to a church, in the first place. Honestly, after my own experience in the Navy, that is what brought me back to church and eventually into the ministry. Well, not knowing why someone walked through our doors, let us, in addition to being welcoming, also remember to be compassionate. Even with people we may have known for years, we may not know what is weighing on their hearts today. So, it is good that our community has a norm of treating each other with compassion. We are reminded how we are all connected.

Today, we are celebrating our connectedness, and sharing our gratitude for those who work hard to connect us together, especially here at church. Let's be grateful for all of our members and friends here in this beautiful place, many of whom have gone above and beyond to bring us together today. Let's be grateful for those who volunteer their time to lead our children, who serve on committees and boards, and volunteer their time in big and small ways, without whom our community would not be what it has become.

We also need to look beyond this place of sanctuary. Let's be grateful for our parents, whether by blood or by adoption. No matter what your relationship with them is like, remember: without them, you would not be here. And the world would not be as nice a place, without you in it. And while we're at, let's be grateful for
our families of choice, wherever we have found them – they who have touched our hearts and been there when we needed them. Let's be grateful for partners and spouses, past and present, who helped fulfill our lives. And, let's even be grateful for our employers, and those who connect us to our livelihood, because that's important, too. And, finally, let's be grateful for ourselves, without whom the lives of those we love would be incomplete.

*Let us be grateful!*

*May it ever be so and blessed be you all.*

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**BENEDICTION** (by Rev. Duke T. Gray)³

*The blessing of truth be upon us,*

*the power of love direct us and sustain us,*

*and may the peace of this community preserve our going out and our coming in,*

*from this time forth, until we meet again.*

*May it ever be so and blessed be you all!*

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³ SLT # 684