

# GETTING OUT OF OUR OWN WAY

(Version 1a)

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

Presented on June 4, 2017, at the  
*Unitarian Church of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania*

WELCOME

Dear friends, some who are new, some who are not, you are welcome here – one and all. We are a welcoming community which honors the inherent worth of all people, regardless of age, ethnicity, gender, orientation, socio-economic class, or other attributes that only serve to divide our society. Here, we welcome you as you are, and are glad you came to be with us today. You may have been coming here for years, even decades; or you may have been coming here for just a few weeks; or, this might even be your first time here, ever. Regardless of how long you have been here, we have one thing to say to you all: **Welcome Home!** Please take a few moments now to greet your neighbors.

CALL TO WORSHIP (by Rev. Michael Walker)

Come on in, step into this sacred space, our sanctuary.  
Join the community, and make it wide and welcoming.  
Let this be a house of laughter and love;  
Let this be a community that feels more like family;  
And let this be a time when we are so happy  
To be here, to be together, again.  
  
For all this and more, we light our flaming chalice.  
  
**May it ever be so and blessed be you all!**

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JOYS AND SORROWS (Market Street)

During our time of Silent Joys and Sorrows, we acknowledge those things we hold in hearts, whether they be joyful or sad. If you wish to mark some joy or sorrow in your personal life, you're invited to come and choose a disc from the heart-basket; hold it, admire it, imagine your joy or sorrow coming to reside in this symbol.

Of course, these can mean whatever you want them to, but we picked out the colors based on the sky. Joys might be blue for clear skies or yellow for sunny skies, while the dark stones can symbolize your sorrows, as an overcast or stormy sky. If you have a joy or sorrow you wish to acknowledge, please come forward.

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MEDITATION

Being a caring community, we *celebrate* the joys and *share* the sorrows, whether we have told others about them or hold onto them in silence. We do so, so that our friends do not carry these alone. You are now invited into a moment of silence and meditation, as we hold these joys and these sorrows in our hearts and minds. We will bring our meditation to a conclusion by joining in singing a Musical Meditation, Hymn # \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ (name) in the (grey/teal) hymnal.

**[Silence]**

Thank you. Blessed be.

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BRIDGING CEREMONY: INTRODUCTION

We gather here in our religious community to celebrate the transition of three young people as they move into adulthood. Unitarian Universalists understand that significant transitions in our lives are to be celebrated, and this is one of them.

This bridging ceremony is not a farewell, but rather a celebration of the blossoming of our most precious resources into full adulthood. This is an opportunity for us to recognize **Lydia and John Hursh**; to applaud their successes thus far, to acknowledge them, and to wish them happiness and satisfaction in what is to come. It is to make sure they know we are with them whether they stay close or go far from here.

This ritual also honors the dedication of this

religious community to provide a liberal spiritual home for our children. We recognize the love of parents and families, the commitment of teachers and advisors, and the contributions of time, money, smiles and support of every one of you. Without this dedication, we would not be before you this morning.

Together we express our pride to you, **John and Lydia**, for what you have already accomplished in life and what we know you will accomplish in the future. We celebrate your presence among us and in the world. We celebrate the union of people who built this metaphorical bridge you now cross, and this community that you enrich by your vibrant presence.

## BRIDGING CEREMONY: A GIFT OF A ROSE

**[DRE, Sara Palmer, gives each their rose.]**

During our Child Dedication services, we welcome those at the beginning of their time with us by giving them roses with tightly closed buds, on stems with the thorns removed. The buds are symbols of life just beginning, whose unfolding we (just as they) will experience, petal by petal. The thornless stems are vivid images of our deep desire to protect the children of our church family from all that could be hurtful – to make their paths smooth as their lives unfold.

Now, you are at the other edge of childhood, and once more we use the rose as a symbol, recalling images from the past. But, not the tight buds of babyhood anymore, but larger, more vividly colored roses; closer to

opening into full and glorious flower. The stems this time are not stripped of their thorns. We cannot hold away the hurts and dangers of adulthood, any more than we can keep those buds from opening.

Though life is occasionally sharply painful, as well as rich in color and texture, we urge you to engage in it fully. While we are not able to protect you, we hope we have given you the tools you need to survive and thrive:

- Values, by which to measure lives of worth;
- Decision-making skills, and the knowledge of how to think instead of only what we think;
- A heritage of the right of conscience, and the need to act on what that conscience demands;

- And a religious community in which to test and refine the possible directions of your lives.
- You are bright and wonderful people, with bright and wonderful futures unfolding before you. We honor you, just as you are. We believe in you, that you will face whatever challenges life brings you with courage and grace.

### BRIDGING CEREMONY: CHALICE AND BLESSING

It is our privilege and pleasure, on behalf of the congregation, to present each of you with a chalice as a token of our love and care for you. It also carries our wish that your future life be rich and rewarding.

**[DRE gives each their chalice and lights a candle from large chalice, and in silence, lights new chalices.]**

*May the flame of your chalice,  
Which we have lit on behalf of this congregation,  
Always represent for you a renewal...  
Of your faith in holiness, goodness, and the beauty of  
life.  
May it always be for you a re-affirmation  
Of the way of the open mind and the full heart,  
And may this flame always recall for you  
The deep wish of this congregation that your life  
Be filled to overflowing with love and joy.  
May it ever be so and blessed be you all!*

### YOUNG ADULT SPEECHES

[Invite **John** and **Lydia** to speak.]

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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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## GETTING OUT OF OUR OWN WAY

Reverend Michael Walker

Today, I will talk about some things this church community can do to successfully move into your future together, including how to let go of some things that are not doing you any good. But, before I get to that, I'd like share some lessons I've learned in my own life.

As I sat there a few days ago, wanting to slam my head down onto the keyboard rather than spend another second staring at a blank screen, I realize that I had just become a living, breathing embodiment of what I wished to preach on today. That is, getting in my own way, and better yet, figuring out how to get *out* of my own way!

See, here is my dilemma. On my second-to-last Sunday with you all, I want to leave on a good note. I want to leave you all with some helpful ideas about how to be a good church community in your future, without offending anyone in the process. I want to lift up the successes and dreams of many, but would hate to forget someone else who is doing important work, too. I found myself paralyzed, in the composing of this sermon. I literally stared at the screen for hours. My doubts, my fears, as well as my wishes for all good things – all of these were at the root of my paralysis, my own embodiment of this idea. In other words, I was getting in my own way.

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Another personal foible of mine is the tendency to

rationalize. We all have our flaws, but once we become aware of them, then we may be able to act in a healthier way. As a thinking person from a lifetime helping others with their problems, I've found that I spend a great deal of time thinking through issues, whether they are my own or someone else's. The shadow-side of this behavior, what happens when it is taken to an extreme, is that one spends time finding explanations for an issue or problem, even if that explanation lacks logic. Another way of putting this is one creates an explanation for a currently held belief, rather than putting together the facts to learn the actual explanation.

I've had three serious, life-changing experiences that my rationalizing made worse than they would have been without my efforts to create an explanation that fit

my beliefs about myself. These experiences have helped me to recognize my own tendency to rationalize, so now I try to take a step back and look at issues from different angles, and consult with others, so that I'm sure the story in my head about some issue is real and not rationalized.

But, before I learned to do that, I faced pain and unhappiness without the insight to recognize that what I was doing made it worse. Let me share the earliest of those experiences. I'm very close with my family, but we had some troubled days in the past. As a child and teenager, I had a very difficult relationship with my dad. Also, I had always felt like many of my relatives, but especially those on Dad's side of the family, acted oddly around me; treated me differently. As a young teenager, I learned the phrase *black sheep* and applied it to myself.

I was the black sheep of the family. *Baah...*

When I was 15, with Christmas to come soon, I was going through recipes for cookies and other goodies in a kitchen drawer, because it was family baking time. I found one recipe, written on the backside of a letter that had been long forgotten. I shouldn't have, but I pocketed the letter and read it later. It was written by my grandmother, to my mom, at a time when I would have been around 3 years old. It included a strange sentence about how it was good that my adoption had been finalized.

So, here is how I rationalized this potentially explosive news. I knew my parents had been very young when I was born; they had gotten pregnant in high school. So, I decided that the facts that fit my beliefs

about myself were that I had been born before my parents got married, so Dad had to adopt me so that I would have his name. That's not actually how things work, but I didn't know that, back then. But I did know that his side of the family was very religious, so I thought my black sheep treatment was because I was some sort of bastard, borne out of wedlock.

So, that was the story that I told myself for the next four years. I never talked to anyone in my family; I never asked any questions that might have resulted in answers that would change my carefully crafted, rational view of my own self-identity. I knew who I was, even if that was a bastard and a black sheep.

My mom wrote me a letter in my first year of college, and my entire self-identity came crashing down

like a house of cards. I sat on an ocean dock near my college, and cried. My parents were young; they did, indeed, get pregnant in high school. However, it turned out that my natural father was someone else, other than my dad. It turns out that I may have been conceived out of wedlock, but was not borne such, because my parents had gotten married. They then divorced when I was only one year old, because – I now know – they were not well-suited for each other and probably shouldn't have been married in the first place. But my mom had met my first father's buddy in the Navy, and they got married when I was three and he adopted me. My first father was prevented from seeing me for 17 years, for reasons I still do not understand. Oddly, everyone in my family (at least the parts of my family I knew), including even

cousins who were younger than me, knew all of this.

This was the real reason for my feeling like a black sheep – everyone acted strangely around me because they all feared that they might say the wrong thing. It was not that they tried to treat me poorly; it was actually their own fear that they might cause a family problem if they said or did something wrong. In my rationalizing, I misinterpreted why relatives were withdrawn around me. Anyway, although they all knew, I was not told until I was in college.

This may seem like a little thing, and for my folks, they felt it was important that I believe dad was my real father, rather than knowing the truth. I had acquired, or created, a lifetime of beliefs about who I was that just exploded one day and I suddenly, emotionally, felt

unmoored and lost at sea. I had no idea who I was anymore. I cannot even begin to describe how painful this was for me.

As I looked back over my life, I began to deconstruct things that were said and done, and especially all the things that went unsaid and undone. Had I asked some questions rather than making assumptions, I might have saved myself a great deal of pain later on. If I had not rationalized my whole life, I might have felt more grounded and less lost when I finally found out.

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Have you ever gotten in your own way, only to realize later that you made your life more difficult? Have you ever tripped yourself up, in your efforts to do

something? I suspect each of us have different coping mechanisms that we use, and which often serve to hinder us, as we get in our own ways. For me, I've learned that it is rationalizing an explanation for something, which can become problematic for me if my rationalization was based on incomplete information or erroneous assumptions. For you, it is likely something else entirely. What do you do that later comes back to bite you?

One might be forgiven for thinking of our president removing the US from the Paris agreement on climate, which is a prime example of us getting in our own way, but I'm not going to talk about politics today.

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Instead, I'd like to apply these ideas to the church. There is a story that some in the church tell about the

church's history, about a 25-year-old dispute with a long-gone minister. While there may be many reasons for the dispute. One version is about how church money was handled, and that is the one that seems to still affect the congregation today. Let me give you an example of how this issue has evolved to the present day: when the church adopted policy governance, a number of policies were written; they are called 'executive limitations.' The limitations about the safeguarding of money and assets are worded as: "*the minister will not do this or that with church funds; the minister will not allow such and such to happen to church property,*" and so on. Creating limitations is fine, but what stands out for me is there are a half-dozen of such policies in regards to church money and property, covering numerous pages, while there is

very little written about any other area of congregational life, such as worship, religious exploration, social justice, or anything else. The limitations almost exclusively micromanage how church funds and assets are safeguarded. I think it's important to point out that in these policies, the minister is held accountable, but is not given any power to do anything to safeguard those assets. How do you think your future minister will feel about coming to a church where they are held accountable (that is to say, they will be blamed if something goes wrong,) and yet are not empowered to do anything that will protect the church, or themselves, for that matter? This is an issue that I have tried very hard to improve, but experienced many road-blocks along the way.

In my mind, this is an area of congregational life in

which the church gets in its own way. There are many ways to address accountability, to promote healthy systems and to create procedures based in good governance. This church isn't there yet, and I think its holding you back from accomplishing some of things you'd like to do. In one small part, this is because so much administrative burden falls on the minister to walk a tightrope on this issue, that it is difficult to find all the time necessary to do everything else that needs to be done. In other words, our financial accountability policies and procedures are configured in such a way as to make it difficult to do the work of the church.

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Now, a different issue... Last week, I mentioned an issue that "looms large in congregational life" – the

purchase of the Market St. building. Well, that is in the past, and now it's time to look at your future. When someone complains that the campus is not sustainable, I have to ask, *well, what are you doing to help it become sustainable?* When someone sits in the back with arms crossed, continuing to pass judgment on a decision almost a decade old, and yet is not helping to build up the programs and plans for that campus, I can only point out that this is one way in which this church gets in its own way. If you want Market St. to be self-sustaining, then [get over there and] help prepare rooms to lease to new tenants. Or help with the GTS programs. The adage is that 20% of the people do 80% of the work, and I happen to know that many of the leaders this church could really use some help. Some may be on the verge of burn-out,

so I wish to point out the need to do something – to only sit and complain does not fix anything. That is true whether we are talking about Congress and the White House, or our church, or even in our personal lives. Problems do not solve themselves. We have to do the work, or continue to live with the problem.

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In my story, shared earlier, I did not do the work, early on. As a young person, I didn't yet know that even meant. I rationalized a narrative about what was happening, rather than seeking out the facts or doing whatever I might have needed to do to understand my family and myself. In regards to anything in life, we have to do the work to make something a success, if we wish to experience that success, because it will not

happen without our efforts.

Sometimes, it is important to do what I only learned to do after several very painful experiences in life, and that is to step-back and look at any given issue with new eyes and to also ask for the input of others. Telling the same old story, rather than writing a new story, is perhaps the most often enacted human behavior that causes us to get in our own way. **I think that is worth saying again: *Telling the same old story, rather than writing a new story, is what most often causes us to get in our own way.*** Instead, let us step back, regroup, reach out to others, and reconsider what we think we know.

You will move into your future, as individuals and as a church community, as citizens fighting for justice

and as people of faith, [as new young adults bridging and moving on in your lives] – all of you accomplishing our goals by doing whatever work is necessary to secure the success you are seeking. If you are unsure of how to get out of your own way, *ask someone else*. It is always easier for someone else to see our foibles, than it is for each of us to see our own.

Whatever happens next, I believe this church has within your community all the skills and talent, knowledge and other resources, needed to create the future you wish for yourselves. You've got this – and you're all going to be fine, as long as you all work together.

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

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BENEDICTION (by Rev. Michael Walker)

Over a long life, each of us may learn to walk in wisdom,  
But never so wise and when we look at another,  
And they look at us and tell us just what we need to hear,  
Even when we would rather not hear it.  
Such is family, and community, among people who care.  
We're here for each other and speak all manner of truths,  
That we truly learn to walk with wisdom.  
Let us go out and share what we've learned,  
And let us bring what we further learn back here again.  
**May it ever be so and blessed be you all!**

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