

“Roots and Wings: Toward a Sabbatical Leave”

Though we have sung this song together, Spirit of Life, over the years,

We made it a regular part of our liturgy sometime last year.

And if you're thinking: Liturgy? We have one?

Just remember the meaning of the word, that liturgy literally means

“work of the people”

And then imagine how this hour of worship, how calling forth this Spirit of Life,

Saying *Come to me, Come to me,*

how this whole enterprise of creating and sustaining our congregation

really is not the sole work of any one person,

be that person a minister or a lay leader;

That it really is instead the work of all of us, together.

Imagine all this and I think you'll agree that we do indeed have a liturgy,

And that we can be proud as a church for the work we do.

I know I am.

This will become a sermon about my upcoming sabbatical, which begins

After I deliver my now-traditional Top Ten Religious News Stories sermon

On Sunday, January 3rd. But first:

Imagine me on bended knee asking you

to please come if you can that Sunday,

not because of anything I will say,

But rather so that I can simply see you.

I doubt you will ever know how deeply privileged I feel to be your minister,

To be welcomed into your lives, to be asked to help us nurture together our spirits,

and live out our faith in the world.

So before I say anything else let me tell you how much I am going to miss you

and your faces and your stories and our shared ministry during my five months away.

This is why I hope to see you on the 3rd, not to say good-bye, just farewell until I return in late May.

And in thinking of this time away, this time of change for you and for me, and in calling to mind the other kinds of changes and transitions we walk into this room with, the discoveries, the losses, the good, the bad, and in hearing again the words from Spirit of Life, these are the questions I find myself holding this morning:

What are the Roots that hold us close during times of transition?

What anchors us during times of change?

And also:

What are the wings that carry us, that set us free and allow us

To learn something new?

In asking these questions this week I have found myself

Reminded of the story about how the song Spirit of Life came into being

And about it's author, Carolyn McDade, who we may be surprised to hear

Is not a Unitarian Universalist or even much of a church-goer,

and who from her home on the Cape has watched with quiet surprise

and even a little bemusement as her song has become

as much a part of our UU worship

as communion or altar calls might be in other houses of faith.

Now in her mid-70's, Carolyn was just six years-old

when the U.S. entered World War II.

She says "*the men were gone, the women were doing everything,*

and no one was shielding the children from the newsreel.

*“I never forgot seeing Hiroshima and Nagasaki; I remember thinking:
no God I learned about would ever want such suffering.*

That’s when I became an activist,” she says.

And along with a life of activism came marriage, three daughters, divorce,
And more activism, particularly for women’s causes.

Her life was intense with demonstrations, parenting, speaking tours,
And endless meetings.

Many nights, after her girls were asleep, she would find herself at the piano
Writing songs as a way to draw herself back to her center.

Late one night in the early 1980’s, after a particularly long stretch of meetings,
Carolyn was driving home with a good friend.

“I don’t remember what the meeting was for,” she says,

‘but I do remember the feeling I had: I told my friend:

‘I feel like a piece of cardboard that has lain in the attic for years.

Just open wide the door, and I’ll be dust.’

My friend just sat with me, Carolyn says, and I loved her for it.”

She then drove to her own home.

“I walked through my house in the dark, found my piano, and this was my prayer:

To not give up.

It was not written, but prayed.

Spirit of Life, come unto me.

Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.

Blow in the wind, rise in the sea;

Move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice.

Roots hold me close; wings set me free;

Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me.

After praying those words, Carolyn says:

*I knew more than anything that I could
Continue in faith."*

Why am I thinking of this story as we approach this sabbatical time?

You may be wondering: do I feel like cardboard? No!

If the church doors open will I blow away? Maybe, but that's because I'm skinny,
Not burned-out.

A question I've been asked this fall: do ministers go on sabbatical
because we're tired?

No, we go on sabbatical so that we won't become tired,
so that we don't feel, or worse, preach like dust,
so that we can replenish the well

we draw from in order to answer this call to ministry you have honored us with.

But this is not really why I share Carolyn's story, to talk about me.

I share it to talk about us.

Because I think that her prayer asking not to give up,

Asking, please, help me keep the faith

Is not just her prayer. I think it's our prayer, too.

I think it's our prayer every time we find ourselves here in December,
maybe on Route 9, maybe in line, maybe behind someone
yapping on their phone instead of driving,
not feeling all that holy in this supposed holy season.

We pray: *Spirit of Life, come onto me, NOW.*

I think it's our prayer every time we grow overwhelmed or cynical in this season,

When the need is great, when 11, 000 jobs lost last month is considered

A success, when it is all you can do to worry about yourself, let alone others.

We pray: *Sing in my heart, all the stirrings of compassion.*

It was my prayer as I watched the President on Tuesday speak

to the West Point cadets

And to us, telling us he believed we need another 30,000 troops in Afghanistan.

Where does the Spirit go in wartime? Where is God in the violence?

What happens to that part inside us that is capable of love?

We pray: *Spirit of Life and Love, Blow in the wind; rise in the sea; move in the hand.*

I think it's our prayer as we read the headlines, as we notice who wins,

Who loses, as we ask about fairness and struggle to believe what King said,

that while the arc of the universe may be long, it bends toward justice.

We pray: *Give life the shape of justice.*

I think it's our prayer as we think of those in our midst who are fighting illness,

Who wonder how to stay strong during the fight,

who need the anchoring love of others around them.

We pray: *Roots hold us close.*

And I think it's our prayer whenever we ask our selves:

What do I want to be free from?

It is no job, bad job, broken relationships, broken body, bad habits,

Old patterns, old ways of being?

Whatever it is *Wings set me free, We pray.*

And because the strength is not ours alone, we pray:

Spirit of Life, come unto me, come unto me.

I also think this can be a prayer for us during this sabbatical time.

What are the roots that will hold us together,

And will hold you to each other over these next five months?

What are the wings that will give rise to new learning and new opportunity?

These are the questions we're holding this morning,

That I'm asking, and that you have told me you're asking.

But first the facts, which by now should be a review:

The word sabbatical comes from the Hebrew word Shabbat,
Meaning rest or renewal.

I have already told you that I am not tired,
but I do feel the need to feed the fire, to read,
to write something other than sermons,
to attend rather than lead worship,
to be preached to rather than preach for,
to gather ideas and inspiration, to hibernate.

The great Unitarian minister A. Powell Davies has said
‘Life is just an opportunity to grow a soul’ and I am viewing this time
As way to grow mine in new ways.

I also look forward to try growing a beard without having
250 people comment on whether they like it or not.

Since September my wife Karen and our children, Emerson and Ella,
Have been in England to re-connect to Karen’s British roots and family.
I have missed them dearly, but the time has also allowed me to prepare
Us as I well as I know how for my leave.

In January I will join my family,
coming back in June to lead our final two worship services and attend
our denomination’s General Assembly in Minneapolis.

I will never be more than a phone call away, but I also like what
My colleague and mentor in ministry Gary Smith has said,
*“That healthy ministers should always wish to be more dispensable than
Indispensable,”* meaning that we should never believe that everything
And everyone in the church is up to us alone.

You will be in wonderful hands – Laura Randall, who after a year-and-half
With us as our student, is already one of the finest ministers I know,
And Ken Reeves, with us this morning,
Who brings to the 10 worship services he will lead and pastoral care he will offer

years of parish and counseling experience.

Between them and other guest ministers, as well as our Lay Pastoral Care Team,

All of our worship and pastoral care needs will be met, and met well.

Helping to navigate all and answer your questions are a team of dedicated

Lay Leaders led by Deb Boyce.

You will know them by the giant buttons they are wearing that say:

“Ask me about Nathan’s sabbatical?”

Am I over-thinking all this? Need I spell out it such detail?

I am certain it depends on who you ask.

What I do know is that we have nearly 250 adult members

In our congregation and 130 children,

and so there are likely 380 different

Reactions to what my leave means.

What are the roots that will hold us close?

Will you come back?

What will happen while you are gone?

These are some of the questions I have been receiving this fall,

So let me simply say that one of the roots holdings us close

are the promises we made to one another seven years ago

This February during my installation to join our journey together.

You asked me then: *will you preach in love of truth and freedom?*

Will you walk with us, and serve us devotedly and to the best of your ability?

I said yes then, and while I am sure that along the way I have made mistakes

and fallen short,

I continue to say yes as I preach and teach,

As I go to your bedsides, as I cajole us to not hide our faith,

As we celebrate together our growth in health and vitality.

Have we come far together? Yes we have. It been rather amazing.

Do we have work yet to do? I think we’re only just getting started.

Which has me thinking of wings.

Can I share a wish I have for us during this time?

That you will see it as an opportunity for your growth

Just as I see it as opportunity for my growth.

Maybe I needn't persuade so much.

I'm sure there are some who are thinking:

Isn't he gone already?

But I must say that I will be disappointed if what sometimes happens

In other congregations during sabbaticals happens here,

That having the minister go on sabbatical means

That the congregation takes one as well.

Why?

Because I believe that you minister to each other more than you know.

Because I believe that we ought to come to worship not just

to get our own needs met,

But also because our presence here on Sunday makes a difference

For someone else.

Because I believe that so much of ministry is about showing up,

And showing up is something you know how to do and you can do for each other.

I believe the opportunity here for us is mutual:

For me, it is to renew and recharge my gifts for ministry,

Apart from the congregation.

For you, it is to renew and recharge your gifts as a congregation,

Apart from your minister.

If I did not believe our roots were strong I would not go.

If I did not believe we had new things to discover I would not take
the leave.

I believe in five months we will return stronger together:

deeper roots, wider wings.

And it is with these roots and wings that I believe we can

Become one of the strongest Unitarian Universalist congregations

In our area –

A place others in our movement can look to as a model for what
Our faith can do and be for those who long for our message
And long to find in our doors a spiritual home.
Indeed, in several significant ways we already are this model.
I hope you will be proud. I hope you will also be as excited as I am
About our emerging leadership.
I believe we much to offer a hurting world that needs us.
I believe we have much offer our faith for too long has been on the sidelines,
That for too long has been content to say that if small is beautiful,
Then tiny must be terrific.

A final word: thank you.
Words cannot express how grateful I am for this time you are giving me.
I know how blessed I am,
And I know that everyone of us in this room wants and deserves
A sabbatical,
And this fact only deepens my commitment to use the time well.
But you should also be proud for what this says about you,
That you know that ministry is much less about time served and tasks performed
And much more about keeping fresh the faith that prays:

*Spirit of Life, come unto me.
Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.
Blow in the wind, rise in the sea;
Move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice.
Roots hold me close; wings set me free;
Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me.*

May this be our prayer, whatever the change, and in all times of transition.
Amen.