

June 11, 2006

“Looking Back, Looking Forward”

Rev. Julie Kain

Rev. Dr. Arvid Straube

Rev. Julie Kain:

Many of you know that I'm getting ready for a big move across the country to start as a minister in the church in Pensacola, Florida. I am in the process of packing and I want to take just a moment to show you a couple things that I brought from home this morning...The top of the box says, "No peeking." As Arvid and I talked about this last service that we are leading together, we decided to approach it with a sharing of gifts, a celebration of the times we've all had together here at First Church these past two years and our deep wishes for one another as we continue on into the future.

So I will begin with a few words for you that I hope you will receive as gifts from me. I remember a conversation that took place many years ago now when Arvid was feeling a bit overwhelmed by the growth in numbers of members in his previous church where I became a Unitarian Universalist. At one time, before a new sanctuary was built, similar to here, we actually went to three worship services on Sunday morning because it had become standing room only when we just had two services. Remember that? Of course, it does require a lot of thought and preparation when you have a church that is growing literally at its seams. Our staff here at First Church can tell you a little bit about that. At the time of this conversation, I was a dining room manager for a large Italian restaurant and we often had banquets there. Everything we did at the restaurant was to maximize the use of space and to aspire to provide a consistently high quality of both homemade food from a large menu and professional, personable service. The busier you get, however, the harder it can be to achieve this, but we always kept it as our goal. And so, at that time, it was easy for me to respond to Arvid, "But more is better. It's a great problem to have." I was delighted to find, more than ten years later when I arrived in San Diego to begin a team ministry with Arvid, that over the course of those years his attitude toward the growth of the church had significantly shifted. He now, as you well know, exudes enthusiasm and optimism for always reaching out to more people through more church programs, such as the one he and Fred have launched this year, an intentional ministry for young adults. Our Young Adult Mystery Squad meets once a week and next year we will have a staff position to help that program grow.

The loyalty that I have to Unitarian Universalism was initially fostered by Arvid's church and his ministerial leadership and I must say it has been a genuine pleasure to express my personal loyalty to him as Lead Minister of First Church these last two years. First Church is growing and it will continue to grow. Unitarian Universalism in San Diego County is growing and it will continue to grow. Despite all the natural growing pains, this is a very good thing. The big picture, folks, is that we are here to have our lives transformed and it happens. It doesn't always happen all at once or in perceptible and tangible ways but I have been a witness to you in this community and I

have seen with my own eyes and my own heart the many transformations that do indeed take place here. So, I say to you, “Keep up the good work!”

One gift I leave with you as you continue to grow is to remember this as you move forward with Arvid’s expansionist vision for and with First Church: Listen. Listen to each other and listen deeply. We are setting a welcome table so it is vital to make space for every voice to be heard not just the loud ones, or the squeaky wheels, or deep pockets, but everyone. That is what we mean by beloved community. Now this is not a Talking Stick from the Native American tradition, it is a medicine wand. It’s to remind us that every person brings their own kind of medicine into this world and when we create a sacred space together, our individual and collective wisdom may be released to its fullest so that that medicine can heal the world. This is what covenant groups are about. This is what church is about. This is what we mean by beloved community.

Another gift I leave for you is an invitation to collaborate in the shared ministry of this Church, which is at the very heart of the Empowered Organization Model of Church structure that we are experimenting with now. This goes much farther beyond the business of running a religious institution, into the spiritual practice of discerning the call of a prophetic church. Our liberal tradition asks us to respond to the world with actions of healing and justice making. In order to listen to that call that First Church is being asked to take up, there has to be time set aside to dream. Now I don’t just mean the dreaming that happens when we are asleep, although those are good to listen to as well. The kind of dreaming that I mean happens when we are not necessarily seeing with our eyes, but with our hearts. We look into the future and see a better world, a better community, than the one we know now. Once you have your dream of a better future, don’t forget the next step...Do it!

As Gandhi says, “we must be the change we wish to see in the world.” When we put on our metaphorical work gloves and get to work making our dreams of a better world come true, I invite you to sing this song every once in a while, it’s a good UU song: “Don’t be afraid of some change. Don’t be afraid of some change. Today will be a joyful day. Enter, rejoice, and come in.”

The last gift I leave to you is a very serious challenge to each of you individually and to the congregation as a whole: be sure, whatever you do, do not to forget to--*have some fun along the way!*

Rev. Dr. Arvid Straube:

That is a really hard act to follow. I’m sad today. I’m quite sad today because even though Julie will be here next month, this will be the last time we’ll be up here together, leading worship with you. It’s really hard to say goodbye. Julie, you’re the one I chose to be a part of my team when the Board of Trustees of this congregation asked who I wanted to work with and you’re the one I chose and I haven’t regretted that for one moment. And this is important for everyone here to realize, that we have been a team for those two years. Now, I’ve been a little more up front. It has to do with my role and it has to do with my personality. We’ve accomplished a lot in these two years. It’s

important for everyone here to realize just how much of that accomplishment is Julie's excellent, tireless work, often behind the scenes. We've been a really good team. We've really enjoyed working with each other. We've melded well, meshed well, complimented each other with a lot of fun and very little friction. The accomplishments that have happened at First Church in the last few years are a part of that. What has been mutual respect from a long acquaintanceship has turned into a deep friendship through good times and bad. Julie, I love you.

The Buddha said that the truth of impermanence is the most important truth. Everything changes. That sounds so cliché, but we act all the time as if that's not true, until things happen all too often, many of us think, that lead us to no longer be able to ignore that fact, like a goodbye. This congregation in the last few years has been very aware of impermanence, of the fact that change is a constant of life, change is life. In the Tibetan Book of the Dead and in the Tibetan Buddhist religion there is a description of something called a *bardo* state, Tibetans of course believe in reincarnation, the *bardo* state is the state in between one life and the next, when the spirit, the soul of a person is suddenly cast into a fearful place where nothing is familiar, where the old life is gone and the new life has not yet begun. I'm not sure about the *bardo* state after death but I know that life is full of these transition states, when the old has passed and the new has not yet begun. Unfortunately, times of seeming stability are often an illusion. We lose everything, identity, possessions, relationships, habits, routines. It's all insubstantial. That's not bad news. It's the way it is. Living in the moment, being with the change is the way to meet the challenge of life. Suffering comes from holding on, trying to resist the inevitable, trying to stop the endless river of change. I'm not saying we shouldn't mourn our losses. That is actually part of accepting them, accepting the moment, moving with the endless flow. But we need to remember that without change there can be no growth, there can be no life. It would be a tragedy if a child were to stay an infant forever. It would be horrible if the afflictive emotions that we suffer at some times in our lives were as permanent as they might seem when things are going badly for us. It would be awful if we remained the same person we are today for the rest of our existence, immune from growth, learning, and healing.

The Vietnamese Zen Master, Thich Naht Hanh talks about the leaf that is about to fall from the tree and die in the fall. Thich Naht Hanh says that the leaf is not sad because she knows that she will fall to the ground and who she is will be taken up by the tree to nurture her strength and that new leaves will grow to take the sun back into the tree. You see, the leaf has the secret. She is not the leaf. That's not her essential identity. She's the tree. Each of our separate lives are not the point; we are life itself which is changeless and complete. Accepting our losses, mourning our losses, is not the same as resisting change. By accepting the impermanence of things, we are opening ourselves up to all of the new things that are constantly being born into this world, created from that which was before and could not be without that which came before.

We heard some beautiful Bach. If there was not change in music it would be a drone of one note. Music is change. That's why we love it. Learning is change, putting aside those ideas, notions, and convictions that no longer serve us. Spiritual growth is

change. Finally, spiritual growth is accepting what is with equanimity and gratitude. We are not separate ever from the source of life which is growth and change.

I've got a gift for Julie. Julie, you came to the church I served in Durham, North Carolina with a young daughter and a spiritual hunger. You pitched right in. You served on the worship committee and in many other ways. We, that congregation, saw your potential for ministry and we encouraged it. I'm so proud of you. One of the opening words that I use a lot is on this calligraphy. It's called the Exhortation of the Dawn. This has been in my office for a number of years and I give this to you to take to your new office to remember our deep connection in our relationship and our partnership in ministry, because you have truly shown us, the whole congregation, this lesson as we have struggled with what it means, as our denomination is struggling with what it means, to have two ministers in a congregation and how we do that and how we choose those ministers, and as a matter of day to day, you've shown us the way.

“Look to this day for it is life, the very life of life. Within its brief course lie all the verities and realities of your existence, the bliss of growth, the splendor of beauty, the glory of action for yesterday is but a dream and tomorrow is only a vision, but today well-lived makes every yesterday a dream of happiness and every tomorrow a vision of hope. Look well, therefore, to this day.”