

Jumping in Mid-Stream  
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It was a beautiful, summer day – the sky was clear and blue, only a few high wisps of clouds in it; the air was warm and the river was bubbling at a pace that told you it was alive but not dangerous. The leaves in the full branches of the trees filtered the sunshine and it was a perfect day to be on the river, in a tube, floating my way downstream. I leaned back, closed my eyes and in the distance I could hear laughter and the splashing of water. It was a moment of pure bliss and rest. It's a good memory to have – a good way to celebrate Earth Day – to honor this planet. Perhaps you too have a river story – a story of peace and beauty, a story of time with family and/or friends and feeling like you belonged – you had a place. Maybe it's the kind of place we sang about in our first hymn – and it's like this place, this community here – here where we gather on Sunday mornings – here where you, and you, and we belong.

It was back in the early 1800s when French political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville, wrote that "the genius of American democracy resided in its small towns. The native of New England is attached to his township because it is independent and free: ...American democracy depended on human relationships based in places."<sup>1</sup> The small town, where people knew one another – depended on one another – those were communities where, like it or not, you were known and you knew others. There was a sense that one was essential to the community and that all must work together for the community to survive.

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<sup>1</sup> See The UU World, March/April 2005, page 28.

And now, approximately 200 or so years later, look where we've ended up. Our small towns are shrinking as suburban sprawl grows exponentially. Our sense of belonging in a place, to a place has almost disappeared as the worldwide web connects us with others across the globe. It's ironic, isn't it? To connect to folks around the world and not even know our neighbors name? And then when we pause and reflect at what happened in the Virginia Tech community, a sense of safety, of community was destroyed within a few minutes. This sleepy little town, nestled in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains – whose only draw was the University – it is now known around the world and its sense of intimacy is shattered.

Within all of this, where do we go? The Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed answers the question with these words: "The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amidst the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice. It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community. The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed." This is why we come to church – we gather here - to learn how to create the beloved community and take it out into the world.

After what seemed like years of searching for a place to call home, a close friend of mine found her way into a Unitarian Universalist church and was greeted warmly. The music was beautiful, the sermon was interesting and clearly the people enjoyed each other's company. After the service and coffee time, my friend left feeling elated and was

eager to return. She was dismayed to find the church was virtually closed during the week and that she would have to wait a whole week to see and learn, talk and worship with those folks again. Finally, she had found a liberal, growing, challenging faith, one with an outward vision and social justice causes to work on – a faith with a rich history and they only met once a week. And in the summer time, the church practically closed its doors. Now there is the joke that Unitarian Universalists are the only people God trusts to give the summer off, but my friend found the structure difficult. Didn't people need communal spiritual nourishment more than once a week? Wasn't their community worth something during the summer? It begs the questions Why do we come to church? And what does membership in a church mean?

We talked about these questions. Clearly she hadn't heard of First Church – whose doors are rarely closed. I think many come to church for specific reasons and stay for many others. I think people come with a deep longing for community, for healing and connection. But what is membership about? Surely it's more than signing your name on a card and pledging some money that will keep the lights on and the doors open.

So how are we doing with that? Like the new members we welcomed earlier in the service today, I have just joined you – it feels like jumping in mid-stream into the river of life, jumping in the middle of the on-going process of community building. And I want membership in this community to mean something more than keeping the lights on and the doors open. I want membership, the process of becoming a member in this church to grab hold of us and plunge us deep and wide into the river of community – transforming us in the process.

Here we are gathered at the River – it is big enough that in some places it can be tranquil and peaceful and it is one that is also alive and maybe even in some places dangerous to the status quo (I hope so). There are times you'll be able to rest in your inner tube and float along and there will be time when some white water lies ahead – when your involvement in this congregation will change the way you think about and live your life. I want this church to be the place where we practice living out our Principles. I think the church community is the best place to starting learning how to hold each other gently accountable for living the way we say we want to live.

Being an active member means several things, including: having an active spiritual life – a spiritual practice that feeds your heart and soul; it means attending regularly and involving yourself in this community, by attending a class, learning a child's name in the RE program or marching for peace. And of course, it means committing some of your financial resources to this place that does more than have lights on and doors open for use. It means paying salaries and for growth and outreach and giving deeply from all of ourselves so that we are transformed in the process of being here. You see, I think that's what being a member is all about – to be worth your time, your energy and your resources, membership needs to be a transformative experience. How do you experience your membership here at First Church? Has being a member transformed your life? For you who have been members here for years, is that transformation still happening?

Today we acknowledged and blessed new members. We welcomed them into this community to join us on this journey of faith. Their ideas, hopes, dreams and questions will be added to our own and thus this community will be changed and be transformed

with their inclusion. Let me say here – I'm not talking about change without good process or meaning. I'm talking about the change that simply comes because new people have joined us here. I'm talking about the change that's inevitable because we are serious about including others. They have joined for many reasons and I hope they have experienced this community as loving and affirming and one that will challenge them and ask them to grow. Maybe some have joined because they have already experienced a change in their lives because of this place.

Becoming a member is a significant act. But I wonder what happens if we are not changed by their presence? What happens if we do not change how business gets done around here? I know this might be hard to hear, but let us consider these questions. What happens if classes or worship services remain the same? What does it mean when we gladly accept new members and keep living, doing church the way we always have? There is a phenomenon in churches regarding membership that is called the revolving door. This is when a church takes on as many new members in the front door as there are people who are leaving through the back door. These are the churches that stay at the same size for decades. Maybe the revolving door happens because while they welcome new members, how church happens does not reflect or incorporate those new folks and their new ideas or desires for different experiences. Church happens the way it has always happened and so they remain the same kind of church.

Every four years, the Unitarian Universalist Association appoints a Commission on Appraisal Committee that studies a topic for three years and writes a report. The report is filled with their research, interviews, and suggestions for change around the given subject. One of their reports was on membership and what it means to be a member in our

faith tradition. The report is titled *Belonging – the meaning of membership*. The report states, "Individuals do not simply become members of a community. By their joining and their participation, the community is reconstituted, reformed, changed; it is no longer quite what it was before. In this fact there is hope."<sup>2</sup> I like that last sentence: In this fact, there is hope." Institutions are oftentimes slow to change, because people are. And people make up the institution. But when new people come in, if they stay, institutional changes must occur. And this is scary. Any change is. I know I struggle with this. I want to change but at my pace and I want things to change as I think they should. Sound familiar? I, like you, live in the tension of wanting transformation and wanting things to stay the same. But we can't have it both ways.

One of the guiding principles for me around change – like the flowing river, change means movement – it means life and growth. It means I often will not get the change I want at the pace I want but I will work for it and encourage it if it is a change that will ultimately benefit the larger community. It may not be what I want, but it may be what we need. Change that reflects our vision of encouraging and growing lives of service, integrity and joy. I'm more than willing to work for that; I'm willing to change my plans for that greater vision – for a faith that has the ability to save lives and be about the business of transformation in a world that desperately needs it. It is scary and sometimes painful but I believe the work of transformation is the role of the church. This church, this faith we practice offers to you a place for personal transformation as well as your place in this community.

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<sup>2</sup> UUA report on *Belonging – the meaning of membership*, page 28.

We have inherited a spiritual and faith tradition that is worthy of our time, our sweat and tears; it is worthy of our loyalty, our talents and our resources. The Rev. Olympia Brown told us "to stand by this faith – work for it and sacrifice for it." She said that we "are strong enough to work for a great true principle without counting the cost – trusting in the one God which ever lives and loves." This is the faith to which I have dedicated my life and it is worthy of yours – of living it out daily. We have a good news a human worth and dignity – that every person matters because they are alive on the planet; our faith of justice and peace seeking – of a responsible search for truth and meaning. It is our faith and its use of the democratic process in our congregations, which may be the last voluntary associations that lives its democracy (that alone is a reason to come to church, to be involved in one and to support it – this place that lives this principle when governments all around the globe have not); this faith that promotes peace and liberty for all; that respects the planet and our place within the web of existence. Look at other organizations, other faith traditions and tell me of another whose vision is so encompassing, so life-affirming, that puts forth such high ideals and tries to put them into practice Sunday after Sunday and all the days in between? Where else is there such an intergenerational community that seeks to be more welcoming, more open, more embracing of all of Life's possibilities? This is the faith, this is the church.

You are welcome here – wherever you are in your journey in the river of life – whether you're riding the rapids or floating in the peaceful inlets – this river is wide and we are in it together. This community can make all the difference – if we will but let it. Even though they, our new members, and I too have joined you in mid-stream – let us be open to the transforming possibilities that exist even now. Let us be about the business of

truly welcoming and being open to change that could mean more growth, more life and more love. May we together in the days that lie ahead – learn to create a place for all – and a deeper commitment to this free faith of ours that has the power to transform our own lives and this city. This great faith that strives to make the world more fair, that is indeed our blessed possession – may we proclaim and live it more, every day. May it be so and blessed be.