



# FirstWords

A publication of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of San Diego

## Religion and Church? Yes, Really!

By Emily Webb

People are often surprised when they first meet me that I'm on the path to be an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister. Often people who aren't familiar with Unitarian Universalism make a comment that say something like "Religion? Like a church? Really?" "I respond, "Yes, really! And it might look different than you imagine."

Other folks, often people in my generation, wonder about how relevant church is in the world today. Maybe they are involved in a yoga studio, or a book group, or an activity such as sport or outdoors that is deeply nourishing for the soul.

Today it is easy to hear excellent music, sermons and participate in engaging classes and workshops just from your home - provided there is access to the Internet. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there are more programs and opportunities related to spiritual growth than ever before. We all have options and choices. So again, the question - why church?

Lately, I've been giving a very direct answer. I'll take in a deep breath and say, 'Well, NPR won't bury your dead.'

NPR stands for National Public Radio. It is a source of news, information, art, music and entertainment for millions in the United States. You can turn on public radio and hear a variety of voices and stories. It's a wonderful institution in this country. It reaches many people, and provides an essential service. NPR however, will not show up with a casserole when you've broken your foot. NPR doesn't know your children, your trouble with your boss. NPR doesn't have a way for you to show up and receive a smile, to meet the eyes of another human. That's not its purpose. It is part of the mission of this congregation, of religious communities, to be with people through the many transitions of life - including celebrating new life, growth and change in families, illness, crisis, in moments of joy and to be with people in grief and death. Sundays mornings are my favorite time of the week. I love watching people leave their cars and bikes, stepping on the grounds and noticing friendly faces. I see them stopping for a moment to notice the beauty of the fountain, the texture of the memory wall, and the

speckles of green plant life throughout the property. As the bell is rung, there is a rustle of action, and the movement towards the Meeting House is like soft wave moving towards the shore. Each person brings life into the building, into the worship space.

I am on the path of ordained ministry because I love this experience of people coming together, of being with one another intentionally. While at First Church, people gather in many ways, and at many times throughout the week, not just on Sunday morning. For me, there is still something very special about times like Sunday morning when we come together to be in sacred space. It is for many people, the only time in the week when they actually sit for an hour and simply **receive**.

People are often very busy *doing* and there always seem to be *more* to do. The beauty of worship is that we are together in the being. It is our communal spiritual practice. We might be involved in other private or smaller group spiritual practices throughout the week or throughout the day, but worshipping together is a time to remind one another to slow down, that we are not alone, that our lives have both challenges and blessings. Worship matters. Places where people can be together in silence, in reflection, in a sense of the connections among us and beyond us, matter. Religious communities matter. The forms of churches might change shape, as the world we live in morphs and shifts. And we, as Unitarian Universalists, have the ability to be relevant and engaged in the world of today and tomorrow - it is our calling to be so.

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## Arvid's Arcana— "Will We Be the Blackberry of Churches?"

By Rev Dr Arvid Straube, Lead Minister

Until a few short years ago the Blackberry was the pocket computer of choice for the high-powered and elite of this world. Three years ago, Blackberries were more than 50% of the pocket computer market. In those three years the Blackberry market share has dropped to around 5%, according to an article in the New York Times. Why? Because Research in Motion, the Blackberry parent company had become complacent and did not keep up with the changed consumer expectations created by the introduction of smart phones such as the iPhone and the Android. A new universe of applications has opened up with the introduction of these products and Blackberry has not kept up.

There is a new religious universe out there as well. Recent surveys have all pointed to the increasing secularization of the American public. In those surveys the fastest growing religious group is composed of those who list "none" as their religious preference. This is especially true of Generation Y people in their 20s and early 30s. This is a generation that to a large degree sees organized religion as rigid, dogmatic, homophobic and intolerant, making little distinction between liberal and fundamentalist traditions. It's not as if interest in spirituality or spiritual growth has waned. It's just that more and more people see themselves as spiritual but not religious. They find their spirituality in yoga class, book discussions, meditation groups, workshops and the almost countless opportunities to engage with spiritual ideas and practices on line.

I think it is important for Unitarian Universalism and First Church to take this new religious universe very seriously, as the First Church Board of Trustees engages in the process of creating a new Strategic Plan for the next few years. The question is, how do we respond to this new religious landscape, while remaining authentic to who we are? I think it means we need to focus always on our mission to create community, nurture spiritual growth and act on our values to help heal the world. And it means that we can't stay stuck in the way we've always been doing that. Many of our practices and programs just won't work anymore. Some of them are just fine, but we still need our new programs to reflect the way people live now and the way they see the world. We're going to have to try new things and go in new directions.

This is why we have three different worship styles each Sunday and why we have bilingual services at South Bay and why our Religious Education program for all ages keeps evolving and why we are always increasing and improving our digital and social media outreach. We'll need to pay close attention and stay nimble and flexible, while staying very close to our mission.

## November Sermon Messages

### Celebration Times:

#### Hillcrest Campus:

Sunday, 9:30a (Traditional) and  
11:30a (Contemporary)

**South Bay Campus:** Sunday, 9:30a  
(Intergenerational, Bi-lingual  
[Spanish, English])

The November **Transformational Theme** is  
**Gratitude and Generosity**

#### Sunday, November 4:

Hillcrest Services—"Why Giving Is Good," part of our Essential Spirituality Series, Rev Dr Arvid Straube (live)

South Bay Service—"Dealing with Difficult Emotions," part of our Essential Spirituality Series, Rev Dr Arvid Straube (pre-recorded)

#### Sunday, November 11:

Hillcrest Services—"After the Election, Now What?," Rev Dr Arvid Straube (live)

South Bay Service—"Heroes, Victims, and Villains," Emily Webb, Intern (live)

#### Sunday, November 18:

Hillcrest Services—"Life in Eden," Emily Webb, Intern (live)

South Bay Service—"Why Giving Is Good," part of our Essential Spirituality Series, Rev Dr Arvid Straube (live)

#### Sunday, November 25:

Hillcrest Services—"Pilgrims and Indians: What Really Happened pm the First Thanksgiving," Rev Dr Arvid Straube (live)

South Bay Service—"Life in Eden," Emily Webb, Intern (pre-recorded)



## Strong Families

By Liz Jones, Director of Religious Education and Family Ministry

We hear a lot in the media about families that are struggling, and dysfunctional, yet we all know that there are many families that are functioning well. The Family Strength's Research Project at the University of Nebraska came into

being in response to the fact that amidst all the news about dysfunctional families, people were still saying that family was one of the most important facets of their lives, and that families brought out the best in people. John DeFrain and Nick Stinnett who headed up this project wanted to know the stories that led to these positive feelings.

The researchers working with this project solicited families who self-identified as a strong family. The response to the request was overwhelming. Well over three thousand families were involved in this phase of the project. The families completed an extensive questionnaire. The families that ended up participating in the program were primarily from the United States. They included rural and urban families, all economic levels, two parent and single parent families, and a diverse racial mix. The families came from a variety of religious persuasions, and included families in their twenties to their mid-sixties.

The results of the survey highlighted six major qualities that mark strong families:

**Appreciation and Affection:** These families do not hesitate to show affection, and they are intentional about expressing appreciation of each other.

**Commitment:** They are committed to each other. Family comes first. This includes valuing each member of the family, fidelity, keeping promises, being responsible, sharing goals, willingness to make sacrifices, etc.

**Positive Communication:** Actually talking to each other and listening, confirming what you think you hear, empathy, honesty, kindness – **Positive Humor:** not at the expense of another.

**Time Together:** Spending time together – planned but not inflexible. Creating a family identity – “we all attend church together as a family.” “Camping is a family activity we all share.” Etc.

**Spiritual Well-being:** There is a purpose or meaning at the center of these families' lives. It could be a religious faith, it could be love or helping others – this is something above and beyond themselves to which they are committed and that gives them meaning.

**Coping with Stress and Crisis:** All families have hard times and crisis. Strong families have developed skills to cope with the bad times when they do come. They pull together and support each other. They are willing to get help. They keep communication going and they learn to be flexible in the face of the storms.

In the Adult Education class Family Treasures, we will explore these six qualities. Each month we'll highlight one quality, explore what it means for us, and look at several ways that those qualities can be built and strengthened. We will discuss activities that families can do together around that quality.



Join us on these dates at 9:45 AM (while the children are in their classes) in room 321:

November 11 – Commitment  
 December 9 – Time Together  
 January 13 – Appreciation  
 February 10 – Communication  
 April 14 – Spiritual Wellness  
 May 19 – Coping with Crisis

In Faith,

## From the Youth Service, May 27, 2012

By Athena Halsema-Fernandez and Rose Smith

**Athena Halsema-Fernandez:** I am the girly-est person I know. My favorite color is pink, I wear bows that are larger than my face, and I worship My Little Pony (friendship really is magic). But it wasn't always this way. In fact, I was once terrified of frills, despised pink, and only wore dresses if someone had died.

For you see, when I was about six or seven, I came face to face with the "girly" stereotype. Up until that point, I was pretty normal, and I gave absolutely no thought to whether I fit into any particular stereotype or not. But then I became terribly afraid of being labeled. I didn't want to be thought of as a "goody-two-shoes-girly-girl," (although I kind of am). I kept my hair extremely short, I wore long shirts and baggy pants even on summer days, and I played Pokémon constantly. I was so concentrated on not becoming a stereotypical "girly-girl," that I became a stereotypical tomboy. There's just no way to win with you guys, is there! But as time went on, and I finally left the dark void often referred to as "middle school," I came to realize that I'm not a stereotype: I'm just me.

I fully understand the fact that there is a certain point in our lives when we need to find our identity, but for me, I'm okay with just being myself, and not trying to be an *extreme* of something that's just not me. I have more important things to worry about (i.e. homework, friends, homework, homework). Being yourself is not about being a stereotype, in fact "fitting in," isn't even really that important. Just *being* will cut it for me.



**Rose Smith:** When I think of chivalry, I think of a nice gentleman, holding open doors for women. Now, this can be changed, depending on your sexual orientation: maybe one of the women is holding the door for another, and such. Historically, chivalry is the generic term for the knightly system of the Middle Ages (the time my grandparents were born!) and for virtues and qualities it inspired in its followers. The word evolved from terms such as *chevalier*: *sheh-val-YAY* (French), *caballero* (Spanish), and *cavaliere* (Italian), all meaning a warrior who fought on horseback.

Dictionary.com gives many definitions, but this one is close to what is generally thought of with chivalry: "The combination of qualities expected of an ideal knight, especially courage, honor, justice, and a readiness to help the weak."

This definition means it could be anyone who has a trait of the ideal knight, like courage. Maybe the courage is standing up for what you believe in, like standing up for your passions. For instance, I have had problems in my dream of cooking Italian food. People have wondered, "Why do you want to cook?" Some people say it rudely, because they only see me cooking badly; others just wonder. And I have to have the courage to tell them that even if I don't practice cooking much, my dream is still to cook. This takes courage, which is chivalrous. That's what chivalry means to me now: having the courage to tell others about what you believe in.

As Unitarian Universalists, we pride ourselves in the ability to stand up for what we believe in, like rights of marriage equality, immigrant justice, and the dignity to allow everyone to honor their own religious beliefs. I will leave you with a quote by Scott Farrell: "If you want to check someone's sense of ethics (including your own), you can start by asking one simple question: What would you do if you thought no one was watching you?"



## ZACH WAHLS AND TRUE SOUTHFOX

By NANCY FISK

Zach Wahls, on a tour to promote his book, *My Two Moms*, spoke at First Church in September from the pulpit and then at a book signing that benefitted his new organization, Scouts for Equality. Zach, a former Eagle Scout, attained national fame in a Youtube video, when he spoke about his parents at the Iowa legislature prior to a vote on legalizing gay marriage.

In the service, Zach spoke powerfully about the issues that inform his life. He discussed what makes a family and how love and faith can support a family through the tough times. How his mother, Terry Wahls, made a considered decision to be a single mother of two children. She then met her partner, Jackie Reger and fell in love. Later, Terry experienced health problems that left her wheelchair bound during Zach's teenage years, although she then made a miraculous recovery.

Zach spoke about the observations he's made about love from watching his mothers' relationship. He says that "love is giving someone the power to destroy you and trusting them not to." That, in a family, it's important "to work through the hard times so you can enjoy the good times."

True Southfox, son of Tree and Suzette Southfox, went to the first service, and stood in line

for an autographed book and then got his picture taken with Zach. Impressed by this, I decided to ask True what his impressions were of Zach. According to True, Zach "is a role model for me. I admire how he overcomes obstacles with grace, power and courage." True related to Zach's admonition of working through the hard times. When True fights with his parents over homework or other issues, he says, "One of the upsides is that you develop a resiliency that makes you bounce back from the tough times, and makes you enjoy the good times more."

Something that stood out for True in reading Zach's book was when Zach's mother Terry, a doctor, was trying to get pregnant: "Since the clinic where she worked didn't have an IVF clinic to enroll in, someone suggested she contact the University of Wisconsin at Madison. The doctor she spoke to was initially very friendly, talking in a doctor to doctor manner... When she replied that she would be doing this as a single parent, his voice grew icy." This underlined for True the difficulty gay couples have in being supported by the straight community, when trying to conceive or raise children.

"I wish Zach Wahls was my brother. I picture him as not a deity, but as someone who overcame struggles that I couldn't overcome."

It gives True hope that he will be able to triumph over his own struggles later in life.

To hear Zach Wahls entire message, [click here](#).



## MUSEUMS, AND CROWDS, AND RUINS, OH MY!

By Rev. KATHLEEN OWENS, ASSOCIATE MINISTER

On October 1st, we left the relatively peaceful and relaxing Greek islands and spent a week in Athens...and then moved on to Rome...hence the title of this blog, Crowds, Museums and Ruins. And we often said to one another, "Oh my!" to the crowds, to the largess of these two incredible cities (Athens and Rome), to the crowds, to the rush and crush, to the museums, the crowds, the ruins, the crowds and, yes, all the people. In these cities we sometimes felt over-run, in the way and sometimes like we had to fight for a chance to see.

And again I was reminded of a thought from Cousineau's book, *The Art of Pilgrimage* when he wrote, "I don't believe that the problem is in the sites as it is in the sighting, the way we see. ... imagining is required of us." And indeed, as excellent as most of the museums and ruin sites we visited are, the use of our imagination was extremely important in order to get beyond ourselves and the sun, the crowds and our fatigue and imagine a more complete society of people who lived, loved, worshipped, argued, and learned in the communities we were now seeing as ruins.



Athens is filled with many opportunities to stretch one's imagination as one walks through the city. The Acropolis with two different temples dedicated to Athena was grand and impressive. Later, when the Mediterranean went from the pagan faith to the Christian one, the smaller of those temples became dedicated to Mary. Not unusual and it required some imagination to see the Parthenon as a Christian church. We visited Mars Hill where Paul is said to have preached to the men of Athens, in the shadow of the Parthenon, the Ancient Roman Forum, and in

the new Acropolis Museum we saw the ruins of a Christian community in the midst of its excavation. One can look through the transparent floor and see directly into the ruins that showed meeting rooms, hallways, and homes.

Of course, in Rome it felt that history was directly around the corner or up an alleyway as we turned onto a street and saw the Colosseum directly in front of us. Our imaginations didn't have the workout here like they did in Athens, as Roman ruins felt so present, protected and prevalent. We visited the Vatican Museum and St. Peter's Basilica and were awestruck by the beauty of the art; and we were overwhelmed at the wealth contained in this one area. Like all cities, the homeless are present and in this area especially – a city built around a faith, it was harder to see them.

One place that required almost no imagination was Delphi – one of ancient Greece's most holy sites. We took a daylong trip from Athens to Delphi – northwest of Athens and high in the mountains. It was one of the most beautiful places I have been in. For me, mountains and the sense of the holy go hand-in-hand and Delphi is no exception. We toured the ruins there, heard from our guide of Delphi's history and then, Jan and I simply sat on a bench, under a pine street, with a cool breeze over us, as we sat in silence and took in the awe-inspiring view of blue sky, a few white clouds, mountains with green trees, white marble and limestone ruins below us. It was easy to feel the Great Mystery alive in this place.

The gift of visiting these two cities, representing two very different civilizations has sparked many conversations, thoughts, and leaps of the imagination as to how and perhaps why we have evolved through the centuries. I look forward to sharing more with you and I look forward to the many conversations we will have about some of these ideas after the sabbatical is finished and we are together again. Until then, we continue to travel through other parts of Italy and remember you in our thoughts and prayers.

Blessings to you,

*Kathleen*



## Music People

By KATY SWANSON

My dad was a music guy. He spent most of his evenings in the Music Room, a small room off the living room in the house where I grew up. He'd go in there after dinner, pick out a record, turn on the stereo, lean so far back in his big dark brown leather chair that he would almost tip over backwards, and *just listen* to music for hours. He loved Brahms, Beethoven, and Mozart, but his two favorite musicians were Randy Newman and Elvis Presley.

My dad was a quiet, gentle man in conversation, but he loved to perform. The church I grew up in, the Unitarian Universalist Church of Long Beach, gave him a place and many opportunities to do so. Whether he was leading songs at the Seder, singing on Sunday morning, or playing guitar at Camp de Benneville Pines, he was relaxed in front of a group with his 1950s Martin guitar on his chest, a song in his lungs, and joy gleaming in his eyes.

Last year when I moved to San Diego to join my then-boyfriend (now-husband), I left behind a very important part of my life. Several years ago the Wylder Spirits, an alternative choir/band at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Long Beach, helped bring me back to my guitar and to music after a long break. For many years after college, I spent my nights in my room writing songs on guitar or waiting in a long line of solo singer-songwriters at open mic nights. I was worn out, drained, and tired of playing music alone. When I started going to the Wylder Spirits' rehearsals, I found that learning new songs and sharing some of my favorite music with the group was uplifting and so much fun. I started to feel like a music person again.

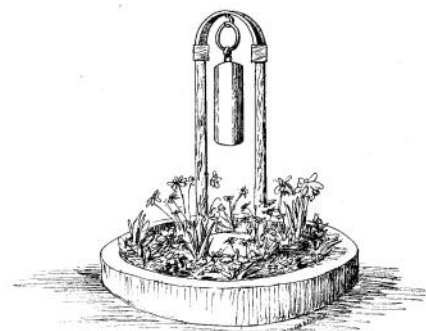
The Wylder Spirits provide a music ministry to the Long Beach church, and my part in it was important to my spiritual growth. As a member of the group, I helped create meaningful worship through music. Music supports the sermon, introduces visitors to the church, and helps the congregation connect emotionally and spiritually on Sunday mornings. I not only helped present but also select music to move and inspire people. Our music ministry helped me deepen my understanding of the church, our faith, my spirituality, and my religious beliefs.

According to George Eliot, "There is no feeling, except the extremes of fear and grief, that does not find relief in music." Our ministry helped me understand the power, meaning, and purpose of music in Sunday worship. Being a part of a community of music people and using the emotional and spiritual power of music to help create meaningful, transformative worship was transformative and uplifting for me, too.

I am beginning my first year of seminary at Starr King School for the Ministry, where I am a low-residency Master of Divinity student, living in San Diego and studying at the school in Berkeley. My experience with the Wylder Spirits is one of the most important experiences I had at church that inspired me to ministry. It helped me connect deeply with the church where I grew up.

I know that music can change lives because it changed mine. I also know that my future ministry involves music. I am a music person *and* a church person. I also long for a new musical home here, in San Diego. Part of my discernment now is to figure out how music will be a part of what I do at church and in the world as a future minister. I am blessed and joyful to be on this journey with the support of the San Diego Unitarian Universalist churches and my seminary community.

**Katy Swanson** is a first year seminarian at Starr King School for the Ministry. Since moving to San Diego in August 2011, Katy has been involved at First UU San Diego as a Wisdom Circle facilitator, in a seminarians-to-be group with Rev. Kathleen Owens, and with the Soulful Sundown leadership team. She and Steve Swanson were happily married this summer.



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