

COMING HOME

Rev. Dr. Dorothy May Emerson

First Parish Church in Billerica, Massachusetts

September 13, 2009

OPENING WORDS—Richard Gilbert, #442

WATER CEREMONY

The Water Ceremony we participate in here today is one of the most common and most loved rituals in Unitarian Universalist congregations. First celebrated in 1980 at the Convocation on Feminist Theology in East Lansing, Michigan, the water ceremony is a way to symbolize our coming together in all our diversity to form a congregation with a common vision and purpose.

During the summer, some of us have continued worshipping together downstairs where it is cooler. New folks have joined us—and we welcome you. Others of us have been away, or connected only occasionally during the summer. The water ceremony is both a representation of our reconnection as a congregation and a blessing of this historic sanctuary where we will worship together for the coming church year.

We bring water from places that are special to us, perhaps where we have spent meaningful times this summer. Our individual waters will soon become one body of water. Just so, we who have gone our separate ways over the summer now reconnect joining our lives and our spirits in one community.

Our mingled water will be used throughout the year for two purposes. Part of it will be saved for use in dedicating children and for other blessings. The rest will be used to water plants in the memorial garden, perhaps after church next Sunday. This past year we used water from our ceremony to dedicate the lift that makes this sanctuary accessible, and we used some to dedicate two children. Water from last year's ceremony is already in our bowl, so when you add new water this year, you will be connecting with the past and bringing it forward in a new form into the present.

You may participate in this ceremony in different ways. You may have brought water from a special place you visited during the summer or during the past year. Perhaps that special place is your own backyard or your kitchen. The water you name can be any place that nurtures your spirit.

If you didn't bring water with you, some is available on the table here for you to use to represent water that has special meaning for you.

As you pour your water into the congregation's crystal bowl, please share in one sentence what your water means to you spiritually. Or you may simply pour your water in silence. The rest of us will participate in this ceremony by bearing witness to the mingling of the waters.

As we pour our separate waters into the congregation's bowl, let us remember that although we come from different places, together we form one congregation. Like rivers running to the sea, we're coming home, we're coming home.

PRAYER AND MEDITATION

Spirit of Life in whom we live and move and have our being, dear God, we lift our hearts this morning in praise and thanksgiving for all that is our life. We are grateful for this place of worship and for the community that gathers here.

We ask your guidance throughout the coming year as we work together to welcome those who seek to nurture their spirits among us. Help us to be beacons of justice and compassion in our communities and with each other. Be in our hearts and give us strength and wisdom for our daily living. And may we honor the past as we live our values and principles in the present and build a strong foundation for the future.

We acknowledge the difficulties of living our values with all the stresses and snares of the world we live in. Especially on our minds this week are the events of eight years ago on September 11th. Help us find ways to work for a world where all people are respected for their inherent worth and dignity, where all people have enough to eat and safe homes to live in, where all people have the economic means to live decent lives, and where the fertile ground of inequality that pervades our present world--providing the context for terrorism to grow--will be replaced with justice and peace for all.

We know we have a lot to accomplish to build a world we can be proud to pass on to future generations. May we be strengthened in this great task by our time together and by the love and support of this congregation.

And now let us add our own prayers or sit for a time in silent meditation. (pause)

We pray in the name of all we call holy. Amen. Blessed Be.

SERMON

There's no place like home. With these magic words and three clicks of the heels of her red shoes, Dorothy transports herself back home to Kansas from the Land of Oz. She has been on a spiritual journey, encountered fascinating friends along the way, fought enemies who wanted to destroy her, but in the end what she really wants is to go home.

For some of us the word home embodies the safety and acceptance of a loving family. Robert Frost wrote: "Home is the place where, when you have to go there,/ They have to take you in."

But for others home is a difficult place, perhaps with alcoholic or abusive parents, or with death taking parents' or siblings' love away at an early age, or of too many struggles to survive in situations of terror or poverty. For some, going to the homes where we grew up is not an option.

Likewise with religion. Some of us grew up in religious communities that were warm and accepting. Others experienced judgment, rejection and maybe even banishment. Perhaps we asked too many questions or expressed beliefs that didn't fit in. Or perhaps our lifestyles didn't mesh with the purported values of the group. For whatever reason, at some point we realized that the group was no longer welcoming to us. It no longer felt like home.

In many Unitarian Universalist churches, this Sunday is called "Homecoming Sunday." The choir sang: "We're coming home to the spirit in our souls. We're coming home, and the healing makes us whole."

For some who are here today, this church is home. It answers the need many feel for a place where they can belong, where they can grow and develop spiritually, and where they can celebrate important life passages.

When children are dedicated here, the whole congregation agrees to enter into a covenant of caring and mutual responsibility, recognizing the importance of children whose thoughts and deeds will help to create the world of tomorrow. When people become members of the congregation, they agree to join with others "in creating a spiritual home together." The membership affirms our widening circle of love and commitment, embracing all who value freedom, beauty, and integrity.

Because this congregation has become a spiritual home for many people, there are some who were part of this congregation in the past whose families will return here for their memorial services. This past year, three memorial services were held in this sanctuary: for Ginny Finlayson, Pat Bowen, and Ken Moloney. This place and this congregation hold all of them in memory and in love. In the memorial garden, located near the side entrance, there is a plaque where the names of those who have died can be listed and remembered.

For those of you who are new, we hope the warmth and acceptance of this congregation will feel welcoming to you. Unitarian Universalism's affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of every person means that you are welcome here, no matter where you are on your spiritual journey. This congregation seeks to embody that welcome here in Billerica.

This congregation is also on a spiritual journey. Today marks the middle of our two-year interim ministry together. This interim journey includes both the search for a new minister and the search for a new vision, a new sense of who you are as a congregation and what you hope to become. In the past year, we made significant progress toward this goal. We worked on coming to terms with the past and healing its greifs. We identified the congregation's unique identity, strengths, needs, and challenges. And, we began the process of clarifying leadership roles and developing new leaders. I look forward to our second year of working together to build a strong and vibrant Unitarian Universalist presence here in Billerica.

As a group called Scarecrow and Tinmen sing:

Let the longing for my journey be
The constant seeking for my true home
When time is swallowed into destiny
There's no place like home

In the beginning of *Wizard of Oz*, while Dorothy is still in Kansas, she sings of a place where "the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true." Perhaps this church can be a place where our dreams of community, our dreams of a spiritual home, can be realized.

One of the special honors for me in serving as your interim minister is that I get to preach from a pulpit that was used by a famous person who shares my name. Ralph Waldo Emerson lived most of his life in nearby Concord, Massachusetts. He began his career as a Unitarian minister but went on, as an independent man of letters, to become the most famous lecturer, essayist and philosopher of 19th century America. To his friends he was known as Waldo.

Waldo Emerson was a key figure in the literary and social movement of Transcendentalism—dubbed by some the “New England Renaissance.” Some of the other Transcendentalists were Henry David Thoreau, Elizabeth Peabody, [Bronson Alcott](#) and [Margaret Fuller](#). They did much to open Unitarians and others to science, Eastern religions and the experience of a mystical connection with nature.

One of Waldo Emerson’s friends and colleagues was Margaret Fuller. This coming year is the bicentennial of her birth on May 23, 1810. Another focus of my ministry is as coordinator of her bicentennial, so you will be hearing more about her in the coming year. Among many other accomplishments, Margaret Fuller wrote a book called *Woman in the 19th Century*. This small but influential book empowered generations of women to think and act for themselves. In it she wrote: “A house is no home unless it contains food and fire for the mind as well as for the body.”

May this house of worship bring you food and fire for your mind and food and fire for your body. May this congregation be for you a place where you truly feel at home, where you can think aloud, speak boldly, and share your full self. May this be a place where you can leave the shackles of the past behind and find new ways of being together in community, that we may create a world of joy and peace. And may this place shelter us as we grow in spirit and in truth and become strong enough to keep hate out and hold love in. Amen. Blessed Be.

BENEDICTION—Lauralyn Bellamy, #692