

Where the Heart Is (Stewardship Sunday)
Rev. Martha Hodges March 6, 2011

Our hearts call us home. When we are far away, nostalgia for home calls us back in spirit, if not in body. And our hearts, our emotions, tell us when we have arrived there. It's common to hear of newcomers to Unitarian Universalism say, "The first time I came to this church, I knew I was home." They speak of the relief and surprise they felt upon first discovering us – the feeling of homecoming. Home is a state of mind. A feeling of belonging, of being in the right place. Home, they say, is where the heart is. Where our deepest needs are answered.

Now, some of us never find that home. Some of us spend a lifetime in search of haven. Not all families provide a home. Because home really has little to do with a dwelling, with bricks and mortar, adobe or wood. Yes, it's hard to feel safe without those physical walls and the roof that shield us from the elements, that provide privacy and warmth. But while a house may protect us from the cold and rain, we all know it can't protect a growing spirit or a sense of self-worth. That kind of comfort, encouragement and nurture are found in a true home, whether that home is sustained by a family, a group of friends, a community, a tradition, or a church.

This church seeks to be a spiritual home – for you, and for all those wanderers out there who long for such a place of rest, nurture, acceptance, support and caring. And for something more... For a true spiritual home offers all those comforts we associate with home, but also something more...

A spiritual home – a home for your spirit – is a place that values your struggles, your doubts and your questions. It does not seek to control your spirit, but rather to provide a safe place for it to grow, to change, to experience periods of shriveling sadness and again to expand to encompass the goodness of life.

A spiritual home does not try to contain your spirit. Your spirit is too big, too adventurous, too curious to be contained. No, a home for your spirit offers a place to return to, every week, to be refreshed and reminded of what you hold most precious. To be reminded of your best self. Of your connections of mutual responsibility and care. To remind you that you are not alone. That there is a safe place for you to come back to when you are weary or overwhelmed. A safe place, a place of grounding, when you feel full of possibility and enthusiasm.

A home for your spirit provides a community. A community in which not everyone thinks alike or uses identical language or images to talk about the sacred. Your spirit does not demand conformity; it thrives on difference, and this spiritual home offers that kind of stimulation. Here you find diversity of beliefs, diversity of ages, backgrounds, and sexual orientations, diversity of social and political priorities and personalities.

And here, in this spiritual home, you find commonalities. A common commitment to free thought, to fairness, to kindness and compassion and truth. And a common commitment to see it through, to see each other through ups and downs, and to see this community through ups and downs, through lulls and frustrations, successes and moments of exhilaration. A commitment to give of yourself to keep this home open, for you, and for all spiritual seekers. To all those wanderers and exiles we have yet to meet.

This common commitment is what we mean when we speak of a covenant – of this church being a covenantal religious community and not a creedal one. We covenant to affirm and promote those seven principles on the wall here. And we covenant with each other, to encourage, comfort and challenge one another; to speak the truth in love; to each do our share to make this a home, a home for the spirit. This covenant has never wavered.

This past year has not been an easy one. We've all suffered losses. Beloved ones have died. Job security has evaporated, along with the ability to pay for luxuries we've become accustomed to, luxuries like a staff person to keep the building clean, or paid staff to manage our children's religious education, or to produce our weekly order of service. It hasn't been easy, but you have not wavered in your covenant. Volunteers have stepped up to do the jobs formerly done by staff, and much, much more.

Under the volunteer leadership of Paula Braxton and Candy Wood and with the extraordinary dedication of our Religious Education teachers, UUCC has affirmed, even in these difficult times, that we are fully committed to the flourishing of all generations here. Our children continue to share their exceptional talents with us through worship for all ages and our middle-schoolers have set an example of moving beyond these walls to build friendships with their peers at various MUUGS retreats. We can be proud that, small church though we are, we provide Our Whole Lives classes in human sexuality to our children at all levels. Next year, our juniors will be working on the Coming of Age program. Our children give us a lot to celebrate. This religious home truly does honor people of all ages and feels blessed to have them among us.

And, while we are celebrating, take the Italian dinner we enjoyed a week ago. Look at the tremendous effort from so many people that went into producing that elegant meal. And look at the turnout we had. Most important, look at the feeling of goodwill, the joy in being together, that we all felt that evening. This church – that is, you – is really good at making opportunities to enjoy each other's company and to celebrate this community. Our celebrations include not one or two little subgroups, but the whole community. Single or married, with or without children, toddlers to elders, gay and straight, visitors, guests and longtime members, we come together on these occasions. This is something special about this church community. This church is home to all of us.

Like any home, this one requires commitment and cooperation to maintain it. I know we will all do what we can to support it financially in the stewardship drive that is beginning here today. And never for a moment doubt that your gifts are appreciated. They are true gifts from the heart. I want to recognize that and thank you for that. Whether you are in a position to give a lot or a little in terms of money, you all give of yourselves, and those gifts are beyond price. This is our true treasure.

The Gospel of Matthew says, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Our treasure is what we give to bring our heart's desire to life. Look to how you spend your treasure of money, time and love to discover your heart's desire. Our heart is calling us home.

We find ourselves facing an exciting challenge. Where will our physical home be in the years to come? And what will it look like? And yes, how will we pay for it? Jim Eastman has put together a kind of imagination board to help stimulate our thinking about this. Be sure and take a look at it during lunch. So many choices will have to be made – by you – in the coming year. You may have heard my personal fantasy of a new home, a geodesic dome, made to order, built in part by our own hands, expandable, environmentally friendly and beautiful to see and to

use. I've put together this little folder of information on domes, to help sell you on my idea, but mine is only one voice. We will all have a voice in making the decisions that will come up this year, as our current lease nears expiration.

I know that, whatever we decide, and whatever our resources turn out to be, we'll go through this process the way we always face challenges: with mutual respect and faith in the wisdom of the collective, the spiritual cooperative that we are. And it is my hope that as we discuss and decide about our future, we will remember those wanderers, those in search of a spiritual home – this spiritual home – and that we will never forget that we are called to provide for them as well. For all those yet to find us, yet to come home to us. Those whose hearts are calling them here. To offer them a home, and bread for hungry spirits, is the greatest duty, and the greatest privilege, we can ask for. And our hearts – your hearts – are big enough to hold them all.

To paraphrase our opening words by Charles Bukowski:

Be on the watch... There is a light here, in this church. The gods do offer us chances. Know them. Take them. The more often you learn to do it, the more light there will be. Your life is your life. Know it for the treasure it is. The world waits to delight in you. The world waits to come home. Let us be ready.