Hello, I'm Jeff Phillips.

Having presented two affirmations previously in this faith community, I thought my words to you today would come easy. “Sure,” I said to Bruce Bendix when he asked… Then came the realization that I had to follow Lisa Bohne’s similar presentation last week. How could I possibly top that? Of course, there is no way, and frankly no need. “Be true to your thoughts and feelings,” advised my sage wife, Lois.

My previous sharings have started with history, tracing the influences and milestones that had led me to Unitarian Universalism. Again this time, I found that there were notable events which led to my engagement with Countryside Church.

My mother holds deep faith in the Christianity of Catholicism. Rather than just showing up each Sunday, my mom was encouraged, from an early age, to share her musical gifts, as soprano in the Ukrainian Catholic Church. A couple years after my mother starting attending Our Lady of Perpetual Help, the new Ukrainian church near our home, my father decided that he, instead of sitting on the couch at home while the rest of us went to mass, could come with us and be an usher. Now Usher was a position of service, comprised mostly of passing out bulletins and collection boxes, passing the basket, and counting money in the church kitchen, where my dad could spend time with the love of his life… cigarettes.

So it was established for me, from an early age, that church was not simply for attending, it was a place to contribute time and energy… and music. I was an altar boy, assistant CCD instructor, ran the printing press in the rectory basement and sang in the choir, and was substitute musical director.

What did I get for all my engagement? “Your reward is in heaven,” my mom would say. Hmmm… I did feel connected to the choir members… it’s hard not to feel connected to a handful of people you sing with, unaccompanied, in four-part harmony. Had I known, I could have received the same kind of connection singing in a barber shop quartet! As for religious connection, I learned basic bible stories, received instructions for ethical living, and pretty much discarded the rest, which was easy to do, since it was all in Ukrainian anyway.

I moved away from Detroit when I went off to college, and found that I appreciated my family better at a distance. For many years, what little time I did spend in a place of worship was usually related to either music or a girl… and sometimes both. Engagement was my goal, but more of the marital type.
More years passed… marital engagement came, then children. When Clay and Carly reached ages seven and five, their mother and I sought a place where they could learn about religion—all religions if possible—and that led us here to Countryside Church… but not until after an intense engagement down the block at Immanuel Lutheran Church, where I was complicit in starting a praise band. While my family were receiving dogma from the pulpit and dogma from Sunday school, I was in the chancel, blissfully engaged with the band, playing and singing God’s praises with uplifting pop/rock music.

Like my dad years prior, I wanted to be where my family was, so I left my Lutheran Praise Band chums and joined my family here at Countryside. My intellectual connection to this congregation was evident from my first Sunday visit, when I realized that I was in agreement with every word I heard, read, sang and was invited to repeat! Wow! I didn’t know a place like this existed! This is a religion?

Musically, though, I had just left my best friends. That was tough. During my first Countryside service, Dan Wiseman was playing a Euphonium solo. That was an encouraging sign. The second service, the Countryside Choir was in the loft, and I remember leaning in to my then-wife during a choir piece and saying, “If I join here, I’m going to be sitting up there.” To which she responded, “Naturally.”

So, following my parents’ example, I became fully engaged with Countryside Church by joining the choir, mentoring in the Coming of Age group, joining Circle Suppers, playing various instruments, pledging a portion of my income, making continual refinements to Countryside’s media systems and becoming a Welcomist.

What do I get from all this engagement? I get you. I get a community of friends, fellow inquisitive explorers and music makers. I get a local family of open minded individuals who embrace life in all its complexity and messiness. People who don’t look to dogmatic religion to assuage guilt or simplify their lives, but rather who look to each other for continual inspiration and insight. We… you and I… covenant together, here, in the search for truth and meaning. Here, I can say what I feel, and feel what I say. You are my fellow travelers. For that, and the opportunity to engage with you at so many levels, in so many ways, I am very grateful.