

Keep Calm and Widen the Circle
A Stewardship Sermon given by the Rev. Hilary Landau Krivchenia
at Countryside Church UU on Feb 13, 2022

In May 1866 Frances Ellen Watkins Harper addressed the 11th national women's rights convention in New York City where she beside Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. Unitarian, just like Anthony, Harper understood the interdependence of our lives. She said “we are all bound up together in one great bundle of humanity ... society cannot trample on the weakest... of its members without receiving the curse in its own soul.” It seems impossible that such insight as we now hold was held by our Unitarian forebears all those years ago.

Only a couple of weeks ago I preached about the way that our principles are all about relationship -- with ourselves, with one another, with all people, and with all life. Our principles weave us into the world. For me, this sense of connection brings great joy and a sense of belonging. Every living being is my relation. We aren't the first faith to stumble-- OK we didn't stumble, we worked our way kind of systematically -- toward this idea. But we're not the first faith tradition to recognize this truth. Mitakuye Oyasin Is the Lakota expression that means “all are related.” It's an ancient wisdom that's taken people in the so called “developed world” millennia to remember. I'm grateful to the Lakota people for allowing non-native people to use these words of time tested, mystically experienced, science proven wisdom.

All are related. Our faith exists to help us live into this reality -- to give us guidance and yet freedom to live creatively, justly, compassionately into the family of life.

Widening the Circle is the congregational theme for the month of February. But really, it's our theme and our purpose all the time.

It's a circle made by strengthening the web of relation that is lifted up here in and by the congregation. Here, we support and -- even in times of pandemic and heating malfunctions -- we build our relation to ourselves, to one another, and to the world. I miss seeing you – even masked. I miss your presence, personalities, the chance to look into your eyes closely. But, even now, it is we who keep our kinship strong, hold the circle, and keep widening it. This great purpose runs the length and breadth of our beloved building -- whether we're in it or not -- and touches every day of the week.

All week things happen through the work of this congregation that lift up our connections. Here are a few examples. One of my favorites is the consistent and loving care that our grounds team takes outside our home – creating a welcoming setting for our work and life. Even when we've been meeting virtually their work has been tireless and creative – ready for us all to come home. You may not know that through this pandemic, our gardeners tended their plots on the church grounds. Like the historic victory gardens - they planted and harvested crops of flowers, vegetables, and hope that they shared with the food pantry, Chalice House, and others. They demonstrated that now, as throughout history – hope grows as long as we remember to plant it well. Our transitions group meets monthly to connect adults in mid to late life, offering a wide range of programs that stimulate mind, spirit, and conversation, build friendships, and connect participants to the world. Our soul connections groups are small groups that build heart to heart connections. The Living the Pledge program is building connections

so that members of the congregation can support and encourage one another to be real allies working to end racism. The pledge poster is now at church so that one person after another who wants and intends to help end racism can sign it until we have a congregation where real inclusiveness is our practice within our walls and we can be skilled and empowered to take antiracist witness and work beyond our walls.

We strengthen the bonds of kinship with pastoral care, ongoing book groups, meetings of many purposeful committees, within and then widen our circle with our work at Chalice house and with our partner organizations and in many other places. Only a couple of weeks ago Dr. Mary, your board president Tom Dempsey, and I went to the district 211 board meeting because the folks that call themselves the “proud boys” we're going to be there to intimidate the board, To witness against the teaching of actual American history, and to foster division and distrust. We were there to witness to unity with all people and to the power of the truth of history to liberate.

It's all about relationship and having a wide and loving circle. A principled circle. And every one of us shapes it: from our covenant, to our engagement in the life of the congregation, to our pledges, and even our bequests. We build for the present and we build for the future.

While we may seldom realize it, our children and the experiences we offer them are one of the most powerful sources for weaving our expanding Circle of relationship. They are our present and our future. You know, there are congregations Unitarian Universalist and otherwise- that completely shut down their children's religious education programming during the pandemic? It was less trouble of course. But now they must rebuild a program from the shattered and scattered pieces. Here, at CCUU, with the material support of her assistants -- most recently and luckily if you ask me - our Britt Boehm – our Dr. Mary sustained our children's religious education program so that children and families remained engaged throughout the pandemic - of course, to varying degrees -- so that we still have not only the foundation but the heart of a religious education program. Lessons for home were prepared, fun projects, family learning, out of the house adventures, and props were often delivered by hand. You know what this did? It meant that, whether they bothered to register for religious education or not close, to 100 kids along with their families remained actively connected to, learned from, and felt cared for by our RE staff and our congregation. Now Dr Mary is preparing the program to go hybrid - an experiment we are starting with all those kids and families who were sustained throughout the pandemic -- because we had both a full time and brilliant director of lifespan religious exploration and she had a half time assistant -- so they still feel a part of this congregation and hope to see one another soon.

These young people a a core way that we widen the circle into the future. Some of you may not know that just recently, the coming of age youth created a labyrinth and sundial on our grounds. An actual widening circle - for spiritual deepening for the whole congregation. We dedicated it in blisteringly cold weather. The large circle joined in singing with Tom Dempsey on his guitar. You could feel the smiles through the masks. Yet another kind of victory garden.

I told you a couple of weeks ago that the sense of kinship and principles of Unitarian Universalism quite literally saved my life when I was a teenager. 20 years later UU made my life. First attending the First Existentialist Congregation of Atlanta and

then the Unitarian Universalist congregation of Atlanta inspired and called me into our ministry. Reminded me of my own gifts and my own hope for the future. There's Dr. Mary, whose career in the university was shaped by the UU faith in which she was raised. Not only did she study and teach about Unitarian Louisa May Alcott whose book *Little Women* has for generations- taught women that we have real choices in life, but as Mary worked for her PhD, she focused on and wrote about Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and she brought this remarkable Unitarian woman to a larger circle. The wise seeds we plant in early childhood or youth grow our faith and it's great promise for the future in ways that are sometimes unseen by us but reverberate through the Future.

I'll give you another smaller, younger example. Xander, a 5 year old member of this congregation was so impressed after our Chalica service this year that he began to hug his parents and say "I love you. You have worth and dignity." and, when asked why he wears a mask during this pandemic, little Xander replies "it's the difference I can make." These are long term investments it's true -- but we can gather because decades ago, other UUs made long term investments here: in these grounds, in our building, in internships, in youth who, like the Reverend Tom Schade grew up to serve our movement.

Who knew that when the brilliant Frances Ellen Watkins Harper wrote her beautiful words they would be studied and adapted by the brilliant Martin Luther King, Jr. to inspire millions or that Theodore Parker would write those words about the arc of history that would resound now. Who would have guessed that Henry David Thoreau's essay on civil disobedience would inspire Mohandas Gandhi in his work to liberate, India, his home country.

Some of you may know the work of Frances Moore Lappé. Raised Unitarian Universalist. her compassionate, critical thinking resulted in a book called *Diet For A Small Planet*. It inspired a justice oriented generation to eat with a smaller, more just footprint on planet earth.

Just too many to name. We pledge our financial resources in the present so that we have a place in person and a virtual space to continue our work of strengthening the bonds and ever widening the circle of kinship. And so that our faith will change the future. And well - my beloveds - this faith is more needed now than ever.

Ours is a supremely democratic faith and the spirit of democracy urgently needs friends now. Ours is a faith not in one creed or another - but in the knowledge that every soul and person is equal and should be treated with justice, equity, and compassion. Ours is a faith tradition long dedicated to critical thought -- and That -- we can see, every day, is needed now more than ever in our society and world. And ours is a faith powered by love and reason. Both sorely needed now in abundance. And ours is a faith that believes in the ongoing and tested search for truth and meaning -- and the truth needs allies now and forever.

Oh- these may be uneasy times, beloveds. But victory gardens embody the will to carry on and grow in uneasy times. It is in uneasy times that places of sanity and courage need to exist -- for they, like this place, are victory gardens of the spirit. Perhaps you'd hoped -- certainly I'd hoped that this pandemic would bring out the best in the American people. Given us unity and courage, groundedness and resourcefulness as a whole, many hued people. But this place stands -- physically and even more spiritually -- as a place where that vision of the people united -- still thrives

and can speak out into the fractured world. Yes – there are times this possibility seems impossible – but it is only impossible until it's not – and we make that happen.

For my family this was a challenging year. My husband Mark retired. We were a two income family pledging around 6% of our income plus many, many donations to CCUU-- as well as other causes during the year. Our income was going to drop by around 40%. We talked and decided that we'd keep our pledge at the same level -- around \$10,000 a year. Oh, we could have used the money -- but I believe so deeply in this congregation and this faith. All in all, it seemed impossible until it wasn't.

I know it's a challenging time for us all. But I urge you to look into your hearts and hopes just as Mark and I did and give generously to the present -- for your hopes and for the future.

It's been a challenging time for the congregation. American churches are dwindling – but not all of them – not the ones making wise decisions and we did make wise decisions-- hard ones -- to sustain our staff and prepare for return. In truth, pledge payments have suffered from a myriad of causes. Perhaps some of you may not have been aware of all the vibrant programming that we've created over the last years, perhaps because you think our building costs dropped- well, you can see that our beloved building is still in need of maintenance -- for our heating system and so much more. And we upgraded our heating and air conditioning in order to make the air safer to breathe in times of pandemic.

I've only shared with you a fraction of what we've been doing here. All of it has put us in a good position for the next phase of purposeful life here. This isn't a diminished congregation, but one prepared to meet the moment -- provided we pledge to make that happen.

We're all aching to return, frustrated, eager to be with kindred spirits well known and new. We want options to participate from home, especially when there's illness, infirmity, or distance. We want to stream our services to a wider audience with appropriately licensed music, readings, and the ability to preserve our services online. We want to return to sending our fair share to the Unitarian Universalist Association which has provided so much support and guidance in these pandemic days, and, above all, we want to keep and fairly compensate the staff who have so creatively kept everything going and empowered us to return ready and able. As the Reverend Patrick O'Neill said "What we love, we empower. We invest in what we love. We give of our time, our energies, attention, and our resources so that what we love might thrive. This principle applies to our church as well..." So wrote my colleague.

It is a vital time for deep generosity to lead – time to be ready to live into the future – which has arrived – no blockade at the border can stop it from arriving. It is time to empower this faith community to grow. Time to equip our staff in light of the past – for the present and for the future. It is time to fully empower this faith community to fully inhabit our principles, our faith, our covenant, and our hopes. We cultivated this congregation as we would have any victory garden in a time of conflict and turmoil. Yet, when the pandemic began this seemed impossible until it wasn't.

So let this be a time to reassess what you've pledged in the past and reckon that you can probably do better – even far better --time to stretch to the next level of giving or even the level beyond that – realistically according to your actual finances.

Back when I met Mark, he was a fancy scientist working at General Mills. He went to Unity Temple in Oak Park where his two children attended Sunday school. One day I discovered that he pledged \$600 a year. Here was a moment when I, aspiring minister, could educate this good-hearted soul whose income was higher than anything I had ever known. Well – his pledge went up a lot that year and it's been uphill ever since.

I invite you to pledge your hopes and not your fears, to pledge your vision of a world made whole and a people to work toward that vision, I invite you to pledge to one another that you will plant, cultivate, and be hope here – now and in all the days to come. I invite you to see your pledge as a purposeful act of building and strengthening our relationships – with our selves, one another, and with all the family of life. I invite you to see your pledge as a leap into the impossible not yet – that becomes possible in the very moment that you leap.