

At Least One and Probably Many

When we were working on this service,
Kimberlee pointed me in the direction of this poem by Lawrence Kushner –
isn't it lovely?
everyone carries with them at least one and probably many pieces
to someone else's puzzle.

This is what religion is all about:
reminding us that we carry with us the pieces of others,
and others carry the pieces we ourselves have been seeking.

We carry what others need.
Others carry what we need.

We need one another.

I don't know how we got into our head this idea
that we each already have all our pieces.
That we were each, at some point, presented with a cellophane bag,
every single piece we would ever need in our lives
accounted for, included.
I don't know where we got it into our heads
that we could take our bag,
with everything we needed,
and we could take that into our own private corner of the room,
or our own room,
our own kingdom,
and make our own puzzle, make our own meaning, make our own happiness,
without needing to consult, or share, or exchange, or talk to anyone else.

I don't know where we got this idea in our head,
but we did, didn't we?

We think we have what we need.

Ha!

Now, I'll admit that sometimes we will think to ourselves that even though we have everything we ourselves need, that probably someone else needs us.

It's nice to feel needed.

But we forget that it's a two-way deal – if they need us, then chances are we need someone too.

Some of us, it must be said, feel the other way 'round: we know that we need what others have, and badly.

But it is harder for us to admit that we have something they might need, too. But we do.

This is the truth of religion – “ligion” shares the root for the word “ligament” – binding, connection. Religion is to re-bind, to re-connect, for us to remember that everyone has pieces – at least one and probably many – for others. And others have ours.

And this is why we have friends, and lovers, and churches, and neighbors, and teachers and students. Because it is together that the meaning of our lives can become clear, that we can work toward completion.

So, take a puzzle piece.
Use a marker.

Maybe you want to color your piece.
Or maybe you want to write on there – write a gift.
A gift you need, to help you complete your puzzle.
Or a gift you have, that maybe – just maybe – someone else needs.

Near the end of the service, we'll collect these pieces and put them together.

Speaking of gifts, it is upon your gifts –
your love, your time, and your money –
that this church depends for its existence and future.
So, we now take up an offertory to support our work –
and we thank you for sharing a piece of yourself with us.

Celebrating the Past, Entering the Future

Thank you for your support of this fine church.

Let me say something about this church –
some of you know the history much better than I,
but some of you maybe don't.

This church is descended from a Unitarian Society founded in Rockford in 1841.
1841! Pretty cool.

This year is our 171th year as a worshipping, learning, serving community.

This church has changed a lot over all those years.

It's had six different names in those 170 years,
and it's met in four different places, not counting the public halls and living rooms of the first decade or
so.

And this church has had 26 ministers in those years,
if you count all the interim's, associates, and assistants –
but you don't count all the student interns and summer ministers. 26.

However, if you just count those ministers who were full-time, called, and served more than a year, there
are just 14 of us,
with three of us – Thomas Kerr, Charles Parker Connolly, and David Wiessbard,
serving about 30 years each.

We are proud of our history, proud of what this church and its leaders have done
for all these years.

Later this fall, I'm going to tell you the story of one of these 14 ministers,
The Rev. Augustus Conant, who served from 1857 until 1861.
Rev. Conant was born 200 years ago this October,

and in addition to his service in Rockford, he served congregations in Geneva, Palatine, and Elgin, Illinois.

All four churches will celebrate his birthday this fall,
and so a few months ago I was supposed to hand these out to you.

But the late spring got away from me, and here we are.

But it's not too late.

Take one.

Cut it out.

Attach a popsicle stick to the back.

Take it around Rockford, or other places you might travel,
and take a picture.

Send me the picture,

and we'll put them together with the pictures taken by members of the other congregations,
and we'll see where Rev. Conant gets around.

[Pass them out.]

We have a great history –

we also have, if I do say so myself, a great future.

Unitarian Universalism is always recreating itself for a new age,
and this church is always recreating itself, too.

We are embracing our unique and powerful role

as a spiritual home for religious diversity,

as a place of reason and love,

as a place that helps the transformation of our world come to pass.

A place of hope and strength,

and a church that continues to welcome the newcomer,
of every age,

a place where children and youth and grown-ups

are growing in faith and understanding and connection.

We have a great future.

We're making it real together.

The ministry of religious education of our children and youth –
that you might learn and grow and discover –
and the ministry of welcome –
that we might include, expand, and make-at-home –
this ministry is shared ministry.

It belongs to every child, every youth, every family,
and every member of the church.

To provide some assistance and expertise in this work,
we have hired ourselves a wonderful, creative, skilled, and dedicated woman,
Kimberlee Carlson,
as our program director.

She's not here to do your ministry for you.

She's here to help you do it well.

So, today, we celebrate her presence with us and welcome her
to our church and our church staff.

So, I'll ask all the children and youth, first, to stand,
and say the words up on the screen together:

“Kimberlee, Welcome! We are happy you are here to help us learn and grow as people and as Unitarian Universalists. We promise to listen to you, laugh with you, and to share our lives with you.”

And now I'll ask all the parents and grandparents who bring children and youth to this church, and all the religious education teachers and volunteers, to rise in body or spirit, and say together the words on the screen with me:

“Kimberlee, Welcome! We are glad you are here to support our ministry to our children and youth. We promise to partner with you, to say Yes! when you ask for our help, and to share our lives with you.”

And now I'll ask all the members of this church to rise in body or spirit, and speak the words printed on the screen:

“Kimberlee, Welcome! We rejoice that you are here to support our ministry to the children, youth, and newcomers of this church. We promise to be generous with our hospitality, to take risks and embrace possibility for the sake of our faith, and to say Yes!, even before we've been asked.”

Kimberlee, Welcome. I'm glad you are here and very excited about our future together.

I *Know* I've Always Wanted a Home

If life is a search for the right puzzle pieces,
what are those pieces?
If we're looking for something, what are we looking for?
Corduroy hears the little girl say:
"I've always wanted a teddy bear!"

We parents hear this all the time, don't we?
"I've always wanted that toy!" –
even though they've never seen it before in their lives.
"You never let me do what I want!"
although we let them do what they want all the time,
far too often, probably.

"I've always wanted a teddybear!"

And corduroy mimics this grammatical construction:
but he's not sure:
I think – I think, he says, - I think I've always wanted to climb a mountain.
I think I've always wanted to see a palace.

But you know what you've been seeking when you find it:
I know I've always wanted a home.
I've always wanted a friend.

This is what we are seeking:
connection – friendship.
Home.
Home, a place to say, I belong.
These are my people,
this is where I make sense,
where I am restored, and challenged, and welcomed,
and grow and rest
it is where I return when I feel lost,

and part of it stays with me when I travel out into the world to change it,
or me, for the better.

I know I've always wanted a home.

Indeed it is for each of us.

So welcome home.

This is home.

This is – or can be – that place for you.

Welcome.

Olly-Olly-Oxen-Free

Come on in, wherever you are,

come on in, whoever you are,

it's a new game.

Olly-Olly-Oxen-Free!

It's a new game,

it's a new year,

It's a new beginning.

Here is what I have learned –

from my own life,

from hearing the stories of so many other lives, including yours:

the object of the game is not to hide.

the best hider is not the winner.

the winner is the one laughing, having fun,

piled together.

it ain't the one with the most toys.

it's the one with the best friends.

get found!

this is what we're after – puzzle pieces who really want to be put together,
stuffed bears who want a home and a friend,
little kids and cancer patients who need others to find them and know them.

This is what we are after –
and this is what homecoming is about:
that we come together, because in coming together,
in being together,
we are stronger and wiser and more beautiful and more adventurous.

Lawrence Kusher said that when we give someone else our puzzle piece,
it makes us a messenger from the Most High –
and this sacramental sensibility –
that our own lives are messages from the most high,
that we human beings, to put it in a humanist phrase,
are infused with dignity and worth,
or, put another way,
are incarnations of the spirit of life,
we human beings are messages, we are messengers, -
and we are so when we share our lives with one another.

Why is this so?

Because, as some of you have heard me say before –
and will again, and again, and again –
because whatever it is that is holy and worthy,
it lives in us and between us.
So when we gather in covenant, and in beloved community,
and we are present to one another,
then we ourselves, and the community we build together,
we are holy and worthy.

It is in community that we exercise reason and experience love.
It is in community that we do justice and transform the world.

It is in community that we discover the meaning and beauty of our lives.

And it is in community that we are found.

Olly – Olly- Oxen – Free.

It's a new game, a new year,

so come on in, whoever, wherever, you are.

You are welcome here.