



**NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST CHURCH**

Sailing Home

Rev. Hannah Petrie, Acting Senior Minister
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301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@neighborhooduu.org

On Friday morning, I got an email from longtime member Alan Freeman: "Hi Hannah, This is written on the plane to Atlanta, where I will be this weekend to hear a play reading. Sorry to miss your first service AJE (After the Jim Era). However, I thought you'd enjoy the Zen story I read to my Chalice Circles this past week:

"Teacher, year after year you speak, and we listen. But over and over I do not understand. I beg you, boil it down to a simple syrup - a few words - what does the Buddha teach?"

The other students laughed. So did the Teacher, who then sat supremely still.

Finally, the Teacher pressed a finger into the sand and wrote:

You ask for the truth
Listen while the Buddha speaks
"Ev'rything changes"

And hearing no more questions, the Teacher danced, and the students joined in.

As much as I would love to begin and conclude my sermon with that wisdom and ensuing dance party, I will press on. Still another of you, this one very new to the church, Ms. Kim Rocke, texted me a quotation by Karen Kaiser Clark: "Life is change. Growth is optional. Choose wisely."

That also pretty much sums up my message today. But let's makes sure we're all on the same page.

If you were here last weekend for Jim's grand retirement party and his sublime final worship service the next morning, like me, you may be thinking, "What just happened?" For so long, we have anticipated the departure of Senior Minister Jim Nelson who faithfully served our beloved community for ten years. It was a long goodbye, not unlike the long goodbye of a loved one who is terminally ill. There's time to have a proper goodbye, but even so, when the end comes, the finality of it takes your breath away, and it may be harder than we imagined it to be.

Jim's departure is a living death, for we will not see him for a long time; and if and when he returns, it will never be the same. This may feel disorienting. I will never forget, last Sunday, standing up here with Jim and seeing all your faces, marked with grief toward the end of the service. It was a living memorial service. It speaks to the greatness of this beloved community that, together, you and Jim were able to create these beautiful and profound moments of laughter, grief and letting go.

In the book, *Sailing Home*, Norman Fischer makes the point that time is far from linear. He writes, "The 'now' of the Odyssey is an ever-shifting affair, constantly deranging our sense of where we are in time. It is as if the poem, in charting Odysseus' forward progress in such a deliberately mixed-up way, is trying to tell us something about how we experience time along the course of our journey of return."

Grieving is like this – it is its own journey of return. And especially for a church that must let go of a successful ministry, grief can have a way of coming and going, back and forth, pushing us into the past or future, mixing us up. In other words, it can be awfully difficult, because it asks something challenging of us. It requires commitment and consciousness – I'll speak more about this, but first let's talk about the logistics of the transition we've chosen for ourselves between senior ministries.

We are literally in uncharted territory. We are the first large church in the UU Association to forgo an interim ministry that is not a succession situation of the Associate taking the Senior position. We are being watched closely to see if this can really work. This four-month journey from the port of Jim's completed ministry to the port of Lissa's new ministry is the interim period we find ourselves commencing today.

I have faith in myself and in all of you that we can do it well. However, we'd be foolish to believe that it's not without its potential perils and pitfalls – and the transition period is not just four months, but likely a few years, as the church, staff, and Lissa together find our way home to a vibrant new era of senior ministry.

As we begin our four months together in this interim period, the first obvious thing to point out is I'm not an Interim Minister! There are these people called AIMs, which stands for Accredited Interim Minister. Every year or two they move around the country serving different UU churches in transition between settled ministries.

Neighborhood Church has opted for a stint of continuity rather than the one year AIM experience. So like Miss Congeniality you can think of me as Miss Continuity. My role as Acting Senior Minister is to lead us from one Senior Ministry to the next, and not make any big changes or big decisions. My goals are simple: keep worship strong, with five or six excellent guest ministers visiting us in the months to come, and see to it that our 2015 Pledge Drive is a success. With all of us working together with passion and commitment, I know that it will be.

It would be silly for me to play the key roles a conventional interim minister plays, as I've been part of the organizational system for almost eight years. Today's sermon is the most interimish sermon you'll hear from me. We are blessed to have a gifted consultant who will be working with us, the Rev. Arvid Straube, who recently retired from senior ministry at the large UU church in San Diego. He will be preaching March 1 and leading the church in a workshop the afternoon of March 15. We also have a strong lay-led Transition Team in place that you'll be hearing more about soon.

So we have much to look forward to as we sail home together. Part of what we'll be doing is acknowledging and honoring the times when the going gets tough. In the Odyssey, Odysseus receives tough love over and over again, so I'm going to be candid today about giving you some tough love. Keep in mind I'm hearing it right along with you, because I'm adjusting to change too, as are the staff.

The epic of the Odyssey is the story of how we come home to ourselves - it is a great allegory for the spiritual journey, and how intensely challenging it is. It illustrates all the difficulty we humans have in being honest with ourselves, and empowering our higher selves over our lower. And yet there is nothing more worthwhile or honorable than sticking with this journey, despite its travails and set-backs, its repetitious lesson that we must return to the home of our souls again and again. I love how Fischer puts it here, "Though we may go to great lengths to avoid pain and trouble whenever we can, the truth is that deep down we all welcome it if it must come, if that is what it takes to keep our lives real. We all hold to some values that are more dear than our own comfort."

I think part of keeping it real here at Neighborhood Church in the months to come has to do with honoring our journey of grief. For those of you for whom it is more profound, here's the good news: by honoring your grief and experiencing it, you are honoring this church. Because it is only through experiencing grief that we can come out the other side, and let go. It's a process of clearing out by integrating what has died in the garden into its soil, so that something new can grow there. As Fischer writes in his section about the Sirens, "The past is crucial and unavoidable. We have to face it, digest it, and integrate it into our present living - and this is ongoing work." I love that - we don't glorify the past and we don't pretend it didn't happen. We integrate it.

There are many stories of new ministries being haunted by residual grief over a former ministry. It's been said that Lee Barker's ministry here was really just a long interim ministry, because it took that long for another ministry to take after the epic ministry that was Brandy Lovely's. Maybe, maybe not. But that's an example of reflecting on this church's past that is worthwhile to do during a transition period, taking stock of who we have been, and how that may inform who we want to be. It is not likely that Jim's ministry will haunt Lissa's, but in naming that possibility, it is even less likely. Because there are steps we can take to prevent that from happening.

As an emotionally mature congregation, Neighborhood Church will take responsibility for the varying levels of grief we each feel. In other words, grieve as you are able. It's not fun - grieving is exhausting and painful. But it's even more exhausting to not grieve when we need to. Let's keep our lives real, by honoring what's really happening in them.

And while grief is not a universal response at this moment in the life of the church, this is a tremendous opportunity for the church to come together as a whole, to support each other in

this process. Here we are, reborn in a sense, getting reacquainted with who we are, independent of Captain Jim. We're not adrift, far from it. We are on an exciting adventure of self-exploration, and discovery. We are sailing toward the next, new thing, and the better we know ourselves, the more self-determining we can be.

There may be some detours in there, some Cyclops we have to slay; we may even lose a few of you. But like Odysseus, I know this church will remain true to itself, and it will come home. When I mentioned in my tribute to Jim last weekend that the church's identity was well intact apart from its ministers, you just about cheered me off the stage! Good for you. But here's a warning: don't get too comfortable in your self-congratulations. Just because you are happy and healthy, that doesn't mean you should forgo an opportunity for unflinching self-appraisal, which is usually what interim periods are for.

As many religious traditions suggest, we set forth for the very purpose of an arduous journey home – this is how we grow, this is how we make the choice to grow, in the face of inevitable change. This is what it means to hold some values more dear than our own comfort.

So let us enjoy these next several months together – let's have fun, but let's also take advantage of them, setting forth on some self-reflection. Arvid will guide us in that, but you can have your own conversations, or moments of reflection. Be adventurous, even if you're not sure where it will lead you. Take stock in what UU minister Forrest Church wrote in his book, *Bringing God Home*: "What experience taught me is that sometimes the only way to ensure a safe homecoming is by submitting to the perils of running away." On the same page, he quotes Walt Whitman, with the preamble that everything we could possibly hope for in life is right before our eyes:

Will you seek far off? You surely come back at last,
In things best known to you finding the best or as good as the best,
In folks nearest to you finding also the sweetest and strongest and lovingest,
Happiness not in another place, but this place . . . not for another hour,
But this hour.

This is such an exciting time for Neighborhood Church because we are so strong and with a strong and energetic leader in Lissa coming our way, the potential is dazzling. Strength is about to marry strength – what exciting new life will spring forth from that union! But as we must not be seduced by the Sirens, signaling the nostalgia of the past, so also must we not be seduced by fantasies of the future. Let's be excited about it, but let's live in the present, in this hour, in a reality that asks important work of us. Let's be grounded and tend to the soil, finding meaning in this work together.

So let us grieve, and let us dream – it may be mixed up and confusing at times, but let's not avoid it for fear of experiencing difficult emotions. Keep in mind that the way we approach

our emotional life is not an aside to the journey home, something that will make the journey more or less pleasant: it *is* the journey. Honor your emotions, whatever they may be.

I encourage you to share the experience of your journey with one another. Over and over again, Odysseus learns that he can't go it alone. Every step of the way, he needs help, and we are no different. With the protection of each other, we can open ourselves, free of the fear of experiencing what our hearts, minds, and souls call on us to experience.

So let us set forth, that we may return stronger, clearer, brighter. This is our time to live in the now, together, sailing home.

Let's go!