

First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque

August 9, 2020

Ten years. Ten years! Well, how did that happen? I arrived here fresh out of Divinity School. I made a beeline for the best church in the country, if you ask me.

I came, initially, because both this congregation and the senior minister at the time, Christine Robinson, were known by reputation throughout our denomination. I heard that this congregation was healthy, growing, and open to trying new things. That people here went deep, theologically, and embraced the theological diversity that existed within the congregation.

So much has happened since then. It started pretty much right out of the gate. When I had been here just six months, Christine left, as planned on a four-month sabbatical. I remember her saying, from the pulpit, “Now, everyone go easy on Angela. She’ll have a lot on her plate!” And, everyone was very considerate. But we did not just take it easy. By the time Christine got back, the congregation had voted to construct a new sanctuary, had launched a three-part, eighteen-month long immigration justice focus, and had managed to bring the president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, our national denomination, out from Boston for a visit. Don’t worry- Christine knew about the sanctuary. She had done a lot of work leading up to that point to get us ready. That was the beginning of our ministry together, a ministry that would be fruitful and meaningful, and never boring.

I remember being filled with awe as we really did build that new sanctuary. We accomplished something together that none of us could have done alone. I was moved by the sense of community, and by the many kinds of generosity and work it took to make it happen.

All of the ministry that happens within and from First Unitarian, flows from that: from the kind of community we are, from all of the kinds of generosity you share, and from working side by side. But most of it is not as visible as a big building. So today, I want to share twelve “snapshots” from the last decade, many having to do with my wonderings and growth in ministry, which often took place in the church moments that happened just out of sight.

Most are entries from my journal, where I often write in the present tense. A couple are stories I pulled from other places and re-wrote journal style for today. They are from throughout my ten years, but they aren’t in chronological order here. You’ll hear a couple of references to Christine—she is our Minister Emerita now. Some of the other names have been changed.

Some of the snapshots are funny or uplifting, and some are poignant or sad. If you are feeling a little fragile this morning, I want you to have a heads-up about that. I’m sharing the happy and the sad, because they are both part of our lives and our church is here for us for both. Here are twelve snapshots.

#1

The first sermon I preach after arriving in Albuquerque as the new Assistant Minister is called “The F Word.” Christine looks incredulous. “The F Word?” Yes, I say. It stands for forgiveness. I think she’s picturing it on the sermon sign board out on Carlisle Blvd. Just sitting out there with no explanation. I get it. And, well... Hi, everyone. I’m here! Better that they know what they are getting into. The reading that Sunday is, The Idiocy of Flight. (The same one we heard just now in today’s service). In it, Jane Rzepka mentions “the vantage point of the minister’s study.” My journal will soon be filled with things from that vantage point.

Soon after I start, I watch Christine bless babies by holding them, showing them the congregation smiling at them, and touching water to their soft foreheads. She doesn’t read from a script. I vow to get the hang of that ceremony so I can do it too.

#2

I plan meticulously for Sundays, editing my sermons sometimes right up until people arrive. I go over the Order of Service line by line, I try to prepare the worship leaders, I spend more time than I want to choosing hymns (this was before we had a full time music director). I inspect the platform, and try to remember to see the whole sanctuary. I get nervous.

In the end, what all of this preparation does is make space for the ridiculous, the unpredictable, the clumsy beauty of worship to happen without derailing us. The planning makes a worship-shaped container for things like this:

A teenaged mother I’ve never seen before who sits in the front row with a newborn, a two year old, and a three year old next to her. They are talking and wiggling, she looks exhausted to the point of expressionlessness, and I’m trying to imagine what need or desire overpowered the logistical hurdle of her wrangling those three babies in here. Later, I catch her in the family room to make sure the usher didn’t offend her when he invited her to try it out. I am overflowing with joy as I hold that two-month old baby, and try to help his mother clean up the toys her other two have strewn around the family room like a tornado, the worst mess I’ve ever seen in there. I try to let her know that I too was a young mother, and try to elicit a bit of her story. She won’t talk much, except to note with embarrassment that her breasts are leaking. I wish I could wrap her in a big hug and tell her she’s going to be ok. But I have no idea if she’s okay or not. Why did she come? Did she find what she was looking for?

#3

Campus clean-up day: I get sent to a part of the campus I did not know existed. The thin strip on the west side of the RE building, between chain link fences. It’s hot. The ground is dust and gravel. And goatheads. But working side by side bonds people. Michelina moved to China with her family several years ago. But I still remember her, because she rolled up her sleeves along with me to pull those weeds.

#4

The ushers hand out little squares of origami paper along with the Orders of Service. I invite the congregation to turn them into Valentines, without knowing who would receive them. We mix

them all up and redistribute them. I pad the basket with a few extras, for latecomers. So at the end of the service there are some leftover. Here are some of the things you wrote for each another:

- Even when it is dark and cold there is a light within you that shines!
- Thank you for spending this time with us. Peace and happiness be with you.
- You are precious. You are loved. I'm glad you're here.
- Thank you for your compassion.
- May peace ... follow you everywhere you go.
- May you be surrounded by Love and Caring community.
- The holder of this paper is entitled to many days of sunshine and love.
- You are special. May you love freely and let yourself be loved.
- May you be kind to yourself today.
- You are enough. May you be safe.

#5

Standing next to a spry older fellow in the office workroom, I watch as Christine transfers his wife's ashes from a plastic bag into a ceremonial vase.

Chuck and Tommi must have been married for forty years. I remember when Tommi called me, back in Boston before I got the job here. After two rounds of interviews and an in person visit, she wanted me to know that she was an atheist. "You kept talking about God," she said. "What would you do for *me*?" In person, I'd mentioned God only once, and not even in the sermon. But sitting in my car, outside one of the old New England churches with its impossible layers of stone, I offered a humanist prayer for her broken ankle. *May the healing energies in your body overwhelm all suffering.* Then the search committee reached its consensus, and I was hired. Eight months later, after having been ill for quite some time, with something worse than a broken ankle, Tommi died.

Now, here are her ashes, wisping over the edges of the vase. They disappear as tiny air currents carry them away from the minister's hands. I worry about where they will land. I wish we could gather them up again, but we can't. I wonder how many others are part of the church, permanently. I think of the hours I've spent with the board and various committees, and the ashes and spirits that were around us all the time. The world is covered in ashes.

Outside, her husband pours them into the memorial wall. Tears catch him off guard. We hug. So much is boundless: the presence of generations, love, the reach of death, and the meaning of our connections, when we float among the wisps.

#6

A guy comes into my office. A newcomer, maybe in his mid thirties. He sits down. We do the usual how are yous. And then he asks me, point blank, what is the meaning of life?

What is the meaning of life? I repeat back.

Yeah, he says. Why do we exist?

I don't know if I have the answer to THE meaning of life, I tell him. But I do know a lot about living A meaningful life. We could talk about that.

He nods slowly.

A meaningful life, he repeats back.

Yeah, I say.

It feels theologically honest, maybe even smart, but part of me is afraid it's not enough. He can find another clergy person, in a religion with a creed, who'll offer a direct answer to his direct question. I think of the people I have counseled, who were going through hard things that I did not have easy answers for. I think of my sermon writing. It seems like I'm always trying to write sermons about things I don't have a direct answer to.

Who or What is God?

Where Does Evil Come From?

What is Love?

Do I know enough to do this work? Does our *religion* know enough? After the man leaves, I write a poem. It goes like this:

You bring yourself before the sacred,
before the holy,
before what is ultimate and bigger than your lone life
bigger than your worries
bigger than your money problems
bigger than the fight you had with your sister and your aches and pains
bigger, even, than your whole being, your self who is
 part of
 and trapped within
 and blessed with
a body that does what you want
and doesn't do what you want
and wants all the wrong things
and wants all the right things...

You stand at the edge of mystery,
at the edge of the deep,
with the light streaming at you,
and you can't hide anything—not even from yourself,
when you stand there like that,
and then... what?

Maybe you call your pastor and say,
 What is this?
 What am I looking at?

What do I do?

And your pastor comes and stands at the edge with you
and looks over.

She can't hide anything either, she thinks,
not even the fact that she doesn't know the answer to your question,
and she wonders if you can tell by looking at her
that this is the case.

She thinks of all the generations who've come there before you
and cast words out toward the source of that light,
wanting to name it.

Somehow, she thinks to herself, the names stayed tethered to the aging world and got old
while the light remains timeless and burns without dimming.

Meanwhile,
the armful of worries you brought to the edge of mystery
have fluttered to your feet.

Unobscured by these, you shine back,
light emanating unto light.

You, with your broken heart and your seeking,
you are the utterance of the timeless word.

The name of the Holy is pronounced
through your being.

Later that year the poem will be published in a book of meditations, then republished for use in
worship across the country.

#7

Joe is hard of hearing in one ear, and nearly deaf in the other. He is in a hospital bed with his "good" ear against the pillow. He has slurred speech due to Parkinson's, so he is also hard for me to understand. He keeps trying to tell me something. I can't figure out what it is. On top of our hearing and speech issues, there are machines beeping and all the noise of a hospital. I am holding his hand. I try telling him about ten different ways that I have been thinking of him. "You're in my heart!" "I've been thinking of you!" "The love of your friends at church is all around you!" He just looks at me perplexed. Finally, I lean over him and yell right into his almost deaf ear, "I BLESS YOU!" And with a straight face he looks me in the eye and says, "That'll work!"

#8

I have done many weddings. A few really stand out. This is one of my favorites: the union of a bride and a groom, one from a Christian family, one from a Muslim family. The ceremony takes place in a beautiful New Mexico chapel on neutral ground. It's a hot summer day and we are off to a little bit of a slow start. As I stand at the altar, a very small child, maybe two and a half

years old, runs circles around me. He has that second wind energy. The kind that portends trouble. It is clearly almost naptime. “Whose is this?” I ask the expectant crowd. A family member scoops him up and leads him out the door. A little while later, just as the processional is set to begin, I hear a wail from another room. Then a long pause. Finally, the groom and his mother process down the aisle. Then, a bridesmaid, holding the arm of a groomsman. I look down and see that same small child wrapped around the man’s left leg. He clings as the groomsman walks all the way to the altar. Soon, he is in the man’s arms. During the nuptial prayer, the sound of a tiny snore causes everyone to break into laughter. The wedding was so kind toward the two-year-old. I think this bodes well for this couple.

#9

Sometimes being in the ministry means being privy to private worlds like parallel universes that unfold in plain sight, invisible to passersby. Like this morning on the plane, when I ran into a young mother whose newborn son I memorialized last fall. Her son’s death was the first time we’d met, and I hadn’t seen her since. Back then, I let her and her husband know that we’d probably run into each other, and that it might be hard for them when we do, and that I’d understand. I was picturing a chance encounter in the grocery store. I wasn’t picturing sitting directly behind her on a 90 minute flight to Dallas, my two nearly grown children laughing and joking beside me, my husband also by my side. Nor did I predict that we’d hear her dead son’s name spoken over and over again on the PA system.

I’ve got gate connection information, said the flight attendant. We’ll be arriving at gate D-as-in-David 3. If you are going to Baltimore, gate D-as-in-David 14. Boston, gate D-as-in-David 7. For Miami, the gate is A-as-in-Apple 9. If you are connecting to Portland, your gate is D-as-in-David 10. Providence, D-as-in-David 4.

And on and on it went. It turned out American Airlines connected predominantly at Gate D as in David, David whose tiny body I held and blessed, before he died.

There is no mother who cannot imagine losing a child. We all imagine it—too vividly, too often—from the moment we first allow ourselves to love them. To have raised nearly grown children is to have lost them a million times in my mind, to illness, injury, accident, to foul play, flukes, and happenstance, to my own ineptitude.

And yet my children are here, and another mother’s grief is profound. In ministry as in life, we reach for each other across chance and fate. We reach toward each other, and try not to miss.

#10

A Dream: there are two big snakes in my house. I get one to go outside. The other, bright green, jumps into my couch, beneath the middle cushion. I call a snake handler to remove them. She arrives with a stick with a grabber on the end, and a handle that seems too short. She catches the snake and laughs as she sticks it in my face. I notice she has a checklist that instructs her to do this—to stick scary snakes in people’s faces. When she leaves, I find that other wild animals are trying to escape their enclosures in my yard. A gorilla has broken free. Wild dogs are

wandering around near tame ones. The chimpanzees are without water. There are dozens of puppies in the basement of my barn. When I awaken, I sense that the snake handler was god.

#11

I learn to do that baby blessing. I stand on the edge of the platform in my vestments and heels, and touch a baby girl's forehead with water as I hold her on my hip. "I welcome you into the community of all good souls, and dedicate you to a life of love and service for and among your fellow human beings." Later, in the grocery store, I can't look at strangers' babies without silently blessing them.

#12

It's August 2019, Bob's first Sunday as our Associate Minister. When he was here visiting in the spring, and preached as our candidate, he made some crack about fanfare. I can't remember the rest of the joke. I didn't really pick up on it. But one of our trumpet players did. So when I introduce Bob at the 9:30 service, Larry pops up in the back of the sanctuary with his trumpet and goes for it. Bob is surprised, and we all laugh, Bob included. At the 11:00 service, Larry and his trumpet jump out of the closet, stage left. Bob is surprised to be surprised again. More laughter. Better that he know what he's getting into.

Before I close, I want to add that throughout these ten years, most of the time, my family has been just out of the frame, supporting me behind the scenes. It's hard to find words to express what a treasure their support is. But... I think I might be able to give you a sense of it. Here's a video from May __ 2017. Christine was about to retire. Here's what my family was up to in the church office, during the long minutes in which we waited to hear whether the congregation had voted to call me as the next Senior Minister.

[Video: Eye of the Tiger]

I feel very lucky, and very grateful. It has been a wonderful ten years. I hope we will have many more years together, with funny moments, and poignant ones, and lots of opportunities to serve.

Thank you for being a wonderful congregation, and for the honor of ministering to you and with you.