

Joy and Woe
By Rev. Meghan Cefalu
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A poem by William Blake has been running through my mind in these last few days, as I've been preparing to stand here and speak to you this morning. He writes:

Joy and woe are woven fine, A clothing for the soul divine, Under every grief and pine, Runs a joy with silken twine. It is right it should be so, We were made for joy and woe, And when this we rightly know, Through the world we safely go.

On Thursday of last week I sent a letter out to the members and friends of this congregation. I know that for a number of reasons not all of you here this morning have received or had a chance to read the letter. I will take this opportunity to read parts of it so you all have the same information.

Dear Friends,

It is with both deep sadness and the excitement of a new adventure that I let you know that I have accepted a position in another congregation and will be resigning as Minister of the Unitarian Universalist Community of the Mountains as of December 31, 2013.

Serving the Unitarian Universalist Community of the Mountains has been one of the greatest joys in my life. And so the decision to leave has not been an easy one to make. It has been through prayer and reflection, conversations with my spiritual director, friends, family and colleagues that I have come to realize that this is the right time. I truly believe that the congregation, and especially the current and incoming leadership, is well positioned to navigate this transition with grace. Just as I trust that I am ready for a new challenge, I have every confidence that the strength and resilience of this community will serve you well through this period of change.

This congregation and I have both grown a tremendous amount over these last seven years. It has been such a privilege to get to know and love you during this time of shared ministry. The idea that I will have to say goodbye to every single one of you breaks my heart. Thankfully, we will have six more months to celebrate and honor our ministry together, bring some closure to this chapter of UUCM's life, say goodbye and wish one another well.

I will begin my new position as the Assistant Minister for Congregational Engagement and Pastoral Care at the First Unitarian Society of Newton in Newton, Massachusetts (ten miles west of Boston) in January. I am excited to have the opportunity to work collaboratively with the senior minister and a large staff team. My focus will be on bringing in and integrating new members, creating programs that will encourage multigenerational

engagement in the congregation, and facilitating the lay ministry program.

The letter goes on with some more logistical points that I'll talk about this morning.

I know that this news may come as a shock to you whenever it was that you first heard it. I wish there was a more gentle process of letting you know. It has been said that, "Nothing is so painful to the human mind as a great and sudden change."¹

I want to reiterate that this was not an easy decision to make. While the new job is just exactly what I've dreamed of, there is still a part of me keeps asking, "Are you crazy?". This congregation and I have grown up together. I am your first settled minister. You are the first congregation to call me. We have fumbled our way along and learned how to navigate this minister/congregation relationship together. It has been a delightful journey thus far. And now things are really humming. Why would I want to leave such a good thing, especially when it is going so well?

And how can I possibly say goodbye to all of you people whom I have gotten to know and grown to love? How can I leave before watching with pride as next year's high school seniors, Sophia and Willow, bridge into young adulthood? How can I miss hearing the kids in the next Coming of Age program read their credo statements? And, strange as *this* might sound, I can hardly stand the idea of someone else performing the memorial services for some of our more fragile elders. Who will know them and love them enough to do it right? Leaving this congregation might just break my heart.

And that is okay. My heart has been broken before and it will be broken again. I am a big believer in that saying, "It is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all." Or as William Blake reminds us, "We were made for joy and woe."

Just because it will hurt like hell is no reason to halt the forward momentum of life. Life's transitions are never without some pain. You cannot have learning, growth and change without some degree of loss. So, as much as it will hurt to say goodbye to you, and as much as moving across the country and leaving my mother and the rest of my family and friends pains me, I feel the tug of a new adventure pulling at me. And, I am taking a leap of faith.

Maybe you are reminded of a leap of faith that you have taken in your life. Maybe it was when you went off to school, or joined the armed forces, or came out of the closet, or asked someone to marry you, or said 'yes' when someone else asked, or finally broke down and sought help for an addiction because your life was spinning out of control. When was it that you took a leap of faith?

Whatever the situation was, it was your decision to say 'yes' to a deeper calling within you that changed everything. You had to be willing to let go of what had been in order to take those first tentative steps towards something new. Do you remember? Do you remember feeling scared? Did your decision upset someone else?

¹ Mary Shelley. Frankenstein.

Eckhart Tolle writes, “Some changes look negative on the surface but you will soon realize that space is being created in your life for something new to emerge.”

It is my deep faith that my choice to leave UUCM is ultimately in the service of life and creativity and growth for everyone involved. Or at least it can be, if we choose to respond from that perspective.

May it be so.

Part II – Sophia McKean

Part III – FAQ

The Board and Committee on Ministry and staff have had the chance to sit down with me and ask me questions and share their thoughts about this decision. I’d like to offer some of their questions and my answers, as I’m sure you all may have similar questions.

Q: Why didn’t you tell us this was a possibility? It would have been nice if we could have known.

A: I have longed for this process to be more open and transparent. It was painful to be keeping this possibility a secret from you. But all of the wisdom I’d received from colleagues and the advice of the UUA office of ministerial settlement told me that I should not inform anyone at the church until I had been officially offered another position. Part of the reasoning is that if the new job had not come to pass, my ministry with you might be compromised.

I am committed to transparency and healthy process. So after I received the official offer from the board chair of the Newton church on Wednesday morning I wrote the letter of resignation and called meetings with the Board of Trustees and the members of the Committee on Ministry for the following day. I called and spoke directly with those leaders who would be the most affected by my leaving. I would like to make myself available in these next few weeks to speak personally with any of you who might have a particularly difficult time processing the news.

Q: Why now? Especially right after you were gone on renewal leave last year?

A: I was told in seminary that I would know when a ministry with a particular congregation is complete. I never in my wildest dreams thought I’d ever feel that way about UUCM. Until I did.

My time away on renewal leave was a time of rest and spiritual growth. And, inevitably, the time for reflection gave me some clarity about my career path. I became clearer about what I enjoyed the most about parish ministry and those aspects that I would like to spend less time on. This new position will allow me to more deeply explore those areas that light me up.

I learned recently that the average length of a ministry is now about 6 years. UU ministers are encouraged to take their sabbaticals in their fifth year. I don't think that this is a coincidence. It makes sense to me that once people have the down time to gain some clarity they may come to realize they are ready for something new. That is the reason the contract often states that the minister will serve the congregation for a full year following the end of a sabbatical leave.

While it might have seemed like I was away all of last year, my sabbatical actually ended in December. I was taking my accrued vacation and study leave during the months of February and March. Just to make sure I understood the language of my contract correctly I sought and received confirmation from the UUA settlement office.

I know it may seem awfully soon to be leaving you. But this new job was slated to begin in August of this year. It was such an ideal position to me that I let the search committee know I was interested, but that I could not possibly start until January to honor my commitment to this congregation. Ultimately, they decided it was more important to wait for the right person than to have someone else who could start in August.

The other part of the answer to "why now?" has to do with you. I have no doubts in my mind that this congregation will continue on its upward trajectory – even through a major transition. Last year while I was away you all did more than simply survive my absence; you thrived. Attendance on Sunday mornings did not suffer. The board made great headway in a number of important areas. The RE program grew by 100%. Pledges increased. People had disagreements and worked them out. New members were drawn in. You did all of that without my guidance and support. Your new leadership is organized and competent and ready. There are members here who remember this congregation before I arrived. Their long-term perspective will help bridge the community through the interim ministry and then into your next settled minister. You are ready.

And this may be harder for you to take in, but I believe you are ready for new blood too. There are several projects that I know need to happen in order to further the ministry of the congregation. And I honestly don't feel like I have the drive and motivation to spur them on. Someone new will inevitably come in all fired up with the energy to move with you to the next level.

I am committed to several major projects before I leave. We will hire an Office Administrator, and go through the process to re-envision and restate our congregation's mission. Adding an administrative staff person will help provide some continuity and improve our communication. Having a well-defined and dynamic mission statement will sharpen our focus towards our true goals as a congregation.

And there are other significant changes already afoot. Under the leadership of the Director of Religious Education, the Religious Education Committee has recently decided to become the Lifespan Religious Education committee. This new model will encompass Adult Religious Education and will include multigenerational learning and service opportunities. I know this congregation is bound for even more greatness!

Q: What is the process? What will happen next?

A: Most likely the board will hire an interim minister to begin in January. Interim ministry is a specialized ministry. Interims are specially trained to help a congregation grieve the former minister and prepare themselves to call the next minister. They are like the official rebound relationship of ministers.

The UUA helps match interims with churches in need. The interim will probably be with you for 18 months during which time a search committee will form and begin the process of finding your next settled minister.

I want to reassure you that you will not have a hard time attracting another wonderful minister here. This is a very desirable congregation. Not only is Grass Valley situated in one of the most beautiful places in the country, but this congregation has what ministers look for most: you know how to love a minister. That matters a great deal. And this congregation has a healthy emotional system, meaning that you do not tolerate anyone holding the community hostage by using intimidation, bullying or bribery. You have no idea how rare and precious that is. You have a covenant of right relations that truly influences your interactions with one another. You have a demonstrated commitment to fair compensation for your staff. This will be a dream job for a wide number of very talented ministers.

And so we will have these next six months to say goodbye in all the ways we need to. Goodbye is not easy. There is a reason last week's service was on the topic of letting go. They say a minister preaches what she most needs to hear. We will help one another let go and embrace and even get excited about the upcoming changes.

Eminent Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh has said, "It is not impermanence that makes us suffer. What makes us suffer is wanting things to be permanent when they are not."

Every goodbye brings up all the other goodbyes we've had to say. Every grief surfaces all our other experiences of loss and feelings of abandonment. There may be buttons pushed in you by this news that surprise you. Remember that the process of grieving is never tidy. It is messy and unpredictable. Feelings of anger, sadness, indifference and excitement about new possibilities will cycle around and around. It can be helpful to simply know to expect this and allow whatever feelings you have to simply be there.

In a few moments we'll have the opportunity to participate in a ritual that will allow you to explore and express some of the reactions or feelings you may be having this morning.

First, I'd like to move us into a time of meditation and inward reflection.

Remember that under the level of your thoughts and emotions, exists a deeper state of mind that is peaceful and calm. This state is always available to you. It takes some practice knowing how to find and rest in this place.

I invite you to close your eyes, take slow deep breaths. Call all of yourself back into your body. Feel yourself rooted firmly to the planet. Bring your awareness into the center of your head.

Susan Sanford shared this image with me this week and I'd like to pass it on to you.

If you imagine yourself as the water in a lake you can see that even when a large rock splashes into the water upsetting the surface and sending out waves in every direction, the rock is not the lake. The lake remains. It grows calm again. And when fish and other creatures move and muddy the bottom of the lake, the fish are not the lake. The mud settles and the water grows still again. When wind ripples the surface causing whitecaps to form, the wind is not the lake. The lake remains fundamentally unchanged.

There is in you a deep inner stillness that is not upset when your life situation changes around you.

Take some more deep and slow breaths. Bring your awareness inward, into the center of your head. Call all of yourself back to this present moment.

Let us rest for a few moments in the stillness and peace of our inmost calm.

We'll come out singing our sung prayer, Spirit of Life...