

"Organically Grown"
Inaugural Sermon and Worship Service for
The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
of Wayne County, Ohio
August 18, 2019
The Rev. Jennie Barrington, Interim Minister

Opening words (Wendell Berry)

Rev. Jennie

"...let us be merely practical for the time being and say that we need to know: who we are, where we are, and what we must do to live. These questions do not refer to discreet categories of knowledge. We are not likely to be able to answer one of them without answering the other two."

Chalice lighting (Debra Faulk)

Janice Baxstrom

"A chalice lit in our midst is a symbol of our liberal faith,
A faith built on the foundation of freedom, reason and tolerance
A faith sustained by acts of kindness and justice
A faith that visions a world flourishing with equality for all her people
A faith that demands the living out of goodness
A faith that requires thoughtfulness
A faith of wholeness
This tiny flame is the symbol of the spark of all this within each of us."

+Hymn #38 Morning has Broken

Sharing of Joys and Concerns
Offertory

Janice Baxstrom
(Janice Baxstrom)

Welcoming of Guests

Karen Skubik

First Reading (Wendell Berry) (Janice)

For many years, my walks have taken me down an old fence row in a wooded hollow on what was once my grandfather's farm. A battered galvanized bucket is hanging on a fence post near the head of the hollow, and I never go by it without stopping to look inside. For what is going on in that bucket is the most momentous thing I know, the greatest miracle that I have ever heard of: it is making earth. The old bucket has hung there through many autumns, and the leaves have fallen around it and some have fallen into it. Rain and snow have

fallen into it, and the fallen leaves have held the moisture and so have rotted. Nuts have fallen into it, or been carried into it by squirrels; mice and squirrels have eaten the meat of the nuts and left the shells; they and other animals have left their droppings; insects have flown into the bucket and died and decayed; birds have scratched in it and left their droppings or perhaps a feather or two. This slow work of growth and death, gravity and decay, which is the chief work of the world, has by now produced in the bottom of the bucket several inches of black hummus. I look into that bucket with fascination because I am a farmer of sorts and an artist of sorts, and I recognize there an artistry and a farming far superior to mine, or to that of any human. I have seen the same process at work on the tops of boulders in a forest, and it has been at work immemorially over most of the land-surface of the world. All creatures die into it, and they live by it. However small a landmark the old bucket is, it is not trivial. It is one of the signs by which I know my country and myself. And to me it is irresistibly suggestive in the way it collects leaves and other woodland sheddings as they fall through time. It collects stories, too, as they fall through time. It is irresistibly metaphorical. It is doing, in a passive way, what a human community must do actively and thoughtfully. A human community, too, must collect leaves and stories, and turn them to account. It must build soil, and build that memory of itself --in lore and story and song-- which will be its culture. And these two kinds of accumulation, of local soil and local culture, are intimately related.

Second Reading Garrison Keillor, from Happy to Be Here (Rev. Jennie)

(This reading is written in the style of journal entries.)

"May 2nd: Asleep upstairs with the windows open for the first time in months, I was awake at five or six in the morning. The air was cool and wet. I put on blue striped trousers, a green wool sweater, and blue sneakers. Our dog chuckled in the kitchen, hearing, as I did, the birds, a thousand of them, and I opened the screen door and let us out. What I saw was the old red barn (with cows in it), the granary full of oats, the empty chicken coop, the machine shed (with rusty parts lying around on the ground outside), the corncribs full of corn, and the pump house, pig barn, and silo, the brown brick house, hundreds of trees, the cow pasture, creek, low swamp, and dump, and beyond the trees, fields plowed last fall that smelled of pig and cow manure, and front and back roads, neighbors' fields and woods, and clear sky. I walked across the yard and sat on a big rock by the road. I heard the dog bark, four clear barks.

Found Paradise

Found paradise. I said I would and by God I have. Here it is, and it is just what I knew was here all along. Well, I guess that is about it. I'm happy to be here, is all."

Special Music (Instrumental, played by Sue Kandel)

Sermon "Organically Grown" Rev. Jennie

An ad in the newspaper is what started it all. An ad in the newspaper led to all this, the beautiful and bountiful setting that is now the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Wayne County Ohio. That ad was placed in the newspaper back in 1971, by Lowell Steinbrenner. (Much of this history is taken from UUFWC's website. And I'm pleased and proud that your congregation's history is posted there for everyone to read.) Mr. Steinbrenner's ad invited like-minded people to join him to discuss the possibility of forming a Unitarian Universalist congregation of Wayne County. Though a similar effort was tried thirteen years before that, in 1958. It lasted for about ten years before it became inactive. Then several of the people in the first group joined up with the second effort. I think that's an important piece of this story. Liberal thinkers here tried once and, they didn't give up, they tried again, and the second time took root. So on April 23, 1972, nineteen charter members met, at the Freedlander Park Chalet, to adopt a draft constitution, and elect officers, and sign the membership book. The names of those original nineteen members are on a special plaque outside this building's main doors. Again, I am pleased and proud that you've displayed that, for everyone to see. I feel some awe when I look at that plaque. Those original members did a daring and bold thing. It took a risk to start up a liberal congregation in this conservative area, and it took a leap of faith.

The original founders worked with the UUA, and with its materials and suggestions, from the start. But they also did things their own way, in keeping with their values and beliefs, and mindful of this local area's character, needs, and even landscape. At first it met in the Union Grange Hall. In 1991, they hired the part-time consulting minister, the Rev. Mary Hnottavange-Telleen, followed by Barbara Cooke, and then, in 1996, by Rev. Elaine Strawn. Rev. Elaine became the full-time minister here in 2010. By 1996, there were sixty-two members, enough to purchase their first building. Directors of Religious Education were hired, which led to further growth in membership numbers. The Fellowship's staff grew to include professionals for Music, Administration, Membership, and Bookkeeping.

By 1999, that building was getting crowded, and the members decided to buy land and build their own new building, this beautiful one which shelters and inspires us today. In October of 2005, with 123 members, the Fellowship moved here to 3186 Burbank Road. And in 2006, this building received LEED Gold certification, for its commitment to environmental responsibility, the first house of worship in the nation to be so certified. That act of commitment, and the positive publicity it generated, led to even more membership growth. And in 2008, the UUA named this Fellowship a Breakthrough Congregation. Environmental responsibility is not the only social justice need that this congregation has promoted. It has also worked for gay rights and gay marriage, and literacy efforts, and prison reform, immigration, racial justice. And it has raised and contributed money toward disaster relief, fair trade products, food banks, and greenhouses. And, by just a few years ago, the Fellowship was again becoming crowded. So a capital campaign was recently launched to expand this building. And again I will say how pleased and proud it makes me to see how over-the-top successful that effort has been. The congregation I have just on-boarded onto, as your new interim minister, is processing the emotions of the end of the stellar ministry of Rev. Elaine. But I have every confidence that your congregation's momentum toward further growth and development has not ended, nor even slowed down.

That ad in that newspaper --forty-eight years ago!-- led to all of this. The Peace Pole, with the words, May Peace Prevail on Earth, in four different languages; the wildflowers and landscaping; the memorial markers honoring members loved and lost; the labyrinth; the social justice signs by the road (and though that process may have been lengthy and complex, it still sounds to me like the decision was made with good process); this exquisite LEED certified environmentally responsible building; and this room (now renamed Strawn Hall), with its majestic windows, water garden, the chalice, the wonder box, the banner from UUA General Assemblies, and the bulletin boards displaying your congregation's impact beyond its walls; and though it's not a visually tangible thing, the twenty-three year ministry of the Rev. Elaine Strawn. All of these things are precious things. The original founders of this Fellowship believed that it would be worth it to take the risk and take the leap of faith. And they were right! And now the responsibility to sustain these things, and the meaning of them, lies with you, the members and friends of UUFWC. And it will also be up to you to let go of some things, or some ways of doing some things, that have outlived their useful purpose, and to be open to new things, new ways, new people, and open to change. In a nutshell, that is what interim work, in an interim period, is all about.

And I am beginning with your Fellowship's origin stories very intentionally-- because those origin stories are what will guide you, and inspire you, in envisioning and making actual, the next chapters in this congregation's history. The congregation that your Fellowship has become is the result of its founders' answer to the question: How do we be responsible, thoughtful, compassionate, and justice-seeking residents of this place where we live? And how do we do that religiously? Your Fellowship's origin story can inspire us today, in this new era --it inspires me-- and your Fellowship's origin stories can guide us in discerning the ways you want UUFWC to grow and flourish in years to come. Together, we can begin to answer the question: What do you want UUFWC to keep growing and producing?

I have been learning about and reflecting on your Fellowship's history and your accomplishments since just before my interview with your search committee in the spring. All search committees give me something of a heads up about the realities of their congregation and its present circumstances. For example, what Chicagoans gave me a heads up about, before I moved there two years ago was the parking. Parking in Chicago is so maddeningly challenging and complicated that it makes for the basis of very funny comedy routines-- many very funny comedy routines. So, about half way into our Zoom interview, your search committee said to me, something like: "We're excited that you are considering coming here, and we're very happy to be interviewing you, but we just want to be honest with you about some things about this part of the country." (Can't you just hear Gail Woosley saying that?) "Yes, of course (I replied)." "Well, (Gail said) you're in Chicago, and we're here in Wooster, and we wanted to ask you why you are interested in coming here." "I love a Midwest College Town!" (I replied) "That's great! (your search committee said) But you're in Chicago, and we're here in Wooster, and we just want to be honest with you—" I gave them a minute and waited patiently and then Gail said: "Cows-- lots of cows; there are more cows than there are people around here-- for miles and miles around here-- we're just sayin'..." (I like cows; cows are nice! I thought to myself.) "Farmers and people who teach agriculture-- Farms and fields and silos (Gail said), and lots of open space." "I love farms and fields and silos, and open space," I replied. "But the good news is (Gail asserted) you won't have to pay for parking. You can park for free, anywhere and everywhere." Not very many days after that, I started packing my bags, and my car, for Wooster, Ohio.

And so for many weeks I have been reflecting on your congregation's history and accomplishments, and reflecting on farmers, and farms (including cows). And of course I've been contemplating what the focus of my first sermon and worship service here should be. And what I realized is that your Fellowship's growth has been organic: UUFWC has been "organically grown." By that I mean that UUFWC's growth was not the result of something that was artificially superimposed on it from elsewhere-- Whereas mergers and acquisitions are "inorganic growth," your Fellowship grew and developed naturally from a small group of people who were rooted in a certain geographic place, and who had a strong and clear sense of purpose, mission, and vision. There is health in that, and I see beauty in that. Your congregation was not planted nor started by an outside organization nor individual. And, similarly, the Unitarian Universalist Association, in its origin stories, wasn't started by an external organization nor individual, either, such as Catholic churches often are, or as John Wesley founded the Methodists, and Martin Luther inspired the Lutherans. Unitarian Universalism was birthed from people reading Biblical scripture, in its original languages of Hebrew and Greek, and discussing and debating what they saw in that scripture. And what they saw was liberal theology. That origin story of ours resulted in some of our predecessor free thinkers being persecuted for their beliefs. And that origin story is the basis of our continuing to speak up for and work for freedom of religion today. I will say more about our denomination's religious roots at the UU Inquiry class after the worship service (Please join us!) It is a history of which we all can be rightly proud.

And so my reflecting on this congregation's organic growth, and on the farms and farmers that surround it, led me to the writing of Wendell Berry. He is a farmer in Kentucky, and a prolific author. His essays and poetry are beautiful and thoughtfully reflective. In short, he believes that our nation is in a crisis-- He sees destruction and decay of our communities' natural resources, and relationships, and the connections which once existed between generations. And he believes the antidote to that destruction and decay comes from exactly what so many of you, and your neighbors and friends, are doing: investing in local communities in ways that are responsibly and respectfully sustainable, especially through supporting and investing in local farms. In Wendell Berry's own words, from the reading Janice read for us this morning:

"[This is what] a human community must do actively and thoughtfully. A human community must collect leaves and stories, and turn them to account. It must build soil, and build that memory of itself --in lore and story and song-- which

will be its culture. And these two kinds of accumulation, of local soil and local culture, are intimately related.”

Those words that Janice read are from an essay that Wendell Berry delivered for the Iowa Humanities Lecture, called, “The Work of Local Culture.” He presented it in 1988-- thirty-one years ago! He felt, then, that our nation, and especially our local family farms, were in crisis. And I’m sure we would all agree that, by now, the crisis has become far worse. But Wendell Berry, who is now eighty-five years old, does have hope for our nation’s repair and renewal of its natural resources and its community ties. And that hope of his would be strengthened by seeing what your Fellowship is gifting to and modelling for the wider community (to quote from some of the background materials I was given):

“Our congregation is here to be a consistent voice of liberal religion in the four counties; to be a center of spirituality which welcomes seekers of all types; and to be a compassionate and welcoming community which takes care of one another.”

I’ll close this morning with Mr. Berry’s words from the conclusion of his lecture:

“My feeling is that, if improvement is going to begin anywhere, it will have to begin out in the country and in the country towns... Rural people... have much reason, by now, to know how little real help is to be expected from somewhere else. They still have, moreover, the remnants of local memory and local community. And in rural communities there are still farms and small businesses that can be changed according to the will and the desire of individual people. In this difficult time of failed public expectations, when thoughtful people wonder where to look for hope, I keep returning in my own mind to the thought of the renewal of the rural communities. I know that one resurrected rural community would be more convincing and more encouraging than all the government and university programs of the last fifty years, and I think that it could be the beginning of the renewal of our country, for the renewal of rural communities ultimately implies the renewal of urban ones. But to be authentic, a true encouragement and a true beginning, this would have to be a resurrection accomplished mainly by the community itself. It would have to be done, not from the outside by the instruction of visiting experts, but from the inside by the

ancient rule of neighborliness, by the love of precious things, and by the wish to be at home.”

+Hymn #16 (Sing Through Twice) 'Tis a Gift to be Simple

Parting Words (Samuel Trumbore) Rev. Jennie

“Go forth in simplicity.

Find and walk the path that leads to compassion and wisdom, that leads to happiness, peace and ease. Welcome the stranger and open your heart to a world in need of healing. Be courageous before the forces of hate. Hold and embody a vision of the common good that serves the needs of all people.”