



## **Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation**

**Sunday, February 16, 2025**

**“Rooted in Love” with Rev. Mary Gear**

### **Chalice Lighting by Jay Wolin**

Are we a people of holding on or of letting go?  
Holding on to rigid ideas or  
Letting go and opening our minds and our hearts, to something new;  
Holding on to certainty of how things should be or  
Letting go and living with the uncertainty of new ways of being in the world;  
Holding on to what makes us comfortable or  
Letting go so we may grow which can be uncomfortable;  
Holding on to what makes us safe or  
Letting go to make room to help others feel safe?  
With this flame, this symbol of our religion,  
let it be a symbol of burning up the ties that hold us back from being our  
true self and reaching our true potential;  
let it be a symbol of lighting a new way for us into a better tomorrow;  
and let it be a symbol of letting go  
Because holding on too long and too tightly is never good for the soul.

### **Opening Words by Rev. Julián Jamaica Soto titled “Celebrating Abundance”**

**Leader:** All that we are, together and individually, is part of the abundance of the universe.

**People:** We are made of stars. We are made of earth.

**Leader:** All that we have / comes from earth, from the labor of those in our communities

**People:** ...from the cities, farms, and oceans that enliven us. The world, and those who live in it.

**Leader:** We are surrounded by blessing, by grace, and by possibilities.

**People:** We are reflected in every other human being.

**Leader:** We respect and honor one another's differences.

**People:** We celebrate our interbeing with abundance and the practice of generosity.

**Everyone:** Come, let us worship together.

**Story: "Sustaining the Tree of Life" by Lynn Gardner**

The tree stood in the middle of the village. Its trunk was so large that it took six people holding hands to reach around it. The roots were strong and wide, and its branches spread out over the village square, offering shelter from the rain, or shade from the summer sun. Its fruit was juicy, sweet, and plentiful.

The people of the village loved the tree. Children played beneath it and climbed its lowest branches. Young people knew that if you whispered your dreams to the tree, they were more likely to come true. People who proclaimed their love or friendship for one another beneath its branches found their relationships to be nourishing, and elders discovered that their sweetest memories could be counted on when they were near the great tree. The tree had been witness to so much, and when the breezes blew through the leaves, one could hear echoes of generations: laughter, conversations, dreams, prayers, and songs.

Animals loved the tree, too. Rabbits lived in burrows under the roots, squirrels and monkeys lived in the branches, and bats and birds flew in to eat the abundant fruit. The tree seemed to buzz with life!

One day, a traveling merchant arrived in the village. He rested in the shade and ate two pieces of delicious fruit. “This fruit is incredible,” he said. “I would like to have some to sell in the next villages that I visit. Who owns this tree?”

“No one owns this tree,” replied a villager. “If anything, we belong to it.”

“Well, then, if no one owns the tree, then no one will mind if I pick the fruit!,” said the merchant, and began to fill a basket.

“I mind,” said the villager, “and today I am the keeper of the tree.”

“What do you mean, keeper of the tree?”

“We each take our turn being here with the tree. We could never own it. We are here as protectors, as sustainers.”

“That’s ridiculous. This tree doesn’t need you! You could just take what you need; take what you want. The tree will continue.”

But the villager couldn’t be persuaded. “Sir, this tree isn’t like that. We don’t come here to take from it...even though we receive much. We are keepers of the tree because this is where we are nourished. This is where some of our most precious memories are, and where our people have dreamed. This is where we remember who we want to become.”

“Well,” said the merchant, “you may think this tree is very special, but it still doesn’t need you to sit with it. That is preposterous!”

“Ah,” replied the villager. “The tree itself may not need me—but what of others who come by? Just this morning I sat with a woman whose heart was heavy with worry. Had I not been here, she would have had to carry that weight alone. And this afternoon, a tired couple came by, and they rested with me. They said they had been looking for a place like this. And then an elder came by, and we watched the birds in the branches together.

“And now you are here. You were confused about what this tree is, and how to be with it. Imagine if you had arrived and not found anyone here to talk with? You might have continued thinking that everything you do is all about you. Luckily for you, my friend, I’m here to let you know that when you care for the tree of life, it becomes about so much more than just you.”

And the merchant sat for a while in the shade, thinking about these ideas that felt new and a little challenging. As the sun went down, he picked up his bag and headed out of town, whistling a song that he hadn’t thought of in years. On his way, he shared a smile with each person he met, his heart feeling strangely light and joyful.

And the people of the village? They continued to sustain the tree of life: to care for one another and to share their gifts, with grace and gratitude. May it be so for each of us.

## **Reading 1**

Today’s first reading is excerpts from Susan Beaumont’s book [How To Lead When You Don’t Know Where You’re Going: Leading in Liminal Space](#).

Beaumont is a congregational consultant, coach and spiritual director. She published this book in 2019, just in time for the global pandemic.

The liminal period is ...fraught with both opportunity and danger. It can be an incredibly freeing season in which old structures are released, new identities and possibilities are explored, and power is reassigned. It is also a troubling time during which people are subject to the lure of tricksters. Leaders and followers may be tempted down false pathways which serve no useful purpose.

The natural human response is to resist liminality and to strive backward to the old familiar identity, or forward to the unknown identity...rather than wander in the wilderness.

Our resistance stems from the fact that liminality begins with and ending, an experience of loss. And, humankind resists loss. We also resist the unknowing inherent in “not yet”--the loss of control over our own destiny.

## **Part 1: Liminal Space — Again**

Whew. These past few weeks have been....I'm not even sure of the words. Breathtakingly destructive. Wildly painful. Incredibly sad. I've been in touch with lots of feelings recently, my own and some of yours, including a sense of helplessness and loss. One evening while sitting with my husband talking about that day's challenging events, I took a moment to notice how I was feeling in my body and spirit. And it came to me in a flash as I blurted out, “Oh. This feels like Covid all over again.”

Do you remember those first weeks and months of Covid? When we didn't know what was happening? When we got conflicting and confusing information, and there was plenty of misinformation going around? Waiting for some leadership and guidance? When we were isolated, needing connection and knowing that being with others could be dangerous. Do you remember that time?

In just a few weeks, we will mark the five-year anniversary of the global pandemic shutdown, and we are still recovering from that time, working through what has changed and what has remained. Working through the losses and the collective trauma of living through events that changed us forever.

And here we are now, in another time of great peril and change that feels beyond our control. I have the same sense of disbelief, shock and confusion that I felt then; how could this be happening? Sadness and grief about the impacts on people and the planet. Living with the realization that some things are irreplaceable, people, animals, trust. Feeling like I have little or no control over what is happening and hurting so many and so much.

The circumstances aren't the same, and yet it feels familiar. It makes me want to howl at the moon.

As we were preparing for the service today, Whitney commented that she thought I'd talked about liminal space before, and she's right. I preached about liminal space several times during Covid to help give us a framework for what was happening then, and I think it can be helpful again now.

Liminal space is the uncertainty and unknown between what was and what has not yet come into being. It's a time of destruction and loss. When we were in the liminal space of Covid, we hoped for a post-Covid world, and we had little idea of what it would be like. Some of us longed to go back to how we were before. Some of us longed for it to just be over so we could move on. We endured together the in-between of not what was and not sure what would be.

Here's some things we know about liminal times: they're exhausting. It's hard to hold on to some sense of order and stability while everything feels dangerous and is changing.

During liminal times, we will encounter the limits of our tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty, and facing our limits is hard.

Liminal times begin with an ending of what was, so there is always grief.

And uncertainty causes worry and anxiety about what might happen and what is to come.

We need each other during liminal times because living through them is hard and we need support and encouragement, especially when we are in despair and feeling hopeless. It requires relationships; that we take care of each other and of our community.

Susan Beaumont, the author of our reading, suggests some perspectives that can help in liminal times, and there are a few I think are important for us now. The first is the spiritual shift from knowing to unknowing.

Unknowing isn't ignorance about a thing or ignoring something. It's the process of slowing down our thinking, noticing and suspending our judgements, recognizing our compulsions, often our need to act quickly, and setting aside our ego-centered concerns. It's approaching what is before us with a sense of curiosity and openness, pausing to listen and think through options.

Last week, Rev. Sara spoke about having a growth mindset regarding inclusion, which is being willing to admit that we may not understand the experience of someone different from us but being willing to learn. Having a growth mindset suggests that we can learn new ways to be and act. This is the shift from knowing to unknowing.

Another shift required in liminal times is expanding our awareness, seeing the whole of what has been, what is, and what is emerging. It's being on the balcony, not on the dance floor.

This shift in perspective helps us identify the technical problems that we face and the adaptive challenges that are before us. There's a lot to say about the model of adaptive leadership and I plan to speak about it more next month. For now, I'll simply say that a technical problem has a known solution that can be implemented with current knowledge and expertise. The problem may be complex and important, and the solutions are known. This is knowing.

An adaptive challenge can only be addressed with changes in our priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties. Facing an adaptive challenge requires going beyond expertise to curiosity and discovery, letting go of entrenched ways, tolerating losses, and generating new capacity. To face adaptive challenges, we have to be willing to learn new things. This is unknowing.

Liminal times can have both technical problems and adaptive challenges, and there are many more adaptive challenges. Our task is to identify which is which and address them appropriately. It requires less knowing and more unknowing.

So, here we are again in a liminal time, a time of transformation when the outcome is unknown. As a nation we are facing something we've never faced before. We're also facing new challenges as a congregation in a world asking more of us. Transformation means becoming something different; whether it is positive or not is a matter of perspective and opinion. While there are many things we don't control in this liminal time, how we transform is up to us.

## Reading 2

Our second reading is excerpts from two blog posts about congregational discernment by Meck Groot and Joe Sullivan posted in early 2023.

Meck Groot is part of the Unitarian Universalist Association staff for the New England Region. She is a graduate of the Episcopal Divinity School where she concentrated on feminist liberation theology and ethics.

Joe Sullivan is the former Unitarian Universalist Association director for the Northern New England District, and a congregational consultant on leadership and governance.

What's apparent now is just how radically counter to Unitarian Universalist culture the practice of discernment is.

The first challenge is getting a group of UUs to admit they are staring into an uncertain future, and no one really has a clue what to do. There's no easy fix, no meaningful plan, no map, no expert to call in to tell us what to do. More and more congregations are asking existential questions that baffle all of us:

- What are the needs of families and children of our community today and how are we situated to serve those needs?
- What options are open to us to advance our mission and serve our ministries with our present financial and volunteer capacity?
- What are available options for uses of our building consistent with our values that could allow us to continue to fulfill our mission while helping defray the cost of upkeep?

Culture change is hard. But here's the good news: UUs already have established practices and processes that can support group discernment for faithful risking. At its core, covenanting is one way UUs develop the community trust needed for a practice of discernment. Worship done well creates opportunities for us to receive the wisdom and guidance of the community and beyond. Cultivated practices of inner work help us get in touch with inner wisdom and let go of ego that keeps us expecting the “right” answer.



Discernment over the perplexing questions facing congregations today is about revealing faithful next steps rather than finding right answers. Discernment taps into core values, mission, calling, and readiness to reveal options that are faithful for a given group of people at a given time.

## **Part 2: Rooted in Love**

The joke among ministers is that every preacher has just one sermon that they give over and over again. As I've reflected on my time in ministry and the voice that I have honed in my years with you, I think this is my sermon:

We are called to do hard things. There's a lot we don't know, and we will make mistakes. We must try anyway for our own spiritual growth as people and as a community, and for justice. And we can do these things together with love as our foundation.

I could just stand up here and say this each week; we'd get to coffee and snacks a lot sooner. I suspect you'd like a bit more than that to nurture your mind and spirit in these challenging times, so here we go.

Here's the hard things that I think are before us.

We are called to deep communal discernment about the next best steps. This requires slowing down, deep listening and curiosity; unknowing. It requires moving beyond our personal experience to include the whole, especially that which is different from us. I'm not saying that we wait and do nothing. I'm saying that we take the time to notice where there is energy and passion within and outside our walls, to determine where we can have the most impact, and to discern what our unique role is as a faith community. There are new leaders and paths emerging and we have to be ready to follow them.

We can also remember the good news that we know we can survive and thrive in liminal times. We've done it before, and we can do it again.

During Covid we created new teams to address what was happening and to help determine the next best steps. For example, with the support of staff, volunteers stepped forward to create the Tech Team that helped us

go online. Our first online service was streamed from this sanctuary on Zoom with a laptop and a webcam perched on a stool with duct tape. It was a miracle. And look where we are today: streaming each week on Zoom and YouTube with a skilled and experienced Tech Team of staff and volunteers. We have about 1/3 of our congregation attending online, and 25-60 people who watch the services later on YouTube. In these liminal times, many are joining us virtually and onsite, seeking community and a sense of purpose.

During Covid, we continued offering classes, social groups, children's and youth programs, a parent's group, and welcoming new members, so we could sustain support and connection for all ages. Today, we continue to offer as much as we can online and onsite so we can be as inclusive as possible.

We didn't know how to offer our services and programs online or how to be safe in a pandemic. We used our collective expertise to figure out the technical problems. Now we can move up to the balcony to identify the adaptive challenges before us as we grow and change in this liminal time.

Liminal times also ask that we explore our past, not so that we can replicate it—that isn't possible— but so that we can remember the stories rightly and bring forward the lessons and values that can help us build hope for the future. During Covid in 2022, we revisited our history as we celebrated OUUC's 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary and you installed me as your minister. Some of you created a video of OUUC's history to supplement the written history created by Tim Ransom and Emily Ray at OUUC's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. If you're interested, you can find that history on OUUC's website at the tab "Who We Are."

Lately I've used our Sunday morning worship to explore our history as a faith tradition and as a nation. I wonder how we might explore more of our collective values and stories as we discern where we go next.

During liminal times we are asked to revisit and clarify our purpose with questions like: Who are we? Who are we here to serve? What do we stand for? What are we called to do or become next?

During Covid in 2021, the OUUC Board of Trustees engaged a consultant to help us revisit our Vision, Mission, and Ends or Goals. Each Sunday, the celebrant says our vision and mission in the welcome to each service. You can also find the result of that work on the website at the tab “Who We Are.” These are important questions to revisit in these liminal times: Who are we called to be and what are we called to do now?

And last, liminal times require that we remember that we are not alone, and we need each other! During Covid we counted on guidance from our local and state health departments, from other congregations and from our denomination. We didn’t go it alone; despite the shut-down, we were connected.

During this liminal time when we are called in so many directions, it’s so important that we identify the relationships we can nurture with our community partners. I know that everything feels urgent right now and that we may feel pulled in a thousand directions. This is where we must find a middle way—we cannot do nothing, and we cannot do everything. We have to focus on a few things. Our collective discernment is to identify those few things that we can do, and who we want to connect with to do them.

At OUUC, we have long-standing groups focused on environmental and social justice. Since the election, a group has formed around immigration justice. There is activity regionally to support our trans community, which you ‘ll hear more about next month.

On March 9, the Faith in Action Leadership Team will offer a forum inviting us to identify who our community partners are and how we can deepen our relationships with them. We also have groups that help feed people at the shelters and Community Kitchen.

If you are called in these directions, I hope you’ll join these discussions and these groups. And, if you have an idea or something you’d like to explore, round up a few friends with the same interest and come talk to me or Rev. Sara.

This week we begin our stewardship drive to support the congregation’s work in the next year. This is where the rubber hits the road, and we fund





whatever way you can to nurture OUUC so we can be a place that nurtures others.

So, my dear ones, in the weeks ahead, we will be called to do hard things. There's a lot we don't know, and we will make mistakes. We must try anyway for our own spiritual growth as people and as a community, and for justice. And we can do these things together rooted in love. With our minds, hearts and hands we make this so.

**Extinguishing the Chalice by Rev. Rod Richards titled "To make new shapes..."**

May we practice sacred flexibility, letting go of geometric purity when it comes to our circles, so that we are unafraid to draw them wider, stretch them longer, and find joy in the task of rearranging.

Let us be fearless in our willingness to make new shapes so that we may be accountable to people who have not found us yet,  
so we may welcome those who thirst for our healing message,  
so that we may engage with our people and our partners the work before us: to save our lives as citizens and human beings.  
Go forth and make some new shapes.