

December 2018

Grace Notes

The Monthly Journal of First Unitarian Universalist Church

Mystery

what does it mean to be a
people of mystery?

From the Minister
Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer



*"When is the time for love to be born?
The inn is full on the planet earth,
and by a comet, the sky is torn -
yet Love still takes the risk of birth.
- Madeleine L'Engle*

Children are often, if not always, the best spiritual teachers. They remind us of wonder and joy at simple things, they remind us that sometimes all one needs is a quiet space, a place to breathe, spending time with a book, or some crayons -- or with laughter, however it might come.

A two-year-old I know
would almost always answer a question with,
I don't know.

To be clear, she often *did* know the answer,
and would answer it again almost immediately.
Me: What's your favorite color?
Toddler: I don't know. (pause for less than a second) Blue.

Whether it was learned, intentional, or random,
this taught me something so important,
and something ancient religions and cultures and scriptures
have been trying to teach humanity for millennia:
always begin your answers with humility.
Always share what you know with an open heart --
open to the possibility that you still have more to learn.
Let "*I don't know*" guide your ways of knowing the world.

At this time of year, as we move toward the enduring flames of Hanukkah,
the sacred darkness of Solstice,
and love taking the risk of birth at Christmas,
may we rest in this mystery:

even as this world is filled with uncertainty
even as this life can be gripped with despair --
for generations,
our people have lit candles, sang carols, shared feasts,
and taken the risk of still believing
in hope, in grace, in love - in each other.

Is love still alive in this world?
I don't know. Yes.

From the Board Greg Turosak

In October, about 40 of us participated in a “listening session.” Rev. Luke recounted our storied history of many church locations. We then broke into small groups and provided insights into what’s good or could-be-better about our current home on Walden Lane. This conversation was the beginning of what promises to be an interesting and necessary discernment process.

Our monthly theme for December is “Mystery.” When we think of mystery, what may come to mind is the unfathomable: the mystery of life, for example. Readers may think of mysteries as confounding but solvable challenges. Other mysteries in our lives are simply uncertain, new circumstances: what will it be like to be a parent, what will life be like with my partner gone? These questions present mysterious situations, which we try to work through as best we can.



*No, not the aftermath of another roof leak.
Greg Turosak and Katherine Logan enjoying
the outdoors at High Falls, Minnesota's tallest waterfall.*

It's exciting that we're discussing what's important to us in a church building and property. This mystery ultimately will lead to huge decisions. Do we stay or go? If we stay, what do we change about the building and grounds? If we go, what do we want in a new place? Either way, what's the cost?

One of my first activities at this church 12 years ago was Property Committee work – raking leaves on outdoor property day. Back then, we also had indoor property days. Like many Property Committee members (and sextons), I've been in every square inch of our building. There's lots to like and lots of warts. Over the years, I've been on the church roof many times, cleaning off rotting leaves and checking out the roof. Being on the roof also gave me a chance to enjoy the beautiful sweep of our property – and to appreciate others below toiling hard to make our grounds pleasant. We have a real resource in our grounds.

My spouse, Katherine Logan, and I are members of a Sunday hospitality team. We've enjoyed being coffee hosts over the years. Our kitchen is cozy – it's fun to pitch in but there isn't much elbow room. And the kitchen isn't friendly to people with disabilities. How do we make the kitchen easier to maneuver in and more accessible? It's difficult to see accomplishing either goal in our current building without immense expense.

I haven't made my mind up yet about whether it's best to stay in this building or move. There's good and bad about where we are. It's a big mystery to me. I'm glad that we've started the conversation and so many of you are taking part. But we need to hear from a lot more of you.

Please consider getting involved in future meetings or approaching any board members with your thoughts. We can solve this mystery, but we can only solve it well with a lot of us putting our minds to it.

Meantime, think about pitching in to help keep what we have (15,000 square feet and almost 4 acres) in good shape. That's a lot of land and a lot of building – we need good volunteers!

Solstice Celebration Helps Us Harmonize With an Ancient Rhythm

by Robin Taylor

On Friday, December 21, we will mark the Winter Solstice at First Unitarian Universalist Church with a community potluck at 5:30 p.m., followed by a service at 6:30 p.m. The evening will conclude with a sacred fire in the Courtyard.

Winter Solstice marks the shortest day and the longest night of the year, with sunset in Rochester occurring at 4:23 p.m. that day. It is no wonder that the ancients approached this phenomenon with mixed fear and excitement as they hoped the days would indeed start lengthening again to bring them more light and new growth.

"Solstice has been observed by many cultures over many centuries, and we will celebrate it here at the church to connect to those diverse traditions," says Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer. "Solstice gives us an opportunity to get in tune with the earth and the stars and the sky; to harmonize with an ancient rhythm," "It offers a sense of connection to the forces of life at the darkest time of the year, which brings us hope."



Twenty-some years ago, Winter Solstice was celebrated semi-regularly at First UU among a small group of women who had connected through a Women's Spirituality Adult RE class. They marked the transition from fall into winter by acknowledging the turning of the seasonal wheel, bringing light into the darkness, dancing and drumming together. The group disbanded in 2003.



Several years later, congregant Angela Davey began organizing Winter Solstice events at First UU and opening them up to the whole community.

"I had attended my first Summer Solstice and then Winter Solstice when I was 15 years old in Casper, Wyoming," says Angela, who still needs these centering practices to "feed my soul." Over the years, Angela has added rituals from her Irish heritage and the First People's culture of her relatives and tribes around her hometown in Wyoming.

Some of the women who attended her events wanted to connect further, so Angela offered an RE class called "The Women We Become." Many of those participants have continued helping with the Winter Solstice planning ever since.

Angela Davey
"Each year, Angela chose a different theme and brought in storytellers and held workshops to try to educate participants about the different traditions from around the world," says Ramona Barr, who has helped Angela plan the services and create programs and posters for almost a decade.



Although previous ministers have endorsed the celebration (and Rev. Carol Hepokoski's husband, John Berquist, sometimes performed as a storyteller), they have not participated in past observances. "To have Rev. Luke embrace the Winter Solstice is welcome support," says Ramona.

"I think the Winter Solstice is one of the more magical times in our own home," says Rev. Luke of his family's personal observance. "We turn off every light and sit in complete darkness before lighting candles and our tree. It is a beautiful celebration and one I'd like to lift up to our congregation. It is a core celebration for that time of year, and I think it has a grounding effect."

The celebration at First UU will be intergenerational, beginning early and including a potluck dinner so that families

and children can participate in all, or just parts of the evening. Dinner will be followed by a short service of poetry, readings, and candlelight in the sanctuary.

After the service, anyone interested is invited to take part in the pagan tradition of a Sacred Fire in the Courtyard. Participants will have the option of being "smudged" with the smoke from a burning sage stick (a Native American cleansing ritual) as they enter the Courtyard to circle around the fire.

Once the Sacred Circle is cast, participants are asked to stay until the ceremony is over, because "Once cast, the circle needs to be respected," explains Ramona. A Yule Log will be offered to the fire, and participants will be invited to take a pinch of herbs and pine needles to add to the flames and make a prayer offering. For Angela, this is a deeply rooted spiritual practice of meditation and prayer. "Once the ceremony is finished, the Sacred Circle is opened, and people are free to leave."



For Ramona, the celebration offers a chance to honor both her Scandinavian roots and her ties to North Dakota Native American culture and to appreciate the fun things about winter.



Joe Mish Christmas Eve

This year is the bicentennial of the carol, "Stille Nacht" ("Silent Night"). It was heard for the first time in a village church in Oberndorf, Austria. The congregation at that Midnight Mass listened as the voices of their assistant pastor, Fr. Joseph Mohr, and the choir director, Franz Xaver Gruber, rang through the church to the accompaniment of Fr. Mohr's guitar. On each of the six verses, the choir repeated the last two lines in four-part harmony.

On that Christmas Eve, a song was born that would wing its way into the hearts of people throughout the world. Now translated into hundreds of languages, it is sung by untold millions every December from small chapels in the Andes to great cathedrals in Antwerp and Rome.

The German words for the original six stanzas of the carol we know as "Silent Night" were written in 1816, when Mohr was a young priest assigned to a pilgrimage church in Austria. On the eve of Christmas in 1818 he journeyed to the home of musician/schoolteacher Franz Gruber who lived in an apartment over the schoolhouse. He showed his friend the poem and asked him to add a melody and guitar accompaniment so that it could be sung that evening. His reason for wanting the new carol is a mystery. Some speculate that the organ would not work; others feel that the assistant pastor, who dearly loved guitar music, merely wanted a new carol for Christmas.

Later that evening, as they sang "Stille Nacht! Heilige Nacht!" for the first time, they could hardly imagine the impact their composition would have on the world. Two traveling families of folk singers, similar to the Trapp Family Singers of *The Sound of Music* fame, heard about the song from an organ technician and incorporated the song into their repertoire. They were responsible for spreading this song all around the world. In 1839, "Stille Nacht" was performed for the first time in America, at Trinity Church in New York City.

By the time the song became famous, Mohr had died and the composer was unknown. Even though Franz Gruber claimed he was the composer, it had been presumed to be the work of Haydn, Mozart, or Beethoven. The controversy was put to rest years ago when a long-lost arrangement of "Stille Nacht" in the hand of Mohr was authenticated.

Perhaps this is part of the mystery of "Silent Night." Its words flowed from the imagination of a modest priest. Its music was composed by a musician who was not known outside his village. There was no celebrity to sing at its world premiere. Yet its powerful message of heavenly peace has crossed all borders and language barriers, conquering the hearts of people everywhere.

Singing "Silent Night" during the candle lighting on Christmas Eve is an important tradition here at our church, too. The candle lighting begins in the darkness with the choir singing "Night of Silence." This carol was composed in 1981 by Daniel Kantor and is a quodlibet, the term used for a partner song that can be sung simultaneously with another song. By the time the sanctuary is illuminated with the light of all of our candles, the whole sanctuary is filled with the sound of our voices singing "Silent Night." It is a magical end to our Christmas Eve service.



Upcoming Events

Watch the Weekly eNews for a complete list of events



5:30-6:30 pm	Dinner in the Commons (<i>free will donation</i>)
6:00-7:15 pm	Choir Rehearsal
6:15-7:15 pm	Forum, Children's Activities, Childcare in Nursery
6:15-7:15 pm	Walden Hill Youth Group

Walden Hill Wednesday Forums

- December 5 **World AIDS Day - A Youth-Led Forum**
For World AIDS Day, the Walden Hill Youth in partnership with Planned Parenthood, will present the history of HIV/AIDS. They will present statistics, facts, and stories of HIV/AIDS along with demonstrations of barrier methods.
- December 12 **Community Food Response**
Learn about one of our community partner organizations, the work they do, and what volunteering there means for members of our church. Led by Sarah Rothwell and others.
- December 19 **Praying/Staying Together...?**
Family holiday gatherings can sometimes be challenging amidst religious and social differences. Come for conversation and a chance to practice crafting table blessings for family holiday, or anytime, meals. Led by Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer.
- December 26 No WHW (Christmas)

Special Events

Friday - Saturday December 7 & 8	Handcrafted Bazaar Fundraiser The Bazaar features over 35 local artisans showing their unique, recycled, and handcrafted wares!
Tuesday, December 11 6:30 pm	Caring Tea and Time for Reflection in the UU Chapel We invite you to join us for a time of sharing and remembrance.
Friday, December 21 5:30 pm	Winter Solstice Celebration Potluck, followed by a service and a sacred fire.
Monday, December 24 4 & 6 pm	Christmas Eve Candlelight Services: Is Love Alive? Dessert Potluck Reception between services
Sunday, December 30	One Service Only at 10:00 am

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Throwback Page

History Highlights of First UU



Pictured: Deep snow covering First Universalist Church, circa 1935

*"Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow --
in the deep midwinter, long ago."*

-Christina Rossetti

First Unitarian Universalist Church



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Sunday Services & Religious Education
9 & 11 a.m.

Our publication title, **Grace Notes**, harkens back to the name of this congregation in the 1870s, Grace Church, and also refers to a grace note in music, which is an extra flourish to a main piece of music. Each month, we create some space to highlight just a flourish, some extra notes, within the larger life of our church.