

“Commitment to an Uncharted Path”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman on March 14, 2021

In preparation for this morning’s sermon, I reviewed our services from March of 2020. I went back to the services of last March because that was when the coronavirus arrived in Montana. With the arrival of the virus many aspects of our lives were changed rapidly and dramatically. A year ago tomorrow was the first time that UUFB live-streamed a Sunday Service. That was also the last Sunday we had people attending the service in our sanctuary. The following Sunday, March 22, there were only four people in the sanctuary. The four who were present included the three people who were leading the service, Peg, Laurel and me, along with Lee, who was videoing the service using a smart phone. For our first all online service that Sunday we had 46 “views” in real time. Late that week the Governor issued a “shelter in place” order. That order meant the participants in the service the following Sunday couldn’t all be in the same building. At that point we didn’t have the technical capability to live-stream a service under such conditions. So on March 29, we held our first online social time instead of having our usual Sunday service. We had 48 electronic devices login to our Zoom social time that day. By the first Sunday in April, we were using both Zoom and Facebook live to send our services out over the internet, thanks to our Office Administrator, Christy. All of that seems like the very distant past. But it was just one year ago.

In the past year there have been many changes to what had previously been thought of as “life as normal.” For many of us in-person contact with others has declined significantly. Along with this decline in person-to-person contact our physical contact with others decreased dramatically. I don’t remember the last time I shook hands with someone. And like many of you, I miss being able to get and give hugs. We changed how often and when we go to the store to buy groceries or other needed items. We began having video conference meetings online and spending considerably more time staring into a video screen. And we began wearing masks in public and washing our hands more than had been the practice for many of us. These are just a few of the changes that have occurred during the past year.

I don’t know about you but this past year seems like it might very well have been the longest and most challenging year of my life. With the recent rollout of the third COVID-19 vaccine, and increasing numbers of people getting vaccinated, there is hope on the horizon. I am looking forward to a time in the not-too-distant future when Fellowship members, friends and visitors will again be able to gather in our building on Sunday mornings. Several Fellowship groups, including the Board, the Sunday Services Committee, the Hospitality & Membership Committee and the Religious Exploration Committee have been imagining and planning for the day when we will return to meeting in-person. Returning to in-person meeting is something everyone I have talked to is looking forward to. That is if we can do it responsibly and safely.

Yet as much as we are looking forward to the day when we can all be together again, there are significant challenges that lie ahead. Even with the vaccines, the COVID virus is going to continue to pose a threat—a threat that will be considerably less than it has been over the past year, but still a threat. Because of that continuing threat, we won’t be able to simply throw open our doors one Sunday morning and say; “Welcome one and all. Come join us for our Sunday service.” In other words, when we return to meeting in-person again things won’t be the same as they used to be. Keeping the continuing threat in mind, the leadership of this Fellowship is committed to returning to gathering in-person as soon as it is reasonably and responsibly possible. Because of the continuing threat, the return to in-person services and gatherings will involve traveling a path that we have never been on before. We know where we want to go. And we know the general direction that will take us where we want to go. But to get where we want to go we will need to not just travel an uncharted path, we will need to imagine and create the path that will take us to the destination we want to reach—to be able to physically gather together again safely.

Here are a few of the questions that are being considered by those who are planning for the day when we will return to meeting in-person. What steps do we need to take to insure that our gathering doesn’t

become a COVID spreading incident? Will everyone be required to wear a mask? What degree of social distancing will be necessary? And for how long? A few weeks? A few months? If we need to allow for social distancing, will our sanctuary hold all of the people who want to attend in-person services? Might we need to hold two services for a period of time to accommodate everyone who wants to come? How will we manage the number of people who plan to attend a particular service? Will people need to make reservations for the service they plan to attend? Will we be able to sing hymns together? What limitations might we need to advise or even require regarding physical touching between people who are not part of the same family group, or with those who haven't received the vaccine? And then there is the question of whether people will be required to have been vaccinated in order to attend? These are just a few of the questions that are being considered. There are many others.

These questions haven't yet been answered. They haven't been answered by those in the Fellowship who are asking them as we consider how and when we will return to in-person services. Beyond that, questions like these haven't yet been answered with certainty by other congregations or, for that matter, by scientists who are tracking and studying the COVID virus and its spread. Since such questions are still in need of definitive answers, it seems clear to me that we are on an uncharted path.

As I think about the path ahead I am reminded of a hymn in *Singing the Journey*. The hymn is titled "Woyaya." If we hadn't sung it just 5 weeks ago we would be singing it this morning. Here is how the hymn begins. "We are going, heaven knows where we are going, but we know within. And we will get there, heaven knows how we will get there, but we know we will." Along the path to returning to in-person gatherings we will almost certainly initially answer some of the questions incorrectly. At those points, the path may be "hard," as the hymn states, or even "muddy and rough." If we are patient and supportive with one another, however, I am confident that in the end we will find our way through the difficult parts of the journey.

As I previously indicated, there are a number of questions that remain to be answered. But there is one question that has already been decided. That question has to do with live-streaming our services. For months prior to our first live-streamed service on March 15 discussions had been occurring periodically about putting our live services on the internet each week. The pandemic forced us to shift to online services much faster than we were prepared for or would have preferred. But now that we are live-streaming it has become clear that doing so offers benefits. For example, when the weather or the roads are really bad, people can still attend the service in the comfort and safety of their own home. And Fellowship members and friends can now attend services from almost anywhere. With such benefits in mind, the Board voted in August of last year to continue to live-stream our services after we return to in-person gathering.

One of the other benefits of live-streaming our services is that people from across the state, the nation or even around the world can attend on Sunday mornings. By continuing to live-stream our services we will be able to do what Tara Humphries, our guest speaker last Sunday, suggested in the title of her sermon. We will provide an opportunity for anyone who wants to join us, from wherever they may live or be, to have a seat at the table. We will expand our table far beyond what we imagined when we moved into our first ever building just months before you called me to be your minister in the spring of 2016. We will still have a building that we consider to be our Fellowship "home," but our table will extend far beyond the walls of the building where we physically gather.

As we have been live-streaming our services through the past year we have experienced what can occur when we expand our table. Over the past several weeks the Hospitality and Membership Committee held an orientation to UUFB for people who are relatively new to the Fellowship and have an interest in learning more about us. The number of people who attended the recent orientation was lower than the past couple of orientations but, given the current circumstances, I think that was to be expected. What wasn't expected was that a significant portion of those who attended don't live in Montana. And these folks don't have a second home in Montana either. Their interest and involvement in our Fellowship raises some questions in my mind. How inviting and welcoming will we be once we return to meeting in person? How will we continue to actively include people who aren't able to attend our in-person gatherings in the life of our Fellowship? What intentional steps will we need to take to include people who are attending via the internet

in the activities at “our table?” How will we be able to determine if these people are “sitting at the table” with no one engaging them in conversation? Will they have to blow their horns until the invisible walls that prevent them from being included come tumbling down? These are questions I believe we all need to be thinking about. We know how to be inviting and welcoming to those who enter the doors of our building. But we haven’t previously had to consider how we are welcoming and inviting to people we may have never met in person and might not ever be physically in the same room with.

In the weeks and months ahead we will be preparing for the day when many of us will be together in our building on Sunday mornings again. Getting to that day will take a great deal of thought and planning. And even after we are back in our building, we will need to find answers to questions pertaining to how we are together. There will be questions, such as some I have already mentioned, that we have never before had to consider.

Along the uncharted path that lies before us, we will need some way to determine whether we are going in the proper direction. There may not be trail markers along the path to guide us. And we don’t have an actual compass that will indicate just where true north is. But we have other things available to us that will help us find our way. We have our Seven Principles. We have the UUFB Mission. And we have the covenant we affirm every Sunday during our service. Each of these are printed in the Order of Service today and every Sunday. If we continually use these to check where we are and the direction we are headed, I am sure the path we take will get us where we want to go. And there is one more place for us to look for guidance as we travel the path. That is our new Vision Statement which was adopted by the congregation at the Annual Meeting this past May. Much of what is contained in this Vision Statement was at least talked about if not written prior to the COVID virus arriving in Montana. At the time it was written there was no way for those who were working on it to realize just how prophetic its words would be. If you aren’t familiar with what it says I encourage you to go to the UUFB website and read it. After you read it, I would recommend you print it off and hang it in a place where it is easily visible in you home. I believe our Vision Statement will play an important role in getting us where we want to go. Here is a part of what it says. “We of the UUFB... Will move forward into an uncertain future with grace and humility, fostering compassion and love, claiming our prophetic heritage, and making our fellowship, larger community and world a safer and better place.” That is where we all hope to go. And that, my friends, is where the path will take us if we stay true to the values and the covenants we share and hold dear.

So may it be.