

Sermon: *Postcards from the Pulpit* c. Rev. Vail Weller  
Sunday, May 29, 2011 ~ Unitarian Universalists of San Mateo, CA

By the time of my last week with you, it will have been 424 Sundays (give or take a few for time off, study leave, and guest speakers) that I have had the privilege of being in this pulpit speaking with you. I have had the privilege of witnessing your lives, from here. There is nothing else that I know that is like this relationship of pulpit to pew, or congregant to minister. It is a rare and unusual thing.

As I prepare to depart from this ministry that you called me to eight years ago, naturally, I am feeling reflective. I have a few different kinds of opportunities to speak with you over the next month: at the Annual Meeting of the congregation on June 12, on my last Sunday of June 19<sup>th</sup>, and of course this morning. There are so many things I'd like to say, and so much that I wish I could articulate but which will forever remain inexpressible.

Today, I had hoped to try to sift through some of the images from our years together.

I see myself meeting the search committee, the group of ten who dedicated their lives for a year to finding the right match for what the congregation had articulated. I see myself falling in love with that special group of people who ably represented UUSM. When Candidating Week was over, after we had potlucked and talked and worshiped together, I went off for a walk around the block as the congregation voted to call me as the minister. My husband Bob and I walked the neighborhood, and I remember drinking in the sunshine, the blossoming flowers, and the heady sense of possibility for this ministry with you. That ministry was affirmed as you voted to call me. And so we began.

I see my family moving and settling in, in San Mateo. Zinn, who was 3 back then, had his own room for the first time when we came here. I see members of the congregation bringing us toys for Zinn to play with. Helping move us in. Taking Bob to dinner when I was still making my way across the country to join him here. You were so hospitable and kind.

Over the course of my ministry here, my family has expanded, and you helped to welcome and dedicate Denison when she was born almost 5 years ago.

Standing in this sanctuary alone during the week, I would imagine you all, and imagine those of you who hadn't shown up yet, and I would imagine the joys and longings that you would bring into the space. And over this time together, I felt more and more that this sanctuary became sacred space: a place where you were safe to feel, to discern, to pray, to meditate, to sing, to move, to worship.

There have been extraordinary occasions.

The warm glow spreading throughout the pews as you light your Christmas Eve candles, singing Silent Night with both longing and joy.

The procession of beauty as you bring your flowers for the annual flower communion Sunday. I stand and witness as the children thoughtfully choose just the right flower to take home.

The annual service of remembrance, when you have carried forward photographs and precious memories of loved ones who have died.

The ritual of forgiveness. Seeing you as you struggle with whether or not you are ready, and then, unsure at first, you stand, gaining strength as you approach the chancel, to claim a rock and drop it into the water, to mark the beginning of the process to forgive.

The annual ingathering and water communion ceremony, when you pour your water from across the globe or from your own home tap, both equally meaningful.

Easter morning. Children dressed up in fancy clothes. Trumpet music filling the air. The smell of lilies. Kids filled with sugar being encouraged to sit still.

The annual Coming of Age Sundays, when our remarkable young people stand and share their credo statements, demonstrating how they have been encouraged to shape their lives around the important questions.

The Bridging Ceremonies when our youth walk across the bridge into adulthood, supported and encouraged by their families and faith community.

The youth services, with rapping, original poetry, and all of the joyful chaos that typifies that stage of life.

The Sunday morning when the Supreme Court decision (ruling that state law against defining marriage as between a man and a woman was unconstitutional) was announced, and everyone – EVERYONE! - erupted in applause for a really long time.

So many sounds. The pleasant chatter as people gather and settle. The depth of stillness in our time of meditation. The ringing of cell phones. The full, full silence after a particularly beautiful gift offered by our musicians. The creak of these pews. The toys inevitably dropped which roll loudly down the wooden floor, echoing and mortifying the parent, while reminding the rest of us of the sweetness of the children. The church phone, which used to ring incessantly during worship (and could be heard even in the pulpit!) until we got an updated system. The loud whispers, and sometimes the snoring.

The feedback of the sound system on occasion. The scraping of the wooden doors opening. The sound of karaoke, and hooting and hollering, in this sanctuary. The swooshing, snapping, knee-slapping, foot pounding as we call in the waters during our fall ingathering. The drum circle. The sound of a wheelchair being pushed, a walker being steadied. The rush of energy as the children enter the sanctuary and when they leave it to go to Religious Education. The brush of pages together as the hymn is being located.

The sound of justice being made, demonstrations and political actions being planned, resources being given to those in need. The sound of doors opening as people come in late, or step out to comfort their fussy toddler. The clomping across the floor in the Benner Room and the screeching of the sliding glass doors out onto the courtyard. The grumbling about this, or that. The busy sound of tents being set up in Beck Hall for our rotating shelter for temporarily-homeless families. The holy sound of laughter in

worship. The holy sound of tears and the elusive search for tissue. The thump of bass in cars driving by. The sounds of life going on within and around us.

The words. So many words in this space. Words of poetry, chosen by you, the congregation for the annual poetry service. Reflections written by our worship associates, during which they open themselves completely, to share of struggles, pain, inspiration and hope. Words from guest speakers. Words from Intern Ministers, who over the course of the learning/serving year, become clearer in their own gifts and more solid in their ministerial authority.

Words from me: sometimes tired and worn out words, sometimes hopeful and clear, but always offered with respect for this pulpit and appreciation for the privilege of walking with you.

And of course, the sound of music. The gorgeous organ music that Allan, our Music Director played. The choir back then, numbering 10 or 12, dedicated and steady in their green robes. The sweet leadership of Jeff Morton, who began opening up different musical possibilities in worship. The phenomenal playing of Lyudmila, our accompanist during that time. The children's choir, singing (and percussing) under the direction of Marty Hoffman. And of course, the way we have grown with Shawn Reifschneider as our Music Director and Paul Zawilski as our Accompanist.

Singing with the choir has become a spiritual experience. Worship has become flowing, spirited, and deeper. The liturgy has become more intentional, woven together, and (from my perspective) far more satisfying. We can, and do, try virtually anything that we want to, always working to create the opportunity for a worshipful experience. (Next week, we get to relish the Festival of Music, a time to really notice how we have evolved musically as a congregation.)

There have been weddings. Intimate ones, large ones, fancy ones and very simple ones. Civil Unions, and then Same Sex Marriages, have taken place here. No matter the kind of ceremony, always the spirit of love has been present, and this sanctuary has been enriched and enobled by the vows made here.

There have been child dedications. Times when we have welcomed new life and paused to dedicate ourselves to the heart and mind of the new child. Times when they have eaten the roses we are blessing them with. They have cried, we have cried.

New members have been welcomed, many of them over these years. (I was surprised to learn that 50% of our members have joined in the last 8 years.) They stand before us, full of anticipation that this will be a community that will fit where they are in their lives and encourage them to grow into who they are becoming.

And we have said goodbye to many. There are those who have left our community because it was not a good fit for them, because the community changed in a way that was not comfortable, because they moved away, or because they died.

There have been so many memorial services. The room has been jammed full of people for some of these services, and for others there have been maybe a handful present. But whenever we have gathered to honor the story of someone's life, a deeply meaningful gift has been received by each of us. In those times, we have mourned lost possibilities, acknowledged difficult relationships, and have learned about the beautiful, previously hidden facets of those we have known and loved.

Each one of those lives, a blessing to the world. Each one of these lives, a blessing to the world.

There are many things I have seen and felt from this pulpit over the years.

I have felt unworthy to stand before you, knowing that I have no more wisdom than any of the rest of you, yet feeling a calling to minister and to speak from my own broken life to meet yours.

I have felt tired, because the ministry that I have done here has been challenging and demanding, and tired because I chose to give myself to it fully. Perhaps too fully.

I have felt joy, to my very core, for the ability to do the work I am called to do, in the congregation I have been called to, in the most beautiful place in the world to live.

I am so happy to realize that our community is the place I most want to worship. I am so sad to realize it, too, because I am soon to leave. Yet I trust the new call I am answering, and I trust that this congregation will continue to build on its strong and healthy foundation.

I have been so fortunate to work with all of the lay leaders and staff here. I have learned something from each and every one of you. The people in this congregation are so interesting, so savvy, so fun, so caring – it was easy to fall in love with you, and to deepen in love over these years. I have been moved by the depth of dedication of our Religious Educators, and especially the steady guiding hand of Kathy Van Leuwen, who has shown me what it really takes – what it really takes! - to run a stellar program.

And I am well aware how lucky I am to have been part of a ministry team. It has been such a blessing to have a colleague in Lauren Smith over these 4 years she has been with us.

We have balanced each others strengths and have grown each other in important ways. We respect and care for each other. She is my sister in spirit.

I have felt nourished by the worship that together we have created. I have been so thankful to learn from Shawn Reifschneider as I have been able to sing with our choir, which has been healing and has helped me to grow. The crafting of worship and the preparation for and the writing of each sermon has become the center of my spiritual practice.

I have been honored to work with, mentor, and supervise four Intern Ministers over my years here (Myron Andes, Bill Kennedy, Wendy Bartel and Deanna Vandiver). Each one has brought different gifts to our church. Each one has profoundly affected my own ministerial calling, and has shaped the minister I continue to become. I am so grateful for that privilege.

I have felt supported, cared for, appreciated, and blessed by the opportunity to walk with you through the tender times in your lives. I think it was Forrest Church who said that being in the ministry is like having a front row seat in the theater of life. Yes, it is like that. I have been uniquely privileged to know of your deeper struggles, your highest aspirations, and to learn from and with you.

From this pulpit, week upon week, I have seen you.

I have seen you enter, whether you were slipping in for the first time and crying throughout the service, or returning each and every week to sit in the same spot. I have sometimes felt the energy you were carrying: the sense of struggle and burden, the lightness, the leaning into the silence, or being swept away by the music. I have sensed the start of new relationships. I have sensed the dissolution of others. I have watched your children become more themselves. I have seen those of you who didn't really want to be here.

I have watched some of you struggle with a loss of independence. I have seen you help each other. I have watched you light candles. I have watched you help your children light candles. I have seen you welcome newcomers. I have seen you ignore them. I have seen you plotting revolution. I have seen you trying to find your way into the community, and not succeeding. I have seen you trying to maneuver your differently-abled body through the side aisles to participate in a rite of passage. I have seen you evolve and grow bold. I have seen you mired in a sense of defeat. I have witnessed you trying new things, growing in new ways, and I have felt you being pulled back into the familiar and comfortable.

I have felt you avoiding my gaze. I have felt your spirit beaming out light during worship. I have felt you clinging to sobriety. I have felt you celebrating sobriety. I have sensed your joy at having the children in worship, and I have sensed times when you wish you could sit in peace and utter quiet. I have missed you when you were not here.

I have seen you. It may be an illness, but I think I have seen everything that has happened in this sanctuary on the Sundays I have been in the pulpit. Much of that can be described, but much of it cannot. I carry all of this, and all of you, with me as I go.

I have loved the simple, profound weekly ritual we have shared, of being in worship together. I have seen you, and I have loved you.

I love your yearnings, your generosity, your willingness to grow and be changed in the direction of your higher self. I love your families, and I love your connections with one another. I love your grumpiness – at least, in this moment I can say I do – and I love above all your dedication to this congregation and this living tradition, which has held, nudged, and cared for you in all of your spiritual seasons.

I am grateful for all of these 424 Sundays. I am glad to have a few more, during which I hope we will have the chance to speak to each other of what we have learned and appreciated from each other. My hope is that we will move into the future newly aware that the only thing that is constant in life is change itself; and that we are resting in the embrace of a love larger than we can possibly know.

May it be so.