

“Transformed by Our Care”
Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
February 25, 2024

The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at <https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/>.

Reading

“Big Lesson” by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer¹

...How could anything
ever get in the way of generosity?
How could we ever greet each other
with any words besides,
How can I help you?...

Sermon

Two weeks ago, Sally asked you to reflect on why you come to church, why you participate in the life of this congregation. You came up with many responses: inspiration, friendship, community, service to others, values, community, belonging, music, transcendence, community (that was a popular one).

Within this question, there is the assumption that you are here of your own volition and choice.

A congregation is a unique entity. It is a community that no one is mandated to be a part of. There are no laws saying that you must participate in a church or any other religious community, and our faith has no belief that obligates your attendance or participation. We often call Unitarian Universalism a “freely chosen faith.” Even if you were raised Unitarian Universalist, our understanding is that the decision to continue your engagement with a UU congregation is up to you.

This community is also unique as a place in which the bonds that tie us together are not necessarily familial. While some of you arrive here as a family unit, from individual to

¹ Full poem available at <https://ahundredfallingveils.com/2022/10/11/big-lesson/>

individual and from family to family, we cross boundaries of familial kinship. We cross boundaries of age. We cross boundaries of ancestry. We cross boundaries of economic class and educational background as we come together.

And so, we are a collection of people with diverse backgrounds and histories, hopes and dreams, choosing to dedicate our time, attention, and resources to the endeavor of being a community. And not just a community concerned with our internal affairs alone. But a community that is part of a larger ecosystem of concern made up by the people and living beings with whom we share this place we call home.

There is an affection that lies beneath our coming together. We are drawn here for the people and for what we can do with one another rather than alone. And, with the limitations we all face of time, attention, and resource, there must be care present if you are choosing to be a part of this community.

Our care is powerful.
We can often think of care as gentle, soft, nurturing.
Powerful might not be a word we would associate with care.
But care is powerful because it can lead to change and transformation.

We experienced this together in the wake of the flood this past July. An unbidden transformation took place as the waters inundated homes, businesses, and this church building.

As Margot described so beautifully in her testimonial, the care of this community was evident as you showed up, along with strangers and church neighbors, to haul bins, pass buckets, and mop floors.

Your care was evident in the financial donations made to our Flood Recovery Fund.

Your care has been at the heart of our ongoing healing and recovery since the flood waters crested at their historic height and finally receded.

Since that time, we have worked together to carry on with our essential ministries. We adapted as we moved locations for the first six Sundays of the church year to worship together and

teach our children. You worked together to reopen this building not just for our own use but for our broader community as well.

“Transformed by Our Care” is the theme of this year’s Annual Pledge Drive. As a congregation, we have continued to experience the transforming power of your collective care.

Earlier this month, our congregation, through the Racial Justice Group, joined with Salon Black Walnut and central Vermont Showing Up for Racial Justice to host the second Black OurStory event here in our vestry. The event was open to the public. Members of our Racial Justice Group provided helping hands to set up, greet guests, serve food, and clean dishes as people of all ages and diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds listened to music and poetry performed by Black artists and then joyfully moved their bodies to the rhythms of music spun by the evening’s DJs.

As one of Salon Black Walnut’s founders, Farmer Ama, shared in worship the next day, to experience in real life, in our very bodies, the Beloved Community, is a beautiful and powerful experience. This kind of experience - made possible by the care of this community - can transform how we understand ourselves, our relationships, and our sense of possibility.

In our Chalice Circles, an individual’s feeling of isolation is transformed into a feeling of connection by the caring presence and deep listening of others whose stories are similar and yet uniquely theirs.

In our Spiritual Exploration classes, a child’s shyness is transformed into playfulness by the caring words and guidance of a grown-up who patiently and lovingly allows the child to be themselves.

Through our Climate Action Team, a long-time activist’s discouragement is transformed into re-engaged, hopeful action by the determination of others who remind them of what is still in their power to do and to save despite all that has already been lost.

Our care is expressed and shared in many ways. Through our presence, attention, and nonjudgmental listening. Through our direct financial assistance to someone facing a lack of resources and a growing pile unpaid bills. Our care is shared through grieving together the

destruction and hardship wrought by climate disaster and through taking up the work of cleaning up, rebuilding, and discerning the future together.

All of this matters deeply.

Our ministry matters in a context in which religious institutions are facing pressures of all kinds. Attendance and membership in religious communities has been trending downward across denominations for many years. The fate of many religious entities is uncertain. Yet, I have witnessed again and again how absolutely vital this congregation is to our community.

We provide a space for gathering and exchanging ideas, for nurturing the soul through voices joined in sync and harmony. We partner with others to offer safe shelter and warm meals.

We stand here prominently on Main Street with a declaration that Black Lives Matter and that people of all genders are welcome - no matter how many times we have to replace that proudly hanging flag.

And yet, with broader trends going the way they are, with an uncertain future for religious institutions of all kinds, it is not outside the realm of possibility that this place, this congregation could cease to exist in five years or ten years down the road.

With these pressures and concerns, I believe it is more important than ever that we commit to continuing to be a community that can offer care for the weary soul and uphold values of justice, equity, interdependence, and peace.

And, today the Stewardship Committee and I are asking you to prioritize the care of this congregation.

There is care in attending to the stewardship of our congregation as we ensure that we have the financial resources necessary to continue our ministry of caring transformation.

As we embark upon this year's Annual Pledge Drive, we do so in a moment when we are faced by tough financial realities on many fronts. The city and neighboring towns, our school districts and our state are grappling with tough financial realities. These are realities we face in our own personal lives, too, of increased costs and expenses and, for the most part, decreased

or stagnant income. This reality may be more or less true for you as it is the case that within this congregation, you each have differing financial circumstances. However, the feeling that we are being squeezed is all around us.

Caring for an institution of voluntary involvement and freely offered monetary contributions in this climate poses some challenges.

What remains true is that it is the pooling together of our resources that allows us to continue our ministry. Each of you reflecting on what this congregation means to you, determining what you can give from within your means, and committing to give makes it possible for this community to carry out its mission.

Our goal for this pledge drive is to raise five percent more in pledges than was raised for this current church year, a total of \$382,000. This increase is necessary to keep up with inflated costs and to maintain our current staffing levels and compensation. And, I can report that we have already raised \$86,212 towards that goal.

My spouse and I join you in making an annual financial commitment to this congregation. We believe in this congregation's vital ministry and role in the community. As we have considered our finances and our commitment to the mission and ministry of this congregation, we have decided to increase our pledge by 5% percent to a total of \$5,292 for the year.

I ask you to give careful consideration to your own financial situation as well as your commitment to this church and to pledge generously within your own budget.

We need this place to survive, to continue to exist and thrive.

And, *we* need this place for our own survival.

We need this religious community to inspire our hope, to affirm our agency, to grow our compassion, to expand our love, to deepen our understanding.

We need people with whom we are bound by covenant to continue in the endeavor of creating a more just and peaceful world and living sustainably on our planet.

We need this place, and we need one another.

As the poet Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer writes:

Today it feels so simple:

we are here to take care of each other.

How could we ever forget?

How could anything

ever get in the way of generosity?

May our generosity flow as we take up the work of caring for each other and this beloved community.

So may it be.