

If We Choose

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society
March 1, 2026

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Were it not for the generosity of people who are no longer members of this congregation, SUUS (Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society) would not exist as you know it today, and perhaps not at all.

Indeed, it has long been the case that the present and future of churches like SUUS has depended, in part, upon the past. On people who saw themselves as stewards of something larger and longer lasting than their individual selves.

In the not too distant past this larger and longer lasting “something” was primarily conceived and valued as an alternative to religious orthodoxy. An alternative well articulated by my late colleague, The Rev. John B. Wolf whose words we heard in our time for all ages this morning in which he reminds us that most important reason to join a UU (Unitarian Universalist) church is to support it. For in supporting your local congregation you are in fact supporting, that is, bringing and keeping alive, a larger, alternative way of understanding and being religious in the world.

An alternative in which superstition and fear are cast out and people of every race, creed, color, place of origin, sexual orientation, gender identity, and so on are to not only to be tolerated, but welcomed and embraced.

An alternative in which truth is discerned through living the questions and expressed from a free pulpit rather than revealed exclusively in a historicized mythic past and declared final once and for all within the confines of a neat and tidy creed.

An alternative which is more concerned with salvaging what is good in people and in this world more than in blaming and shaming what is not.

An alternative that can make you laugh, will hold you when you cry, and remain present when you are angry or in despair.

An alternative that will not insult or attempt to appease you with easy answers to life’s mysteries, but accompany you through your lifelong questioning.

Now, while a community dedicated to an alternative way of understanding and being religious in the world may and certainly still does appeal to many, it is not hard to imagine the appeal of a community also dedicated to an alternative way of understanding and being human in the world.

Indeed, we live increasingly in a society that is all about creating and proliferating a singular, fixed identity; a personal brand, if you will. A brand we're encouraged to market and is in fact marketed by others to the world, as the "real" us. "You have one identity," Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook, now Meta, once declared, "The days of you having a different image for your work friends or co-workers and for the other people you know are probably coming to an end pretty quickly", he said, adding, "Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity." A bold assertion from a man not especially known for exhibiting integrity himself publicly, yet an assertion nonetheless in line with the prevailing ethos of the time in which we are witnessing the continued flattening of people, institutions, and ideas into simplistic black and white caricatures we either love or hate. And where the more we hate earns a cynical few a whole lot of money.

Nearly twenty years ago, in the midst of another period of troubling domestic and global unrest, I observed this flattening starting to occur in how I was coming to think about myself and view the world around me.

Alarmed by it, I found myself searching for something I'd never imagined I would seek as an adult gay man: religion. And I do mean religion, not spirituality. I was already spiritual but not religious. What I didn't have was a community. A community in which to ground, deepen, and refine my spirituality, and indeed my humanity. Which is what a religion practiced in community provides. For while many today equate the word religion with inflexible dogma, the Latin root of the word points to a meaning far richer and inviting, including to study and to bind together, as in community or common purpose.

My search brought me to Unitarian Universalism and into relationship with a number of congregations including, eventually, this one (SUUS).

I think it goes without saying it had a tremendous impact of my life. An impact far more significant than an outwardly observable career change.

Now, UU's (Unitarian Universalists) are not big on talk of salvation, but I have said, and still hold, that Unitarian Universalism saved me. Not from eternal damnation, but the damnable condition of a flat, one dimensional existence. A singular identity lived in a predicable, black and white world in which I and my concerns occupy the center and my days are spent giving thumbs up or thumbs

down to all around me according to my unexamined fears, assumptions, and biases.

In short, Unitarian Universalism restored my wholeness.

Not as in it answered all my questions, solved all my problems, or revealed and made sense of all the mysteries of life or its meaning. But as in it helped me recognize, embrace, and deepen my many identities that together form the person before you: A multidimensional person, aware of and undeterred by all the paradoxes that being human entails.

In plainer language Unitarian Universalism introduced me to people I might never have met and ideas I might never have known about, let alone explore. It got me to sing aloud, which I never did, and discover music I might never have heard. And strangely enough, it opened me not only to hear a call to a vocation I would never have considered, but inspired me to risk pursuing it in the face of sustained self doubting in my both my ability and capacity to do so with any level of competence.

Indeed, Unitarian Universalism facilitated an appreciation of my many selves, my multidimensionality that helped me see and experience myself, the world and all within it, round in my sight again. Which is to say it encouraged in me a very different relationship to myself and the world in which I live, an observable change which itself reminds me, in the words of Audre Lorde,

“I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live. My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definition. Only then can I bring myself and my energies as a whole to the service of those struggles which I embrace as part of my living.”

This is exact opposite of what’s forcefully, punishingly encouraged in the many spheres of life outside of communities like ours (SUUS).

John Wolf lifts up Unitarian Universalism’s appeal and importance as a response and alternative to the soul deadening moralism that has long come to the dominate popular understandings of and, too often, the actual practice of religion. And what I have found and value most about this faith is firmly rooted in its response and the alternative it offers to the soul deadening material secularism of the dominant culture.

Today I ask you to consider what it is you value most about this faith and this community in which you explore, refine, and practice it with others. This community I know as the small church with a big heart: Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society.

I ask because it is good to step back from time to time and reflect on a place and its people to which you are connected and what it has meant, means still, and may mean yet in your life. Chances are whatever it means to you, it also has, does or could mean to others too. Reflection has a way of helping us step into the stream of time, nudging us from observer of its passing to participant in the past, present, and future.

This is what it means to be a steward, to shift from observer to participant. To take your place and take a stand with others for something that matters.

It is, in the spirit of Stephen Vincent Benet's assertion, to recognize that just as our earth is but a small star in a great universe, so too are our lives. Yet of both we can help make, if we choose, a world far different than the one we live, see, or read about in the news. More affirming than the one too many religious, secular, and commercial interests and institutions offer us. One more just for earth's inhabitants and the planet itself.

To choose such a world is to take the long view. It is to embrace who we are, who we've always been as a faith: generous stewards of a better world. A better world we build together, generation to generation. Indeed, most of the people whose generosity has ensured SUUS exists today are no longer members largely because they are no longer with us in body.

During their lifetime they gave of their time, talent, and treasure not because they believed in the imminence of that better world, but were dedicated to encouraging and supporting the values and ideas that would move the world a little closer to its realization one life at a time in gathered community. A community whose continued gathering is like a living prayer and whose mantra over the generations has been, in essence, "Let them not say." Which, if you recall was the title of our reading this morning.

Indeed, Jane Hirshfield has described her poem "Let Them Not Say", as a both poem and prayer "hoping to make itself someday incomprehensible."

Hirshfield's poem was written as a hopeful, motivating response to climate change and has found renewed resonance in response to the political climate of the last decade. And indeed her words, threaded with the discomfort of truths

known but denied through passivity, challenge us to acknowledge the reality of whatever truth we're inclined to deny by taking action now.

And the truth is, your church community needs you. Let them not say, we didn't know. We know.

In that spirit, I ask you today to not only think about what it is you value about this faith and this faith community, but to also choose to support it. For without you who are today members and friends of this congregation, SUUS and all it represents to you and the larger world, will not exist tomorrow.

I say this not to scare or strong arm anyone, or to deny the great generosity already present here. I say it because everything we love or disdain in and about this world in which we live has its stewards. People committed to certain values and ideas and the means of ensuring their propagation generation after generation. In other words, the value and ideas you have found here, that you express through the joys and sorrows you share, through the ministries and programming you volunteer for or participate in, through your attendance at worship, religious exploration, and meetings, that you share in an email, text or pastoral visit with me, and that you carry with you out into the world.

Those values and ideas need you.

You are their lifeblood.

Our annual budget may look like a list of commonplace expenses...utilities, supplies, salaries, maintenance, and so forth. And the simple fact is it takes money to operate the church. That's one reason why I'm raising my pledge by 10% for next year. But the other reason, the more important reason to my mind, is the budget, the majority of which comes from pledges, represents another opportunity to express, collectively, our commitment to the values of this faith lived in community, which has given us a spiritual home, connects us to others who share those values, and can help endow our legacy: a future for this community and its values.

Indeed, our annual canvass which begins today, and that you'll hear more about during fellowship downstairs following the service, is an invitation to every member and friend of this congregation- that's you and me - to embrace who we are, generous stewards of a better world, and to do more than simply help pay today's bills, but invest...again or for the first time...in line with your ability... in supporting and sustaining the values and ideas you have found and hold dear as a part of this community. For all of us can partake in the creation of a better world, if we choose.

With love and gratitude, may it be so.

Amen and Blessed Be