

Good morning. It is good to be here with you today...

Ring (phone rings)

- To congregation, “Excuse me, my how embarrassing, my phone is ringing.”
- Answering phone, “Hello. YOU? How can I help you? (listen, nod etc.)”
- “ME! Oh I’m sure you meant to call someone else. And besides this really is a bad time, I’m supposed to be talking to these pe... (listen, nod etc.)”
- “Well - if you’re sure you wanted me...I suppose...I must say I’m really quite surprised. Can we talk later? This is kind of awkward with these people here and I really should get back to them. Uh huh. Ok, well I really think you’ve made a mistake, but we can talk more tomorrow. I’m going to need time to consider this...”

That is what I imagined ‘a call’ to be like when I was a child. Except then I was always half expecting to get the call. Not for ministry – women as ministers were not part of my frame of reference when I was young – but I thought maybe I’d get the call to do some great mission work. I looked for and waited for signs. I was, as you’ve probably figured out, a bit of an unusual child. My thinking has changed somewhat in the years since then, but in some ways I find that I’m not as far from that place as might be expected. I’m going to tell you a bit about where I am now because I think knowing something about me may help you understand my comments this morning a bit better. I am an unapologetic enthusiast for our faith tradition. I also think you need to know that I believe that we impoverish ourselves when we throw out some of the traditionally religious words. I know about the allergies, I have them too – but I am working hard to deal with them. I figure the occasional outbreak of hives is worth it, if I can reclaim, and reframe words of deep meaning and significance. I’ve been known to use the word god, and prayer, words that sometimes make Unitarian Universalists uncomfortable. You may hear an enthusiasm that we sometimes classify as unseemly. I share this with you so that you know where I’m coming from.

My time with you, this year, has had me thinking even more than usual for me, about the meaning of community and about religious community. I’m so gratified that we’ve been living into the questions “what is the nature of a congregation – what makes it different from other types of communities”, “What is the purpose of religious community?” and “What does it mean to be a member of a Unitarian and Universalist congregation?” I think it is essential we think about this...Because without the answers that each of us offers, without the conversations where we consider our responses, there is a danger of doing what you’ve

always been doing. No two answers will be the same and isn't it great that there is a full and robust range of opinions. Here is how I answer the questions, "Unitarian and Universalist congregations are non-creedal, members are free to formulate their own opinions on the nature of the divine and on other theological matters, yet they come together in community to challenge one another, to support one another and to understand how their diverse beliefs call them to respond to the world in which they live." There are other answers. And there are other ways to talk about this. James Luther Adams, a Unitarian Minister & influential theologian said, "Church is a place where you get to practice what it means to be human." And practice, we hope, leads to some measure of improvement. Both of these responses address the issue of becoming...of becoming more fully human. Done well our churches are places where each of us can, if we take the time to listen, become more fully ourselves.

Like the teacher Zusia, I've been challenged to be more fully myself. Through my involvement as a Unitarian Universalist, I have been challenged to become more fully human and more fully Linda.

It is my hope that here we can give one another the support and challenge we need as we make our individual journeys through life. In these places, we recognize humanity in those around us; we can understand that they are fallible. We can learn to accept our own flawed nature. I have heard stories and I know through firsthand experience, how our congregations have been a haven for some. Have you found a kind word, a warm smile, practical help and support when you most needed it? I have heard others tell me how they have developed skills and tapped personal resources that were previously unknown to them. Have you found yourself saying yes, when asked to do something that you never dreamed you could do? And have you surprised yourself with your newly discovered capabilities? Have you realized some of your potential? I came to church looking for a place to reflect on Sunday mornings, a place where our children could learn about religion. I found those things, but I have found much more too. I've learned so much about myself through the things I have been encouraged to do, and through the support I have been given. It's amazing. I've heard it said that the purpose of religious community is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. I believe we can do that for one another. I know I've been afflicted a bit, and I suspect, some of you can relate. I believe that each of us is at times both the afflicted and the comfortable!

If our congregations are to provide this support and challenge in our lives, if they are to be places where we explore our beliefs and where we can work with patience and compassion on being the people we can be, it will be because we, as individual members, understand that this is their function. Because I have learned, through my work with this and other

congregations, that churches are their members. There is, in our tradition of congregational polity, no 'them'. We have no bishops, or deacons or ecclesiastic authority that can make 'it' happen. We folks, are it. Look around. The people you see are the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

It is common to hear congregations compared to extended families. I am not sure that this is the best possible comparison. My family, wonderful as they are, cannot take the place of a supportive community. I am lucky; my family is supportive and accepting. I know that is not the case for everyone. Some of us live too far away from family members to have any kind of ongoing relationship. Others have, for a variety of reasons, become estranged from family members. Whatever our relationship with our families I think we can all easily understand that there is one basic difference between families and congregations. Congregations exist to be religious communities. Our religious values and beliefs, however diverse they may be in a Unitarian Universalist congregation, are a unifying force for us. The principles we affirm, of the inherent worth and dignity of every person, the right to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning and the recognition that we are part of an interdependent web of creation are part of the glue that makes us a religion. When we light the chalice and when we sing together we are engaging in practices that other Unitarian Universalists do. Our form of worship varies from congregation to congregation – but there are similarities. Each time we light the chalice we are reminding ourselves of our hopes of community; this religious community and of the larger Unitarian Universalist community. We are reminding ourselves that we believe our lives matter, that we can make a difference in the life of our fellow congregants and that this congregation can make a difference in the world. Our families do not usually aspire to be religious communities that exist both to support one another and to serve the larger community. If you believe as I do that our congregations do exist to nurture people - To help us see in one another and in ourselves what Channing called, "the seed of the divine," then you will agree with me that each of us has a moral imperative to ensure our congregations are healthy, thriving organizations that have a gift for hospitality and a strong commitment to growth. If you have, as I have, been welcomed in a Unitarian and Universalist congregation, and if you have, as I have, found your life enriched – found new ways to be fully yourself, then you believe that not making our religious approach available and accessible to others who would join us, is not an option. I believe we need to be communities that make it easy for those we don't yet know to join us. I'm not naïve – I know that this isn't always easy. I understand the resistance to change, I've done it. When I first came to Unitarianism, I mistook some of my congregation's visible and obvious differences from the norm as part of the essence of Unitarianism. Over 40 years ago, I joined a small lay-led congregation. I

mistook lay -ed and small, and university style lectures for Unitarianism. I wondered why some of the members there were talking about growth and ministers - not to mention that I wondered why they were talking about God! What they gently and gradually helped me to understand was, "it's not all about me". The First Unitarian Church of Hamilton did not exist to make me comfortable, did not exist to make me feel clever. It existed to help those who would join us on our journey of liberal religion. I went along with those who had another vision. And, friends, I've learned a lot. I've learned that traditional religious forms and liturgy, the way we frame our services, do not equal traditional theology. I've learned that those younger or different in other ways than me and that those without the allergies I spoke of earlier often want different things than I wanted. I've come to understand that we need to embrace theological and liturgical diversity if we are to grow. And as I've explained, I believe we need to grow.

You are on the threshold of a new ministry. What this congregation will become, how it can serve those you do not yet know is up to you. It will require change. New people will have new ideas. They will have different answers to some of the basic theological questions that we ask ourselves. They will have different understandings of how things should be done and what makes for quality congregational life. And so, if you are going to live into the next call in the life of this congregation, you must know that things will change, and you must take responsibility for making it happen. You can't rely on the Board of Directors, the committees, the Minister, or any other person to make it happen. Of course, you can assume that all those people are working in support of the same goal, but you cannot leave it up to them. You are the congregation. You make it what it is, and you make it what it can be. I know, because I know a bit about our congregations and about human nature, that some of you feel that there is some real comfort in the way things are done here, the ways they were done when you were in your last building. I ask you this morning though to consider the imaginary call that you might receive... (you can fill in the blank about the nature of the caller). What are you asked to do, to be. How are you required to help this congregation realize its potential as a congregation that can transform lives?

If this community is to be what it can be, we need you, on your way to becoming who you are, to join in the journey. This congregation is made up of people who are becoming more like the Margarets, and Bills, and Lindas (there are a lot of those here), and Zuisa and whatever.... that they can be. You are this congregation, and each of you has a responsibility to ensure that this congregation becomes what you collectively dream it can be. I suppose you now know why I warned you about my enthusiasm earlier. I have great enthusiasm for our congregations. I believe that they can, because I've seen it, transform

lives. I've heard stories from others who have said. "Before I found this congregation, I didn't understand why my life was worth living." That, my friends, is very powerful. I also believe that our congregations can model the kind of community that our world so desperately needs. We are, when we are working well – communities of diversity, communities of challenge and communities of respect, democracy and peace. We can, and we do disagree with one another, we struggle to get it right, yet in the struggle, we can learn lessons that our world needs. We have much to celebrate. We have much to do. We have much to be thankful for and much to celebrate. I'll close with one last story of community....

There once was a monastery set on beautiful grounds. But things were not going well. The abbot was worried about his community because each year it dwindled in numbers a bit and some of its vitality seemed to fade. And so, the Abbot decided to speak to a wise friend of his, a rabbi who lived nearby. He told the monks that he was going to seek advice so that their beloved community could once again thrive.

And on the appointed day the Abbot went to visit his friend. He explained the problems he was having and he told the Rabbi he wanted his help. The Rabbi responded by offering a cup of tea, and by chatting about the news of the world. As the time for the visit came to an end the Abbot asked, "but what advice do you have for me? I am concerned, at this rate our community cannot survive for long." The Rabbi smiled at his friend and said, "The Messiah is among you", and with that he hugged the Abbot and turned and went into his cottage.

The puzzled, and still worried Abbot returned to his community. The monks eagerly waited for him and asked when he arrived, "What did the Rabbi say, and how can we strengthen our community?" The disappointed Abbot told them of the Rabbi's confusing message, and of his real worry for the community. The monks were sad that the Rabbi's advice seemed so meaningless and they all continued about their routines with real concern.

But in the next weeks as they gardened, and did the laundry and prayed and prepared and ate meals they thought. The Messiah is among us? Could that be true? Could it be Brother Peter? No, he always makes mistake when he is saying the mass, – but then on the other hand he can be so kind when he knows you are troubled. Could it be

Bartholomew? Unlikely really – I don't think he really has true faith – he couldn't be the messiah. But –he does sing beautifully. What about Brother Simon? He always want to upset things with his ideas of change, but when you need advice Simon always knows what to say. Could it be me? Surely not, not me! What about John? Who could it be?

And as they wondered a strange thing began to happen. They began to change the way they thought, spoke, and treated one another and themselves. Underneath their everyday interactions was an awareness of the Rabbi's words. *Maybe one of them was the Messiah.* They began to treat one another with profound respect. They began to act as if each of the brothers, including themselves was the holy one. And a wonderful thing happened. The community began to fill with a spirit of love, and respect and cooperation. People took the time to listen carefully to one another – after all, you don't want to miss something that the Messiah says. They began to treat one another as if they were gifts from God. The news of the wonderful community began to spread. People loved visiting. Families came and picnicked on the lawn there. Novices began to choose that community as a place to begin their monastic life. The spirit of love and care began its work. The understanding that the Messiah might be among them transformed that community. Their understanding that each had the seed of the divine in them made theirs a community of love and warmth and vitality.

Let us take a few deep breaths in silent reflection