

At Homeness Pastoral meditation by Richard Gilbert

Be silent, be still, be serene in this house of the spirit.

Put aside all noises that annoy, all sounds that irritate,

The cacophony that confounds. Here you are at home.

*Leave behind all frustrations that belittle, the causes that fret,
the troubles that torment. Here you can be at rest.*

*Put away all the plans to be made, things to be done, victories
to be won. Here you are at peace.*

Breathe deeply. Clear the mind of uncluttered thought.

*Purge the spirit of all unkindness. Rinse the soul clean and
pure. Here you are at home.*

Sit easy and be at rest. Feel your body recover its resilience.

Your mind its bearing, your spirit its strength.

Once again we have come home to the Source.

We feel the collective power of our companions,

The warmth of their welcome, the support of their caring.

We who have been wanderers groping for something.

We know not what, are again at home. Here is the place for us.

We are at home in this sanctuary and with these people;

We are at home on this globe and with all who dwell upon it;

We are at home in the cosmos, our home for all times past

And all time to come.

We are at home here.

*Sermon for our very first service at our new church,
January 18, 2004.*

Welcome home: a Celebration of our Journey.

By Lone Jensen

Look around you! We are here! We are actually here in our spacious, beautiful new home where the river of time has taken us in a little less than a year. We paddled very hard to get here and we are not done yet. We still need to finish the capital campaign. But for the moment let us rest, rejoice and celebrate. After so much white water rafting and a few broken oars and yes, some accidental metaphorical spills into the ice-cold river of financial reality our arms are tired and we need to rest a bit. We have come so very far by faith. Faith in the future and in future generations of UU's here in the East Valley. From now on I will testify, to all who want to hear, and possibly a few who do not, that yes, these Unitarian Universalists have not only faith to spare but they also believe in miracles. If none are provided they will even create one. Say: Amen, somebody! This congregation has known rivers: the first home was in a small house on River Street and then onto 1700 W. Warner Road, Ole Man Warner that we just said our goodbyes to, and now we have settled here on Del Rio with space to grow. From river to river we have come home again, only as they say in

commercials, it is a new and much improved Valley UU. It does seem as we are destined to follow the river, this congregation's choir (with some help) sang River in Judea to 4000 UU's when the General Assembly was held in Phoenix and my very first sermon here as your called minister back in August 2004 was entitled: Stepping into the River of time. What a journey it has been. And so many said it couldn't be done!

In some ways this journey reminds me of this story told by Roger Fulghum. *Robert Fulghum (All I ever knew I learned in kindergarten Now let me tell you about Larry Walters, my hero. Walters is a truck driver, thirty-three years old. He is sitting in his lawn chair in his backyard, wishing he could fly. For as long as he could remember, he wanted to go up. To be able to just rise right up in the air and see for a long way. The time, money, education, and opportunity to be a pilot were not his. Hang gliding was too dangerous, and any good place for gliding was too far away. So he spent a lot of summer afternoons sitting in his backyard in his ordinary old aluminum lawn chair—the kind with the webbing and rivets. Just like the one you've got in your own backyard.*

The next chapter in this story is carried by the newspapers and television. There's old Larry Walters up in the air over Los Angeles. Flying at last. Really getting up there. Still sitting in his aluminum lawn chair, but it's hooked on to forty-five helium-filled

surplus weather balloons. Larry has a parachute on, a CB radio, a six-pack of beer, some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and a BB gun to pop some of the balloons to come down. And instead of being just a couple of hundred feet over his neighborhood, he shot up thousands of feet, right through the approach corridor to the Los Angeles International Airport.

Walter is a taciturn man. When asked by the press why he did it, he said: "You can't just sit there." When asked if he was scared, he answered: "Wonderfully so: When asked if he would do it again, he said, "Nope." And asked if he was glad that he did it, he grinned from ear to ear and said: "Oh Yes."

The human race sits in its chair. On the one hand is the message that says there's nothing left to do. And the Larry Walterses of the earth are busy tying balloons to their chairs, directed by dreams and imagination to do their thing. The human race sits in its chair. On the one hand is the message that the human situation is hopeless. And the Larry Walterses of the earth soar upward knowing anything is possible, sending back the message from eleven thousand feet: "I did it, I really did it. I'm FLYING!"

It's the spirit here that counts. The time may be long, the vehicle may be strange or unexpected. But if the dream is held

close to the heart, and imagination is applied to what there is close at hand, everything is still possible.

He is right. We held this dream close to our hearts and it grew there for many years and was like a bud, ready to open when we did our all church visioning back in the spring of 2002. Here is the guided meditation I shared with you for the presentation of our Long Range Plan September 15, 2002. Listen and notice what has come true and how it fits now.

I asked you to relax and imagine that it was a Sunday morning September 15, 2007. You are coming to church. As you drive up and get closer you look around at the grounds surrounding the church, a desert landscape at its best. Notice the fragrance of the desert flowers and the variety of trees and shrubs.

As you enter you choose one of the plentiful and shady parking spaces and take one of the many nature trail to the buildings. As you get closer you hear the laughter of children and see our greeters welcoming visitors at the door. Some of our older members arrive in our special UU mobile. People smile easily at each other, young and old mingle and our Religious Education wing is buzzing with activity. The director is busy orchestrating an army of teachers and helpers. A class is getting ready to decorate the chapel for our largest coming of age class ever. Our intern minister who is doing a campus ministry this year is bringing a

group of international students to visit us. Look around before you go in and see how well the buildings fit in the landscape and feel the cool shade on the covered patio. Notice the stones, the color of the walls. And then in the large entry hall before you enter the sanctuary you look at all the different booths, flags and banners with pride. There are so many wonderful choices here. Our full time program coordinator has done his job well. All the committees are here and so are offerings on the bulletin boards of adult classes, small groups, mid week worship and food for the spirit. The social action booth is busy signing up eager volunteers.

But you move on and enter the large simple sanctuary where you are embraced by a peaceful silence. Soft music is welcoming you into the service. From the choir room the large family choir is entering and taking their places. The ceiling soars above you and as the ministers enter together you let go of the daily worries you came with and open your soul to the experience. You know it will move you and satisfy both heart and mind. As the choir begins singing you feel proud knowing that this congregation worked hard to create this space.

After the service you have coffee in the social hall. Outside at a table in the shade you talk to friends and newcomers and hear about the latest plans for our newest social event, an international music festival. In the afternoon and all next week you know this

place will continue to be busy. School children will use the nature trails, our gourmet group will meet in the large and well equipped kitchen and our church is hosting an inter faith conference.

On the way out you stop by the enclosed memorial garden for a moment of meditation. It is a peaceful place with a fountain and a butterfly garden. Trees have names in this garden and so do benches. You sit down on one and look around and remember how all this began. With a vision and a plan. A butterfly lands on your shoulder and you go home, at peace and renewed.

Well it is not exact but it sure comes close doesn't it? I am so proud to be your minister for this is a congregation with vision and courage. Oh, yes we deserve a celebration. And no of course things are not perfect here yet and will likely never be. Which reminds me of another story. Every congregation makes their space sacred in different ways. Mary Scriver writes: *Once there was a Unitarian Universalist congregation that outgrew its home and took the big step of buying a new building. Actually it was a pre-owned building that they bought from an Eastern Orthodox congregation. One of the unique features of this building's sanctuary was that up behind what we are used to thinking of as a pulpit was a kind of niche hidden behind a curtain. Most of the Unitarians didn't know what this space was for.. The idea is that in preparing for Communion, the Host—the bread—becomes at a*

certain point in the ceremony the actual physical body of Christ, real flesh, a true miracle.

The eastern Orthodox the priest would go there to shield the people from the enormous power of the event

Not knowing any of this, the Unitarians began to move in. This congregation had a nice, big, electric coffee pot, which they brought in their first load. Looking around for a safe place to store it until the kitchen was ready, they simply put it behind the curtain in the niche.

In the meantime some of the Eastern Orthodox folks came back to see if they had left anything. They had heard strange rumors about Unitarian Universalists and were curious, especially since the place looked so strange to them without their pictures. One of them—maybe he had always been curious—took up the courage and peeked into the niche behind the altar. Leaping back in horror, he cried out to his friends, “What they say is true! They do worship a coffee pot!”

Well not really! But when you move in there are a few things left behind. On our first Worship meeting here we found that the confessional, which was bolted to the wall, was left behind. Now I must admit I was tempted to institute a brand new rite within Unitarian Universalism or at least have the entire board and leadership confess, along with anyone I have ever lent a book to

that was not returned, a real UU sin of which I am also guilty. Well the heretic in me won out, and the confessional is gone awaiting its transformation into something else, like maybe a puppet stage. There were also ten mousetraps in the back bathroom. We apparently have church mice but that leaves me with a dilemma. How does a mousetrap fit in with the interdependent web? Can we teach them to sing?

There is much work to do yet to make this place our own. It will take some time before we feel at home here in the same way we did at 1700 W. Warner. Each Sunday will bring us closer to this sense of ownership as we fill this sanctuary with music, words, laughter and tears, as we share meals and stories and care for one another. Here at last we can welcome all who want to join us.

Do you realize how unique we are? We stubbornly insist upon the freedom to search and find our own faith. Our only king in history, King Sigismund of Transylvania, issued a decree of toleration declaring that everyone should be able to worship according to his or her conscience without fear of persecution. This was back in the turbulent 16th century at a time when other religions were eager to stamp out dangerous heresy with torture and with fire. There are still those who would like to do that today, although at least in this country they use more subtle means. This is where I find the sacred **here** among us, in nature, in good deeds,

in caring people, in our long tradition, in all that, as our theologian Henry Nielson Wieman said, *work toward the creative good*.

Which was his definition of God, the creative force that moves us toward the good. A God I can believe in. This world could use some good, life affirming, joyful and liberating theology for a change. That is part of our mission to be a faith shaping, meaning making workshop for our members and to give our children and youth, our real future, a sound religious and inquiring foundation upon which to build their faith. Sometimes people ask me if we are a religion and my answer is yes, we are a religion in the best sense of binding and linking together, making sense and finding meaning in our lives. Ours is a far more radical faith than many realize. We believe that human goodness is possible. We believe each of us embody such possibilities. In your presence here I feel a sense of hope. Your commitment tells me that there is hope. You tell me that there is still a place for that inclusive circle that Markham spoke about: *They drew a circle and threw me out, a heretic, a rebel, a thing to flout, but love and I had the grace to win, we drew a circle and took them in.*

Yes, there is much to do. Last night we reached out to the larger community with our Martin Luther King celebration. We will do more this is only the beginning. But we need a little time to rest, catch our breath and wait for our souls to arrive here. We still

need to finish paying for this building. But for now let us rejoice and rest in the moment.

We will thank each and every one of you whose contributions and efforts are valued, noticed and appreciated. You helped us seize the moment and we grew a miracle. It took guts, it took hard work, it took sleepless nights, small and large efforts but most of all it took faith. There will be many opportunities later to thank everyone who took part in this: movers, shakers, dreamers and generous givers. But for today let us just enjoy. We are here now. And we are at home.

We create a sacred space by daily acts of love and how we treat each other. We can become family whether we are related or not. Loyalty is part of it. As is the need to help each other survive in a sometimes hostile world. A congregation can be like a family in the broadest sense. In this congregation we strive to honor and value our very real differences while remaining united in a common purpose. Deeply rooted in human nature is the desire to be at the heart of the real, at the center of the world. Every religion has sacred centers. A sacred center is a place where one may find awe, wonder, mystery or majesty. Simultaneously it can be a place of comfort, solace and quiet intimacy. This is our sacred center. May it be blessed for many, many generations to come!

Amen

