

**Remember to Evolve**  
**A Sermon by Rev. Frieda Gillespie**  
**September 9, 2007**

Well by now you either think I'm totally crazy asking you to change seats in the middle of a service or maybe you are curious about it. I promise that won't be a standard part of my services. But I'd like you to reflect on what that felt like for you to move from the seat you'd chosen to another place.

I'm curious to know how many of you sit in the same place in the sanctuary each Sunday? Will you raise your hands if you do? How many of you sit in different places but with the same people each week? How many of you sit in different seats and sit next to different people each week? None of these is right or wrong of course. That's not the point. The question I'm interested in is how do you feel about change? Do you embrace it or avoid it? I invite you to reflect on this and if some of you would like to share how it felt please do so right now.

I wonder if some of you didn't move to a new seat even though you were physically able to. Would you raise your hand if that was the case? Why didn't you?

I think it's very important to understand and recognize that in our churches you do not have to do what the minister asks you to do, nor do you have to agree with what I say. The right to think and act according to your own conscience is central to our faith. I will get back to this subject of change shortly, but I'd like to tell you a little about myself since this is my first Sunday with you.

I am a person with two homes. I live in Framingham, MA for part of each month. That is my permanent home where I live with my partner Jennifer, her three children Julia who is 7 and is a wonderful artist already, Tim who is 12 and aspires to be a politician and Ben who is 16, has autism, and is learning how to drive! I also live with Jennifer's two large dogs, four cats, a guinea pig and two rats. My 16 year old daughter, Tealeesha, lives in an excellent residential school in MA because of her special needs. I adopted Tealeesha as a single mother when she was 9 from the Foster Care System in Texas. She and I talk nearly every day by phone and I see her each week I am home.

These are all of the reasons I don't just move here for the time I'll be with you. But I do have an apartment here and will be here for 17 days each month which includes three Sundays in a row. With a few exceptions, I'll be preaching on those Sundays. When I'm home in Framingham, I'll be writing sermons and taking your calls and emails.

I was ordained as a UU minister just a year ago in June after five years of seminary. Before entering seminary I worked in the computer industry for many years as a specialist in mainframe outsourcing. I did project management and consulting work and was pretty successful at it. I never was really satisfied though feeling as though the work I did didn't really use my best abilities and it was always a struggle. To explain a bit about how I became a minister I have tell you that I was raised as a Unitarian Universalist, although as a child I would have said that I was forced to go there every Sunday.

During my twenties and thirties I belonged to a spiritual group based on ideas of the 17<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Benedict Spinoza and also based on the idea of a work group that Gurdjieff used. Don't worry if those names mean nothing to you. I'm happy to steer you to some readings if you're interested. I was un-churched in any traditional sense during those twenty + years. Then, in my early forties I began to take a serious turn in my life. Up until that time, I had relied on a spiritual teacher to guide my thinking and life. There was a lot to be said for that discipline and concentrated work, but ultimately it was stifling to me. Taking what I had learned as resources to use as I wished, I began to rely solely on my own understanding and experiences to guide my spiritual life. To do this involved leaving behind people that I had spent the better part of my adulthood with and that was not easy at all. By the time I was 43, I had moved to Dallas TX, quite far from my home base in Los Angeles, CA. Ostensibly, I moved there to live with a man I was in love with, but ultimately I understand that move as a need to start my life again away from old associations. The relationship had ended, I was alone in this very strange city and culture. It occurred to me that I might meet some interesting people at a UU church and so I looked one up and visited there. It was quite an experience hearing the doxology sung that I had sung so many times as a child and listening to ideas and values that I knew that I held quite deeply. I had no idea how much this faith had been a part of my soul all of those years I was away. So it felt like a homecoming.

It wasn't long before I realized that the work of a minister: preaching, teaching, counseling, writing, studying are all strengths of mine and things I loved to do. That's when I realized that I had found my calling and my work. As part of the preparation for ministry, I did an internship for a year traveling from Dallas to Framingham, MA for that purpose. There I fell in love with ministry, with New England and with a woman named Jennifer. The latter development was a surprise to both of us, she after 22 years of marriage and me after only having relationships with men. We have suddenly entered the GLBT world and all of the concerns that go with it in our culture. So, now here I am. This is my second position since my ordination. I spent last year as Interim Minister in Greenville, NC. By the way, my father was from Birmingham, Alabama, and my mother from Ft. Worth, TX, and I lived in TX for 7 years, so I am not unfamiliar with the ways of the south even though I was raised in Southern California. As you may have heard or read in my newsletter article, my parents both died in the past year, my mother, just before I started my position in Greenville and my father this past July. And so I come here with a very immediate and real sense of the impact loss and change can have on us.

It's been a whirlwind process to get settled and begin my ministry here. I could not have done it nearly as quickly without the generous help of many of you in furnishing my apartment and helping me find my way around. And I thank you deeply. I learned very quickly that you are a warm and welcoming congregation. I have also learned in the short time I've been here that you are a very active, energetic congregation and that is wonderful.

As many of you know from having moved to new places it is very uncomfortable at first to be away from what feels like home. And it feels uncomfortable even if you've come to a really nice place. It takes awhile to get past the discomfort of change to find the joy. I hope you'll bear with me as I get oriented here. I really look forward to getting to know many if not all of you this year. The more we can do to make that happen the better, so don't hold back if you'd like to meet to talk. I love to

walk or hike and am always up getting together for a meal when I'm here. Or just drop by my office during the week or call.

I will be wearing two hats this year. As your minister I will be doing all of the things your previous minister, Greg Ward, did for you. In addition, I will also be a consultant to the leadership of this congregation in the process of preparing to call a new settled minister about two years from now. I'll be looking at your processes and offering suggestions for improvements. And I'm sure I will be learning a lot from you as well.

This past Labor Day weekend, Jennifer and I took her kids car camping in the beautiful Berkshire Mountains in NW Massachusetts, at a State Park near the Vermont border. Ben her oldest was very nervous about going with us. He hadn't camped before and was afraid he'd be homesick. This is pretty typical for an autistic person who thrives on consistent structure. We gave him lots of assurance and Jennifer didn't give him the option of staying home, so he reluctantly agreed to try and have fun. Well he did have fun and was only a little homesick he said. He was very glad he went. We are all similar to Ben in some areas of our life. It's only when we are unsettled by either doing something outside our comfort zone or when changes occur unexpectedly that we find out both how driven we are by habit and our attachments, and how much more there is to enjoy in life. Emerson said, "Everyone wants to be settled, but only insofar as they are unsettled are they worth anything." The worthiness he speaks about is undoubtedly the way in which we are forced to think and feel when we are unsettled.

The loss of a long-time minister is such an unsettling change in the life of this congregation. It's a window of opportunity to take a fresh look at this congregation as a system; possibly seeing it with new eyes.

Although we embrace diversity in our faith, the truth is that it can be disturbing. I will not be doing things the way Greg did them, nor will another settled minister. Ministry is so much about being oneself, that it is impossible to duplicate a ministry. And you do not do things the way I've seen other churches do them. So, I will need to discern whether my suggestions or ways of doing things are helpful to you or are meant to keep me safely in my comfort zone. We will both have work to do this year. So we have entered a period of being unsettled, and how we respond to that will determine how useful this time will be for us. If we can be at least as open as Ben was about camping, we might really enjoy this year.

Sometimes the best experiences though start out painfully as a challenge to our inner status quo. So, even if you find yourself not enjoying changes that occur this year, you have the opportunity to look at and talk about how you're feeling so that at the end of our time together, you will have a deeper understanding of what you want from your religious community and why you want it.

There are some intentional processes that the UUA recommends for Interim work:

The first is re-examining the history of this church both from an institutional and from a relational point of view; celebrating the accomplishments and working to heal any unresolved conflicts. Having someone new to tell and reflect with about events that were upsetting can bring new insight to old problems.

Another is to define more clearly who you are as a congregation. Yes, you know that you are Unitarian Universalist, but what does *this* UU congregation exist for and stand for? What experiences, what work, what programs, and what atmosphere are you wanting to continue or create here? What makes you want to come back here week after week and care about one another? Who else do you care about in the greater community? Who do you want to invite here and serve? This is an opportunity to reexamine these questions and perhaps formulate a more comprehensive answer.

The approach of Fall brings us the sense of new beginnings, energy to begin new projects. This energy breaks through the inertia and hopelessness of any ruts or seemingly unsolvable problems. It is a season of transition in a year of transition. It is the most powerful time to ask and answer these questions: What do you all hope for? What do you want for this church? For your own spiritual growth? I invite and challenge you to give this some thought in the coming weeks. I look forward to our time together with eagerness, anticipation, a little fear, and strong intentions for this congregation to build a foundation for the good work to come.

I was given a birthday present this summer by my partner Jennifer that I want to share with you. I'm going to put it up in my office. It is a very fun collage of found objects (aka trash) made into the shape of a butterfly on a wooden heart. It says "Remember to Evolve" along the top. This was created by artist Shari Elf who lives in Yucca Valley, a desert community in California. I'm showing this to you because I think we need some symbolic tools for this interim year and I think there are some great ones here.

For example, here is a small round packet of dental floss. That is essential to get into those hidden areas where undigested experiences tend to fester and cause us pain. We can use the floss to intentionally bring these things out into the light of day.

Here is a tiny coat hanger. What a great symbol of commitment to hanging in there long enough to resolve or create something.

Ok, and here are two tiny plastic pigs. Pigs are very intelligent and we are definitely going to need our intelligence.

Here is a button with the United Farm Workers logo on it. That will remind us of how very wealthy we are and that every luxury we enjoy including having unlimited access to fresh food in our stores comes to us because of the backbreaking labor of someone less fortunate than us. This will keep our concerns in perspective, yes?

There is lots of glitter on this butterfly, shiny and bright, and it can remind us that it is ok to sparkle and let your light shine. It's not just the ugly stuff that tends to get hidden. We have so much to give each other if we have the courage.

There are pieces of a broken mirror too. This is my favorite tool. Because when you look into these fragments you see multiple images of yourself. This reminds us that there are many sides and perspectives even within us, and also within the church, within the community, within our country

and the world—we are not yet whole, but are always needing the work of integration and communication on all of these levels.

There is much more and you may find the tools you're looking for here, so take a peek sometime.

Someone said that change is what is happening around us and to us all the time. Transition is what we do intentionally to process that change and make it meaningful to us. Change is scary. It is uncomfortable and it provides a window of opportunity to define ourselves as more than we thought before. This is the inner work of transition. What makes this possible is trust. You trusted enough to get up and move your seat when I asked you to. Or, you trusted enough to stay where you were without fear of reprisals. That is a relatively easy kind of trust to have. Deeper trust has to be developed over time as we get to know each other and find our common ground.

I want to close with a brief reflection by a colleague, Rev. Fran Dew about trust.

If I could give one gift to this congregation it would be trust, I would wrap trust of oneself in a very, very small box and put it inside of a very small box marked trust in the lay leadership and I would put that inside of a small box marked trust of the minister, and I would put that inside of a box marked trust in your congregational past and I would put that inside of a large box marked trust in your future and I would put that in a very large box marked trust in our liberal religious heritage and I would put that in a very, very large box marked trust in something larger than all of us, something we call by many different names, And one Sunday morning we would have the children unwrap all these packages and pass the trust around so we could all partake.

May it be so.