

Jim Magaw



"Jim Magaw was recruited to Meadville Lombard with a rare full tuition Scholarship for Excellence. Time and time again, that decision has been affirmed, but no more so than when I visited his internship church and saw firsthand how he ministered to the Unitarian Universalists in that thriving congregation. He pastored to them with care and love, preached to them with wisdom and inspiration. Jim is one of our bright lights."

Lee Barker, President and Professor of Ministry, Meadville Lombard Theological School.

"Jim Magaw is a deep thinker, a wizard preacher, a sensitive pastor. He's sophisticated about fundraising and has significant administrative experience. And, oh, the music he makes and the songs he sings. Jim's ministry will be a gift to some lucky congregation and, indeed, to Unitarian Universalism. My own congregation is in transition and will be in search for a new minister in 2015. I hope we can find someone with the skills and savvy and smarts of Jim Magaw. I'm a solid fan!"



Denny Davidoff, former Moderator of the Unitarian Universalist Association



"Jim Magaw brings the 'whole package' as a minister: He is a gifted preacher, teacher, storyteller and musician. He is thoughtful and reflective, and engages with people at a deep caring level with the utmost integrity. The congregation that calls him will be fortunate indeed."

Dan Grandstaff, member and past board chair of the Eno River UU Fellowship, Durham, N.C.

"Jim Magaw shared so much of himself during his ministry here. He quickly developed a large presence within our congregation and was widely viewed as a vital staff minister whom many congregants came to depend upon. Jim accomplished much, including: his exceptional worship services and sermons; his leadership in small group formation and facilitation; and his steady, calming pastoral care, dispensed generously and naturally. He educated, inspired, entertained, comforted, and, at times, transformed us."



Bill Mahony, chair of intern ministry committee and member, Eno River UU Fellowship, Durham, N.C.



"Jim Magaw is a uniquely gifted theologian, a person who is able to convey profound truths with clarity and grace. Jim is a deep thinker with an open heart, able to express with grace and beauty our common yearning for collective comfort in the face of suffering, and our shared delight in the play and growth that can emerge in response to abundance."

Sharon Welch, Provost and Professor of Religion and Society, Meadville Lombard

About Me and My Call to Ministry



Richard Rohr said “We do not think ourselves into a new way of living as much as we live ourselves into new ways of thinking.” Similarly, my path of ministerial formation has been one of living my way into ministry, rather than thinking my way in. To be sure, a great deal of thinking has gone into my preparation and training, but it has been the actual, lived experience of ministry that has made me a minister.

A couple of years ago, I had a moment of realization that I had, in fact, become a minister. It happened while I was offering a prayer during a worship service at my internship congregation. I looked out at these people—people with whom I had worked in committee meetings, in small groups, in religious education classes, in pastoral conversations, in acts of prophetic witness—and I realized that I loved them.

My sense of having become a minister was not handed down from on high. It wasn't as if I'd won some kind of wrestling match and, as a result, had been awarded ministerial authority or ministerial identity. It was all about the fact that I had worked with these people in challenging times and in moments of great joy, and I had come to love them.

And *of course* it's about love. My journey has been about love from day one. Ministry is my answer to the question posed by Mary Oliver in her poem “Spring”: “There is only one question: how to love this world.”

Ministry is how I have chosen to love this world. Inviting others to share this ministry is how I hope to help others answer this question for themselves.

Biographical Information

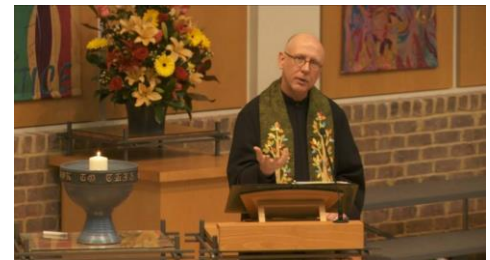
I grew up in several small towns in Ohio during the 1960s and 1970s. As a United Methodist preacher's kid, I felt lifted up and surrounded by a loving community that did its earnest best to live up to the values of mutuality expressed in one of my favorite hymns, “Blest Be the Tie that Binds”: “We share our mutual woes, our mutual burdens bear/And often for each other flows the sympathizing tear.”

All of the members of my immediate family are in helping professions of one kind or another: my mother as a school teacher, my father as a minister and my sister as executive director of a non-profit agency. I have learned valuable lessons from their examples.

I love music and poetry. I have sung and played various stringed instruments since I was about 12 years old, and I started writing poetry at age 7. Even when things have been insanely busy for me (maybe *especially* when things have been insanely busy), I have found some time to make music and to engage with poetry.

Perhaps the most transformational aspect of my life has been my experience becoming a parent. Since my daughter's birth eight years ago, I have been a more grateful and awe-struck person than I imagined I could be. Parenthood for me has acted as a catalyst for further reflection and action on the things that I value most.

I aspire to be Unitarian Universalist minister serving in a parish setting. At this moment, I cannot imagine anything I would rather do. My call to ministry has brought me many gifts—new friends, new wisdom, new challenges and, perhaps most especially, a renewed sense of focus and gratitude. Even the difficult aspects of ministry seem like gifts to me now.



Sermons



One of my greatest joys is preaching and leading worship. In addition to leading regular Sunday morning services at a number of congregations, I have designed and worked closely with other professionals and lay people to lead services for evening vespers, a Solstice celebrations and small group ministry worship. My sermons tend to include stories from various cultural and religious traditions, as well as from my own personal experience. Music and poetry also frequently find their way into my sermons. Below (and attached in *Appendix A*) are links to several of my recent sermons:

Magic from Before the Dawn of Time: [Video](#) and [text](#)

What is our most sacred responsibility? What does it mean that others can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves? [This is the sermon that Meadville Lombard faculty cited when I was awarded the Charles Billings Prize in Preaching at commencement on May 19, 2013.]

Transient and Permanent: [Audio](#) and [text](#)

In his famous 1841 sermon, “The Transient and the Permanent,” Unitarian minister Theodore Parker described what he saw as a dichotomy between the ever-changing elements within religion and those elements that are unchanging throughout time. But is it not the case that everything in life is impermanent? How can religion—and our liberal religious tradition in particular—provide a useful framework for human understanding and human agency in a world where the only constant is change?

How to Love this World: [Audio](#) and [text](#)

When faced with great challenges, we can sometimes get caught up in questions that have to do with how to fix our world. Or how to make the world agree with our views. These questions tend to be less helpful than the central question of how do we *love* this world. Starting from a place of love--a love grounded in what UU theologian James Luther Adams called the covenant of being--is vitally important. This sermon explores how to keep this question front and center in all that we do.

Other Writing

I write about the topic of religious transformation at www.religoustransformation.blogspot.com.

Below (and attached in *Appendix B*) are links to several examples of poems, prayers and essays that I have written in recent years:

[A Hermeneutic of Trees](#)

A poem written after taking a long walk by Lake Michigan in January in Chicago while taking an intensive class in Liberal Theology.

[A Prayer for May](#)

Written for a worship service at my internship congregation.

Honors and Awards



- **Charles Billings Prize in Preaching**, an award given to one graduating student each year for outstanding achievement in preaching.
- **Hardy and Betty Sanders Scholarship for Excellence in Ministry**, a full-tuition scholarship awarded to one student every three years.
- **Clayton Bowen Prize in New Testament Studies**, an annual award given for excellence in the study of Christian scripture.

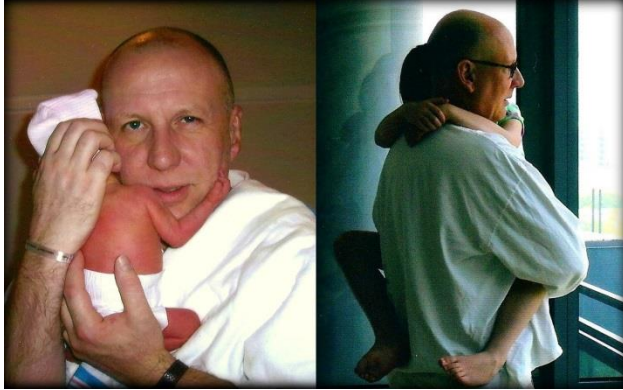
Special Skills and Interests

- **Pastoral counseling:** I have worked with people in all kinds of crises, both as a crisis line counselor and in person in congregational settings, and in hospitals, homes and nursing facilities. I believe that good ministry begins with good pastoral care.
- **Small group ministry:** I designed, organized and implemented a new family-friendly small group ministry program at my internship congregation that included worship and session plans that I wrote specifically for this program.
- **Ministry with children and youth:** I have worked with children and youth in religious education classes, worship services and other settings. The small group ministry program I designed included stories and songs that would appeal to children and youth as well as adults. During my ministerial internship, I worked closely with the Coming of Age Group.
- **Multicultural issues:** I have developed and taught curricula, including a multicultural film and discussion series, a course titled "Building Multicultural Community," and book discussion series on *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color Blindness* and *The Arc of the Universe Is Long: Unitarian Universalists, Anti-Racism, and the Journey from Calgary*.
- **Fundraising:** I have 20 years of professional experience in development and fundraising for higher education. I have written and edited fundraising proposals, annual stewardship reports, speeches for deans and chancellors, case statements and feature articles for alumni magazines and departmental websites.
- **Music:** I sing and play guitar, bass guitar and banjo, among other instruments. I write and arrange songs and have performed at festivals and coffeehouses, both solo and as a member of various ensembles. My first connection with Unitarian Universalism was as a musician and choir member, and music is still an important aspect of my spiritual practice and identity. Music was also a part of my ministry when I worked as an intern chaplain at UNC Hospitals.

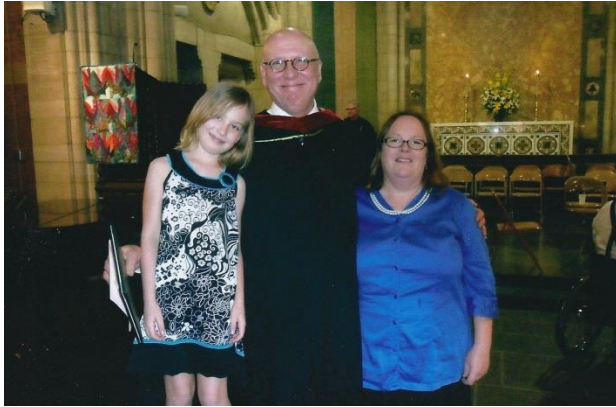


Personal Information

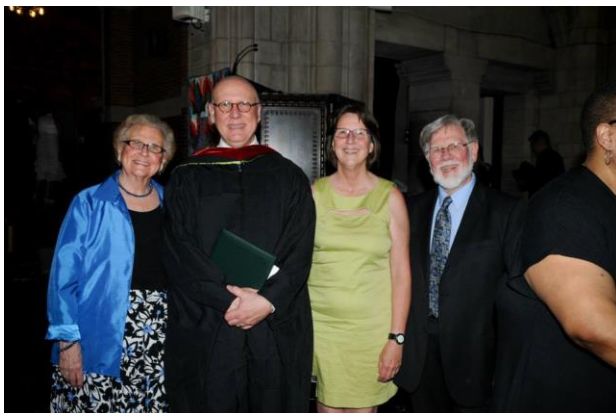
Age 52; in excellent health; married; one child (age 9).



With daughter Ella, age 1 day and age 8 ½.



With daughter Ella and wife Marta.



With mother, sister and father.

JIM MAGAW

OBJECTIVE

To gain a position as a settled Unitarian Universalist minister.

WORK EXPERIENCE

2010-2013 Eno River UU Fellowship Durham, NC

Ministerial Intern

- Led worship.
- Developed and taught religious education programs.
- Developed and led new small group ministry program.
- Provided pastoral care.
- Worked with youth in coming of age program.

2002-present Arts & Sciences Foundation Chapel Hill, NC

Public Communications Specialist

- Write fundraising proposals for major (\$50K+) gifts.
- Write stewardship reports for donors.
- Write speeches for dean, chancellor and others.
- Write feature articles for Web site and alumni magazine.

1995–2002 Kenan-Flagler Business School Chapel Hill, NC

Information and Communications Specialist

- Wrote fundraising proposals.
- Wrote stewardship proposals.
- Planned and organized special events.

1983–1995 Self Employed Chapel Hill, NC

Freelance Musician (vocals, guitar, bass guitar, banjo)

- Performed in clubs, coffeehouses and festivals.
- Played everything from bluegrass to punk rock.

CHURCH VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

2001-2010 Community Church of Chapel Hill UU Chapel Hill, NC

- Chair, Committee on Ministry (2008-2010).
- Chair, Music Committee (2004-2007).
- Member, Stewardship Committee (2007-2010).
- Member, Choir (2001-2010), and musician.
- Featured speaker at worship services.
- Helped establish church endowment fund (2008).

COMMUNITY VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

- Receptionist and recovery group member, IFC Community House (2010-2011), Chapel Hill, NC
- Program Producer, WCOM, community radio (2005-2007).
- Crisis Counselor, Helpline of Chapel Hill (1990-1995).
- Musician and speaker for peace and justice events (2001-present).

EDUCATION

- | | | |
|-----------|---|-----------------|
| 2010-2013 | Meadville Lombard Theological School | Chicago, IL |
| ▪ | M.Div., awarded May 19, 2013. | |
| 2011 | University of North Carolina Hospitals | Chapel Hill, NC |
| ▪ | Clinical Pastoral Education. | |
| ▪ | Completed 10-week program and earned certificate. | |
| 1986-1989 | University of North Carolina | Chapel Hill, NC |
| ▪ | B.A., English. | |
| ▪ | Earned Dean's List honors. | |

HONORS AND AWARDS

- Charles Billings Prize in Preaching, May 2013.
- Clayton Bowen Prize in New Testament Studies, May 2012.
- Hardy and Betty Sanders Scholarship for Excellence in Ministry, 2010-2013.

APPENDIX A: SERMONS

Magic from Before the Dawn of Time

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?”

“Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you.

“We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.” (Marianne Williamson)

When I was in first grade, our class was doing an art project that involved paint and string. We dipped the string in paint and then ran it through two pieces of paper that were pressed together. The process was repeated several times with different colors. And then, when what emerged on these pieces of paper were some very beautiful images. There were shapes and colors that seemed to be moving on the page. It was one of those first-grade art projects that are hugely popular because it's very messy and very satisfying to produce something that goes beyond what you imagine the finished product might be.

But I was having problems with this project. I was a very quiet, very careful, very self-conscious seven-year-old, who was afraid of doing something wrong. And, in order to do this kind of art successfully, you need to be able to throw caution to the wind to some extent. But, instead of digging into the project with natural childlike abandon, I was being overly-cautious. I was pulling the string through the pieces of paper very carefully, trying to control the images that were being created. And as a result, my artwork looked boring and, in my opinion, terrible.

I looked at the other children's beautiful, vibrant, shimmering works of art, and I looked at my own meager, dull, rather pitiful-looking paintings, and I began to cry. And not just to cry but to sob.

And this is where my first-grade teacher, Mrs. Voelm, intervened. She stepped over to me and said, “It looks like you're having a hard time. Would you like to try again later with me?” And I said yes. I ended up staying after class, and Mrs. Voelm showed me the trick of working with a certain amount of artistic abandon. And before long, I had a pretty impressive array of paintings that were every bit as beautiful as the other children's.

The next morning, I walked into the classroom to find one of the bulletin boards filled with my artwork and no one else's. All of the beautiful paintings that I'd made the day before were hanging there. And I was so happy, just completely delighted and deeply moved. It's a feeling that's stuck with me for more than 40 years now.

The lesson I learned from that experience was not just about making art, of course. For me it was a glimpse of a deep spiritual truth: that we are utterly dependent upon one another to find our truest selves and to find and do the work that we are called to do.

It was around this same time, in first and second grade, that I began reading C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*. What an amazing world of imagination and adventure! I loved those books. I'd still rank “*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*” among my top ten books, I think.

In that particular book, Aslan the lion—the great Christ-like figure of Narnia—is laid low, killed by the White Witch who has held the land of Narnia under her spell of ceaseless winter for many years. But he comes to life again.

In the book, the children as puzzled about how Aslan, who had sacrificed his own life for that of the boy Edmund, could have come back from the dead. Aslan says to them:

“. . . though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation.”

When he was asked about the magic from before the dawn of time C.S. Lewis said this: “It [is] the rule of the universe that others can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves and one can paddle every canoe except one’s own. That is why Christ’s suffering for us is not a mere theological dodge but the supreme case of the law that governs the whole world: and when they mocked him by saying, ‘He saved others, himself he cannot save,’ they were really uttering, little as they know it, the ultimate law of the spiritual world.”

The way I think of this deeper magic is that there are certain teachers, partners, mentors, friends who draw the magic out from us and others. They are magicians’ helpers because they open our eyes to what we are capable of doing ourselves. We are the makers of magic--which is, in fact, nothing supernatural but the most natural thing in the world. We are here to remind one another of our God-given abilities that have long lain dormant or forgotten.

John O’Donohue, in his wonderful book *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*, expresses the same idea this way: “A friend is a loved one who awakens your life in order to free the wild possibilities within you.”

What I began to learn those many years ago—and have had to continue to learn and re-learn—is that only when we have freed each other from what’s dragging us down, can we fly. By the age of 7, for whatever reason, I was already of afraid of being the real me, the creative me, the unleashed, bright shining beautiful me. Mrs. Voelm helped free me from those fears.

And she showed me what I believe is the essence of faith formation and spiritual growth: reaching out, pulling down (barriers), opening up (ourselves and others).

The first step, reaching out, involves reaching out in love—not reaching out, in other words, to correct someone or to bend them toward our will, but rather to take a risk and reach out when you perceive a need, even if you don’t yet know what to do about it. It’s a very Christian concept, although it’s found in other traditions as well, but in Christian teachings we learn that because Jesus reached out to us and especially those who were in great need, we are to do the same. It’s the heart of the Christian imperative: reaching out in love.

The second part of this process, pulling down barriers, also requires a bit of risk because we have to find ways of engaging with others that are playful and joyful at the same time that they are transformative. You don’t remove a barrier of your own, or someone else’s, by starting from a position of “This is bad. We need to stop this. Now.” Instead, we need to find some play in the areas around the barrier, and work with others to loosen things up. And once we’ve found that looseness, the barrier itself can sometimes just seem to dissolve.

And the third part of this process, opening up and letting the light shine out, is the fun part. Because it’s at this stage that you determine—again in the spirit of love and playfulness and joy—how and where to focus the light that has begun to emerge once the barriers have been removed—focusing the light, for example, on a classroom bulletin board.

And what was it that I saw when I looked at my artwork displayed on that bulletin board all those years ago? I saw me. Not some grown-up’s version of me, not my own little perfectionistic version of me, not some watered down, processed and carefully edited me, but me.

Mrs. Voelm was giving me a religious education. She was a public school teacher, but she was giving me an experience of education that was more religious than almost anything I received in many years of Sunday school.

In the great Hindu epic poem, the Ramayana, there is a story of Hanuman, sometimes known as the Monkey-god. Hanuman is best known as the devoted servant and frequent rescuer of Rama and Sita, the protagonists of the work.

Because he had been wronged as an infant, Hanuman's parents petitioned the gods to give him some special favors. And the gods obliged:

- The sun god gave Hanuman unsurpassed knowledge of the holy scriptures.
- The gods of fire and water blessed him such that he could never be killed by those elements.
- The god of death gave Hanuman the ability to choose the time of his own dying.
- The wind god gave him the power to change physical forms and to move at incredible speed.
- And Brahma, the god of gods, gave Hanuman physical strength beyond measure.

After receiving the blessings of these various deities, making him virtually invincible, the young Hanuman became something of a nuisance. He was playfully causing trouble everywhere he went. He would tease the meditating sages in by zipping in like the wind and hiding their personal belongings. He would pull their beards and break their sacred objects and then disappear.

This went on for some time until, at last, the gods got fed up and decided that something had to be done about the adolescent Hanuman. So they placed a curse on him.

And the curse was this: that Hanuman could remember his divine abilities only when someone else reminded him that he possessed these great powers. Without this prompting, he would not be able to remember his invincibility and would be, therefore, harmless.

So, throughout the Ramayana, Hanuman performs amazing feats in order to serve Rama and Sita. He leaps across oceans, he scoops up whole mountains in his hands.

But he can do these great and wonderful things only when reminded of his abilities by his friend and companion Jambavan the bear.

What I want us to remember is that we are all the bearers of each other's forgotten power, whether we choose to see ourselves in that way or not. And we must be committed to opening up each other. Because only those who have been opened in this way are able to engage themselves and others in the work of transformation.

So this is my charge to you: Remind the people around you of the deep magic they possess. Reach out in love whenever and however you can, pull down the barriers to learning and understanding (both external and internal), and help open others and ourselves to what's already within us.

There are bulletin boards all around us that are waiting to be covered with light. I pray that we might all be one another's liberators in this vital work that allows everyone's light to shine.

May it be so! Amen!

Transient and Permanent

In Blackwater Woods (Mary Oliver)

Look, the trees
are turning
their own bodies
into pillars

of light,
are giving off the rich
fragrance of cinnamon
and fulfillment,

the long tapers
of cattails
are bursting and floating away over
the blue shoulders

of the ponds,
and every pond,
no matter what its
name is, is

nameless now.
Every year
everything
I have ever learned

in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss
whose other side
is salvation,
whose meaning
none of us will ever know.
To live in this world

you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.

Theodore Parker is one of the most famous figures in Unitarian history. Among other things, he's the person who came up with the phrase, "the arc of the moral universe," which was later picked up and adapted by Martin Luther King. One of Parker's most famous sermons was titled "The Transient and the Permanent"—which I borrowed as the title for my sermon this morning. Parker argued in "The Transient and the Permanent" that specific rituals and customs were transient, passing things.

Parker wrote that [quote] "religious forms may be useful and beautiful [but] an undue place has often been assigned to forms and doctrines, while too little stress has been laid on the divine life of the soul, love to God, and love to man." For Parker, those forms and doctrines were the transient things of religion while love for self and for others and for that which is beyond self and others was what was permanent.

In our own day and in our own culture, we have become obsessed, not so much with specific forms and doctrines, but with an illusion of permanence. We like to think that we will never die. We spend billions of dollars each year trying not to age, or at least appearing not to age. We create institutions and buildings with the assumption that, if we will build them as close to perfectly as we can, then they will weather the storm of time.

What we're missing is the fact that the only way to create something that is lasting is by fully embracing impermanence itself. Embracing impermanence may seem like a contradiction in terms, but that's what Mary Oliver was asking us to do, isn't it?

"to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it; and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go."

In the Buddhist tradition, there is one story of a teacher who had been practicing meditation for many years. All who surrounded him thought of him as the most realized, enlightened person they had ever known.

One day, his son unexpectedly died. When the man discovered this news, he began to sob. He sobbed and sobbed uncontrollably for several hours. People around him watched, dumbfounded. When his crying had finally subsided, one of his closest students asked him a simple question.

"Master," he said, "I don't understand why after all those years of meditation, you could still be so upset about the death of your son. Isn't the point of your training to be less attached to things?"

The master picked up a gorgeous, delicate glass that sat on the table beside him. He said, "I love this glass. I drink water from it, and sometimes I just look at it because of the way the sun's rays shine straight through it. And one day this glass will be gone. It might break, or it might just suffer the wear and tear of time." The student nodded, still confused.

The master put down the glass and smiled. He continued, "I love this glass so much because I know it is already broken. When we see that all of life is touched by impermanence, it does not cause us to become hardened and disinterested. It causes us to love things more."

The challenge, of course, is loving something completely while also being willing to let it go. And this is where religious community can help. But how do we build lasting community in a way that embraces and engages that which is transient?

The Grand Shrine in Ise, Japan, provides an interesting example. The Ise Grand Shrine is the largest and most revered of all the Shinto shrines in Japan. It is the destination for many thousands of people who make pilgrimages there each year. It is an immense and complex and ornate structure, or complex of structures, built with exquisite and painstaking workmanship.

Looking at the Grand Shrine in Ise, you might think, here is something permanent, something lasting, something that has remained exactly as it is for hundreds of years.

So it is surprising to learn that the shrine is completely torn down and rebuilt every 20 years. Every 20 years, since it was originally built in the seventh century — so for more than 1300 years now — the whole structure is taken apart and re-built from scratch at an adjacent site.

New timbers for the re-built shrine are harvested from a forest that is replanted, and the old timbers are sent to other Shinto shrines throughout Japan — especially those that have been damaged by earthquakes or hurricanes.

The new shrine is built in exactly the same way that it has been since the 7th century. No bolts or screws are used. Every part of the shrine is fashioned by hand and put into place in just the same way that it has been for more than a millennium, passed down from generation to generation.

In this way, impermanence is embraced not just in the abstract, but in a very real and very physical way. And it is through this loving embrace of impermanence that something truly lasting has been created, and is re-created over and over again.

This year, 2013, happens to be one of the re-building years. If you were to visit Ise later this summer, you would be able to witness the re-dedication of the new shrine.

Through this amazing and ingenious process, something is lost, but something greater is preserved.

What is lost is the actual physical structure. What is preserved is hard to describe. It's not just a tradition or ritual. It is the physical religious embodiment of letting go. It's the creation of a container that holds both the transient and the permanent.

When I first hear about the re-building of the Grand Shrine at Ise, I wondered what is it that we have as Unitarian Universalists that might accomplish something similar. What do we do to embrace letting go in a way that passes along to future generations a container for transience and permanence?

While we don't necessarily have a corresponding physical process, we do have covenant. Covenant for us is the container that holds our highest aspirations, our deepest loyalties, our greatest love, our most profound connection.

In our tradition, it is covenant that moves us from separateness to connectedness. And it is absolutely vital that this covenant be re-built and renewed again and again and again.

Our promises to one another will surely be broken, not just every 20 years, but sometimes every 20 minutes. Our faithfulness and our loyalties will be tested. But, through our covenant, our community and our world can be brought back together and made whole.

I know it might sometimes seem like a waste of time in our religious education classes or our small groups to create covenants every time we come together. But I would like us to remember that this is how our shrine is re-built. I urge you not to take this process for granted, but to use it as an opportunity to re-examine what is of ultimate value and to pass it along.

For it is in the living out of our covenant that we re-build our shrine. Theodore Parker wrote:
Be ours a religion which, like sunshine, goes everywhere;
its temple, all space;
its shrine, the good heart;
its creed, all truth;
its ritual, works of love;
its profession of faith, divine living.

My friends, we must remember that our task is to re-build a living shrine in all that we do in religious community:

Every time we renew our covenant to one another,
Every time we bring a meal to someone in need,
Every time celebrate life and death and love and loss,
Every time we stand for our values,
Every time we take up the cause of those who are oppressed,
Every time we march in Raleigh or Washington to fight for human dignity,
Every time we do any of these things, we are re-building a living shrine.

It is a shrine that we carry in our hearts. It is the gift that has been passed on to us by those who came before us. It is the gift that we must pass on those who come after us. It is the gift that is given by loving that which is fleeting.

There once was a Sufi elder who was respected for his piety and virtue. Whenever anyone asked him how he had become so holy, he always answered, "I know what is in the Qur'an."

Once he was discovered sick unto death but completely without complaint. "How did you manage to stay so calm in such a situation?" his disciples asked him. "I know what is in the Qur'an," the old Sufi said. Later, the old man was robbed of everything in his cell, even his bed roll and candles. "How did you keep your temper?" they asked him. "I know what is in the Qur'an," the old man answered them. One season no figs grew, and the old man almost starved to death. "How could you possibly have managed to survive?" the disciples asked in awe. "Because I know what is in the Qur'an," the old man said.

So when the old man died, they raced one another to his hut to find out for themselves what was in his Qur'an. "Well, what is it?" they shouted. The disciple holding the book looked up from it amazed and said with wonder in his voice, "What is in this Qur'an are notes on every page, two pressed flowers and a letter from a friend."

All those things in the old man's Qur'an were transient:

- The notes in the margin, while meaningful to the person who wrote them, will gradually fade.
- The letter from a friend represents the love we share during our lives with one another, something that sustains us but ultimately dissipates or disappears.
- The pressed flowers are beauty that has faded. Memories of beauty that challenges us to live lives that reflect the wonder and awe inherent in the natural world. Lives that reflect and embrace the transitory nature of all that is.

All of these are passing things, but they are the things that, properly considered, make us part of something larger and longer lasting. They are the things that compel us to act out of love for the greater good.

To live in this world you must be able to do three things:

to love what is mortal;

to hold it against your bones knowing

your own life depends on it;

and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.

May it be so. Amen!

How to Love This World

In November of 2001, I participated in a memorial service for one of the victims of the 9/11 attacks, a young man whose parents were members of my congregation.

Many of you will recall what things were like in November of 2001. For a number of weeks after 9/11, the nation had come together in a way that seems to happen mostly in the immediate wake of tragedy. At this time, not only had we come together as a nation, but the larger world community had come together in support of those who had lost loved ones.

But by November, this coming together had started coming apart. There were cries for retaliation, for revenge, for hunting down and stamping out all those who were responsible for this particular tragedy. There were cries from many that our nation had to respond to violence with violence, that there was no other way to preserve our position of power and influence in the world.

So it was within this larger context that this memorial service took place for a young man who had been a passenger one of the planes that crashed into the World Trade Center on September 11th.

The most memorable moment of this service — and perhaps one of the most memorable moments of my life — occurred when the young man's mother stood before the congregation and made a statement to this effect: She wished that she could meet and speak with the mothers of the deceased terrorists because, she said, they too know what it means to lose a child.

After witnessing this moment of astonishing grace, I began to think about what it is that we can choose to do in response to the devastating loss and great sadness that are an inherent part of our lives as human beings. Certainly, we must first grieve. But then what?

Our political leaders chose to respond to the sadness and loss and horror of 9/11 by creating more sadness and loss and horror, by going to war. There were other choices that might have been made — choices that had to do with reaching out, reaching up from this place of grieving to the rest of the world and saying, "We get it. We know what it means to live in fear, what it means to see lives torn apart by violence, what it means to lose a child. Let's begin the work of healing together."

Mary Oliver begins her poem "Spring" with these words:

Somewhere
a black bear
has just risen from sleep
and is staring

down the mountain.
All night
in the brisk and shallow restlessness
of early spring

I think of her,
her four black fists
flicking the gravel,
her tongue

like a red fire
touching the grass,
the cold water.
There is only one question:

how to love this world.

The kind of love Mary Oliver talks about is the same love that Jesus spoke of when he said to “love one another.” It’s the same love James Luther Adams spoke of in a sermon he delivered at Meadville Lombard — my seminary — in 1947, when he said, “This love is rooted in the awareness that there is an infinite creativity in being.” And it is in this love that my own call to ministry is rooted.

There is a tendency among many of us to begin from a place of solving problems. When something truly terrible occurs, we start looking immediately at cause and effect, to try to think and reason and talk our way out of the horrible problems of this world.

But this approach is doomed to failure because the question is not how to fix the world or how to make the world come round to our way of thinking. The question is how to love this world.

There are, of course, many ways to love this world.

I think, for example, of the Arhuacos, the native people of the Sierra Nevada Mountains of Colombia, who believe that Mother Earth is alive, that the mountains in which they live were dreamed and spun into being by the Sacred Mother. Their lives are lived in deep harmony with all that surrounds them. Priests and initiates go on pilgrimages that lead them from their homes to the sacred lakes and down to the seashore, now littered with hotels and brothels and casinos.

And all the while, they pray. They pray because they know that their prayers sustain the cosmos. They pray because they understand themselves to be the Elder Brothers who must invite the rest of us, the Younger Brothers, to wake up and become guardians of life rather than destroyers of life. They pray because that is how they love this world.

Although they have seen much of the environment around them destroyed or diminished as a result of the unchecked greed of the developed world, still they persist.

As the anthropologist Wade Davis has said, it is humbling to think that just two hours by air from Miami lives a group of people “staring out to sea from the heights of the Sierra Nevada, praying for our well-being and that of the entire earth.”

There are many ways to love this world.

I think, for example, of Dorothy Cotton, a member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, who marched in St. Augustine in the summer of 1964. She said:

“This was about the roughest city we’ve had — 45 straight nights of beatings and intimidation. We sang every night before we went out to get up our courage. The Klan was always waiting for us — these folk with the chains and the bricks and things — Hoss Manucy [who was a local Klan leader] and his gang. After we were attacked we’d come back bleeding, singing [Sing] ‘I love everybody, I love everybody, I love everybody in my heart.’”

At times the group would substitute the names of their persecutors for “everybody” in the song. For example, using the name of the local Klan leader, they would sing “I love Hoss Manucy in my heart.”

Dorothy Cotton said, “It was hard to sing ‘I love Hoss Manucy’ when he’d just beat us up . . . So we sing it, and the more we sing it, the more we grow in ability to love people who mistreat us . . .”

There are many ways to love this world.

Obviously, we’re not talking a fluffy, dreamy, idealized love here. “Love” in this context isn’t about puppies and rainbows and unicorns. Don’t get me wrong — I love puppies and rainbows. I’m not so sure about unicorns, but I try to have an open mind. But the kind of love I’m talking about moves in the world, it walks and marches, it sweats and bleeds, and prays and sings.

I quoted James Luther Adams earlier. Adams began questioning the liberal religious tradition when he was in Germany in the 1930s. He said:

“. . . in Nazi Germany I soon came to the question, ‘What is it in my preaching and my political action that would stop this?’ . . . It is a liberal attitude to say that we keep ourselves informed and read the best papers on these matters, and perhaps join a voluntary association now and then. But to be involved with other people so that it costs and so that one exposes the evils of society . . . requires something like conversion, something more than an attitude.”

So the love that Adams was preaching about in 1947, just two years after the end of World War II, was more than an attitude. In that same sermon, Adams said:

“We may have to struggle against what the enemy stands for; we may not feel a personal and individual affinity and passion for him or for her. Yet we are commanded for this person’s sake and for our own and for the sake of the destiny of creation, to love that which should unite us.”

The kind of love that we’re talking about here is a love that has teeth — which brings me back to Mary Oliver’s bear.

As you may recall, when we last saw her, she had just awakened and was making her way down the mountain – not unlike the Elder Brothers in the Sierra Nevada, not unlike the freedom marchers in St. Augustine, not unlike Adams in Nazi Germany. The bear continues her journey:

I think of her
rising
like a black and leafy ledge

to sharpen her claws against
the silence
of the trees.
Whatever else

my life is
with its poems
and its music
and its cities,

it is also this dazzling darkness
coming
down the mountain,
breathing and tasting;

all day I think of her –
her white teeth,
her wordlessness,
her perfect love.

To love the world is to open windows that allow us to commune on a profound level with those we perceive as the “others” — because they too know what it means to lose a child, because they too know what it means to feel absolutely alone in this world, because they too know what it means to yearn for something better for everyone.

As I remember that memorial service that took place in November of 2001, I think again of the grief-stricken, grace-filled mother who called us to open a space in our hearts to hold not just our own struggles but also those of the others from whom life separates us. For it is in this space that we might find — broken and disjointed as we may be amid this dazzling darkness — that our true identity is forged from the moral commitment we share in this moment for each other’s well-being.

And it is in this space — coming down the mountain, breathing and tasting, singing and praying — that we might begin to understand how to love this world.

May it be so. Amen!

APPENDIX B: OTHER WRITING

A Hermeneutic of Trees

Two trees stand naked on Lake Michigan:
one twisted and bent at broken right angles,
the other an ideal of arboreal roundness.

Silently they reach for each other, for light,
for air, for earth and sky, for water, for life.

In reaching, they do not mind the cold wind—
Chicago's winter cannot stop their branching
out toward oneness while moving in their own
wholly unique way.

There is no other way
than this—to stand near the stillness of each
other while letting a great song emerge, sighing,
from the depths of difference and connection.

A Prayer for May

As we take this moment to enter into stillness together,
We sense how very difficult it is to be here in this moment,
Just as we are, just as the world is, just as everything is.
All that is real and alive exists in this moment alone,
All that is possible and beautiful is present only now.

Each slender thing that slouches and each big thing that booms
Can only be felt and seen and heard and held in the container
Of this fleeting moment that soon ends but somehow never ceases.

As the church year winds down, as the school year comes to a close,
We don't quite know how, but things have gotten ahead of us:
It's not yet summer, but already we have begun to plan for fall,
It's not yet summer, but we have felt the sweltering heat of the sun,
It's not yet summer, but we have known the chill of death in our midst.

Let us hold one another as this moment holds us—securely, tenderly,
With great care and great affection, with profound regard for what is.
And let us hold this moment, let us heed this moment and praise it.

Let us offer ourselves up to this moment, knowing that all we have is now
And each other and the love that is shared through us and around us.
May it be so now. And now. And now again. Amen!