

December 2014

Hope

We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.

—Oscar Wilde

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It doesn't really matter that the stores started stocking Christmas-themed knickknacks and hullabaloo the day after Halloween. It won't irk me that I heard my first Christmas carol in a retail space when I was shopping for the Thanksgiving meal. The stores can trade in Christmas glory without drawing me into their frenzy. I'm going to rest with the Advent idea of "hope" as long as I am able—as long as I can resist.

The Advent season, beginning in December, is a Christian endeavor: an anticipation of something good to come—namely the birth of a savior, a child. Advent doesn't require flashy décor, blow up Santas, or light-up reindeer. All that's needed is a candle or four, and perhaps a wreath. Mixing the advent season with the Hanukkah season of my mother's familial line, I simply use candles to pause in the evening hours and warm the deep winter dark of December.

Real candles can't be flipped on and they require attention and care. In December, I light candles in the evening or night, whenever I am able, and sit by them in reflection. Hope is a recurrent focus. I witness the pain that racism's legacy brings to bear across our nation, and I hope for a day when we will no longer feel the urge to choose sides. I witness the pastoral pains in our community and hope that all who suffer depression, grief, and the daily pangs of loss or disappointment are lighting candles

as well, literally or figuratively, to light the path toward transformation.

I am by nature a realist. I admit, my least favorite song in our hymnal is "Let It Be a Dance." Although I love the poet who penned the words, they never feel right to me. If life is a dance, it sure spins us with some trying rhythms from time to time. I prefer the music that calls us from our darkness toward the pervading light. I prefer the songs that speak of difficulty in real terms while drawing us out in mind, heart, and spirit toward possibility. "What wondrous love is this... that takes away our pain," is a favorite line, and at this time of year, I rest in "Silent night, holy night." Yes, it can be dark, but it can also be holy, run through with someone of worth and beauty.

MINISTER'S MESSAGE

Advent: Hope and Hubbub



Rev. Anya
Sammler-Michael

hold it in the spirit of prayer or meditation. Remind yourself of the stars.

In Faith,
Rev. Anya Sammler-Michael

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Hope: A Gift of Community



Paul Roche
Board President

It takes some kind of audacity to have hope these days! Racial unrest, polarizing politics, international nightmares, Ebola, and hundreds of other worries plague us and on some level sap our hope. Besides the aforementioned woes, there are other, more metaphysical, reasons to despair: in a universe where God is at best a sympathetic bystander, and death and ultimate annihilation await us all, what possible reason do we have to soldier on? What impels us to live, to be the best people we can, and to help others? My answer is *hope*.

I believe there is a continuum between hope and despair, and everyone is moving on it all the time. To me, religion is the thing that helps propel me towards the hope side of that continuum. When we meet in community—in whatever form it takes, including Sunday worship, Board Meetings, vespers services, covenant groups, book groups, the Social Justice Workshop, the Poetry Slam, etc.—I am imbued with hope for a community that can reach within to comfort and give hope to one another, but also out to the community.

My hopes for the rest of this year and next:

- I hope Rev. Anya relaxes and enjoys her well-earned sabbatical for January, April, May, and June of 2015.
- I hope we all take advantage of the wonderful opportunity to hear from excellent local UU ministers from around the Beltway during the sabbatical.
- I hope this generous congregation will be even more generous during the next pledge drive so we can continue to grow and provide opportunities for those in our community who need us but have not yet found us.
- I hope to be able to announce that once again, we have hired an intern minister to work with Rev. Anya and our congregation for the next two years.
- I hope we can expand paid hours for our wonderful staff.
- I hope each and every one of you gets what you need from our church, that your lives are more full because you have chosen to be part of this

community, and that you, your children, and your grandchildren experience the glow of close community that only religion provides.

See you in church,

Paul Roche

RELIGIOUS EXPLORATION

Rediscovering Hope

Childhood is a magical time. For most children, it is filled with wonder, joy, and love. However, as children grow, they eventually learn that parents cannot fix everything, that bad things happen to good people, that animals and people die, and that human beings can be mean. In the face of these sorrows, we all need ways to cope. We need something to look forward to, something to hope for, something to comfort us when life is painful.



Linda Weaver,
Director of
Religious Exploration

Personally, I find hope all around me. I find it in the faces of children and in my friends and family. I find hope in the prayers and silence of people of all faiths. I find it in the beauty of the changing seasons, knowing that the glistening landscape of winter will be followed by a lush, green spring. I find hope in the stars, which remind me of how amazing it is to be part of the immense universe and how small my worries are within the mind-boggling stretch of time and space. I find it in people raising their voices or taking action to make the world a better place and in people reaching out to one another in care and support. I find it in my own ability to make a difference in some small way.

At the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Sterling, we recognize that there are many, especially those in the difficult preteen and teen years, who need someone to reach out to help them find the hope that can carry them on for one more day, for one more season, or for a lifetime. We strive to create a safe place for this to happen for children, youth, and adults. Offering a place for all to be accepted for who they are, to gather together to support and encourage each other, to celebrate joys, to gain awareness of the mysteries of life, and to reach out to comfort and heal the world. We invite you to join us in this continual rediscovery and sharing of hope.

Children's Religious Education topics and a list of programs and events for children and families is on the calendar at the UUCS website, www.uusterling.org.

REVEREND ANYA'S SABBATICAL

Next month, in January 2015, Rev. Anya will begin her sabbatical leave for study and professional development. She will be away for the month of January; return in February and March to be with us during our busy stewardship season; and be away again during April, May, and June of 2015 for the remainder of her sabbatical. She will return to our pulpit in July 2015.

This is the eighth year of Rev. Anya's service with UUCS. She was eligible to take a sabbatical after she completed four years, so this temporary time away from the congregation has been very well earned!

The Sabbatical Team has continued to meet and plan over the past several months. We have arranged for guest ministers and speakers, planned supports for congregational concerns, and developed pathways of communication for the months that Rev. Anya will be away.

The Sabbatical Team is excited for how our congregation will come together and grow while Rev. Anya is away doing that very same thing! We believe that with change comes dynamic growth, and when Rev. Anya returns to us at the end of her sabbatical break, we can all compare notes.

We have an excellent poster in the lobby containing loads of good information to help you decide who to contact but please do not hesitate to contact any member of the Sabbatical Team if you have any questions or concerns.

The Sabbatical Team

Bob Brown, for the Board

Rosalie Clavez, for Worship Associates

Gus Douoguih, for the Committee on Ministry

Patty McKay, for the Communication Team

Bonnie Lepoff, for the Pastoral Care Team

Stephanie Roche, for the Religious Education Council

Deb Rose, for Covenant Groups

SABBATICAL QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

With the UUCS Sabbatical Team

When will Rev. Anya be on sabbatical?



Bob Brown

What is a sabbatical?

January 2015; April, May, and June, 2015



Bonnie Lepoff

A sabbatical is defined as an extended period of leave from one's customary work to rest and to acquire new skills and training.

Why is Rev. Anya taking a sabbatical now?

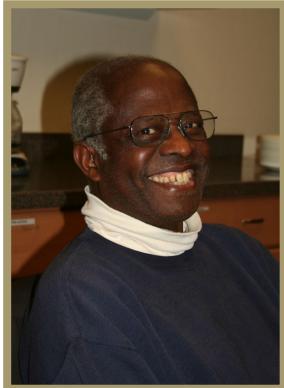


Stephanie Roche

Rev. Anya's contract stipulates that she is eligible to take sabbatical leave equal to one month with pay for each year of service with the congregation, up to six months. Rev. Anya was eligible to take a sabbatical after she completed four years of service. She has been with UUCS for more than seven years and has certainly earned this time away!

SABBATICAL QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS (CONTINUED)

*Can I contact Rev. Anya?
What if I need to talk to her?*



Gus Douoguih

Yes, you can contact Rev. Anya now to ask her about the sabbatical, but once she leaves, please respect boundaries that allow space for rest and reflection. The Sabbatical Team has established supports for day-to-day congregational concerns, as well as unexpected, significant life events that may arise during the sabbatical.

*How will Sunday services be run?
Will we have a minister?*



Missing: Deb Rose

Our pulpit will be filled with excellent preachers from across the region.



Rosalie Clavez

Won't we grow apart as a congregation?



Linda Weaver

Though there may be concerns about Rev. Anya's short absence, it is actually an opportunity for members of our congregation to deepen and explore our shared ministry.



Patty McKay

I have other questions and concerns, who can I talk with?

Feel free to contact the Sabbatical Team, and you can contact the Pastoral Care Team at pastoralcareteam@uusterling.org.

A MONTH OF SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

December: Hope

Members of our congregation are invited to engage the practice of *lectio divina*. *Lectio divina* is Latin for divine reading, spiritual reading, or holy reading, and represents a traditional practice of scriptural reading intended to promote communion with that which is ultimately meaningful. It is a way of praying or meditating with sacred words that calls one to study, ponder, listen and, finally, rejoice within the soul. Unitarian Universalists embrace a wide-reaching definition of scripture, finding words of profound meaning in the works of the world religions, scientists, poets, and the experiences of our own lives.

Find the time in your day to read each piece every day. Read, pause, read again, pause, and then reflect. You may choose to write each quote in a journal and add notes from your reflections. You may choose to read each piece to your family at the dinner table. You may choose to read in the morning or before sleep. You may choose to use the piece to gather your spirit for prayer or meditation.

December 1—3

The very least you can do in your life is to figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope.

—Barbara Kingsolver

December 4—10

Listen to the mustn'ts, child. Listen to the don'ts. Listen to the shouldn'ts, the impossibles, the won'ts. Listen to the never haves, then listen close to me... Anything can happen, child. Anything can be.

—Shel Silverstein

BRINGING HOPE TO THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

You are invited to bring a snack food donation or an item for the mitten tree the next time you are at UUCS. The children's Religious Education (RE) classes are collecting snack foods for **LCPS Backpack Coalition**. This organization provides food to children with economic need so that they do not go without over weekends or school breaks. Suggested foods are: Rice Krispie Treats, pudding, Jello, cookies, granola bars, or small bags of pretzels or chips. The snack items will be included in foods children will pack during RE on December 14. The High School Youth Group is collecting mittens, gloves, scarves, and hats for teens served by **Mobile Hope**, a program supporting the needs of homeless and at-risk youth in Loudoun County.

December 11—17

*Hold fast to dreams,
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird,
That cannot fly.*

—Langston Hughes

December 18—24

*My head is bursting
with the joy of the unknown.
My heart is expanding a thousand fold.
Every cell,
taking wings,
flies about the world.
All seek separately
the many faces of my love.*

—Rumi

December 25—30

“My Brilliant Image”
*Even after all this time,
The sun never says to the earth,
“You owe me.”
Look what happens with
A love like that.
It lights the whole sky.*

—Hafiz

CHILD DEDICATION

Rather than hold baptisms or christenings, most Unitarian Universalist congregations have child dedication ceremonies for infants, adopted children, or young children whose families have recently joined the congregation. We will hold a child dedication at the end of the service on December 21. This short ceremony includes a blessing for the child and a promise by the congregation to support and nurture the child in his or her spiritual life. If you would like to include a child in this ceremony, please contact Linda Weaver at re-director@uusterling.org.

SACRED STORY FOR ALL AGES

Thomas Potter's Hope

From information in "Life of Rev. John Murray"

by John Murray, edited by Judith Sargent

John Murray was a Universalist preacher who talked to people about a loving God. Then something very sad happened. His wife and their baby got very sick and died. John was so sad that he decided to give up preaching and leave England to start a new life. So he got on a boat that was sailing for America.

The boat sailed and sailed and sailed, and at last they were almost to America. But the boat was blown off course and got stuck on a sand bar many miles from their destination!

John Murray went ashore and as he walked along he saw a very strange sight. He saw a small farmhouse out in the middle of nowhere and nearby he saw a church. What was a church doing in such a lonely place?

John introduced himself to the owner of the church, a man named Thomas Potter, and asked him about it. Thomas answered that he had built the church, but that he was waiting for a preacher who would preach about a loving God who would not send anyone to an unpleasant place like Hell after they died.

"Well," said John Murray, "I used to preach just exactly that—I was a Universalist preacher—but now I don't preach any more." Thomas Potter grew excited, and said that John was just the person he had been waiting for and insisted that he preach on Sunday.

Want to share something in the January newsletter?

- ✓ Reflections or articles related to the November liturgical theme, *justice*
- ✓ Announcements (including those related to events that will take place in January and the first two weeks of February)
- ✓ Group or committee updates (what you accomplished, what's planned coming up, etc.)
- ✓ Recent photos taken at UUCS or during UUCS events

Please send anything you'd like to include to newsletter@uusterling.org by December 15.

John Murray said, "No, I have to get back on my ship. I must be on it when it sails." Thomas convinced John to agree to preach if the ship was still stuck on Sunday. John was sure the ship would be free by then.

Days went by and when Sunday came around there was the ship, still stuck on the sandbar. So John Murray came ashore and on that morning, September 30, 1770, preached a sermon on Universalism to everyone in that neighborhood. He was such a good preacher, he kept on preaching Universalism, and he went on to found the very first Universalist church in New England, which is still a Universalist church in Gloucester, Massachusetts.

That's our Universalist miracle: because the wind didn't shift, John Murray started preaching Universalism, and became the most famous Universalist preacher of his day.

Discussion Questions

What do you do when you make a mistake or break a rule?

How do you feel when someone forgives you?

How do you feel when someone does not forgive you?

What do you need before you can forgive someone else?

How do you act and feel when you have not forgiven someone? When you have?

DECEMBER JUSTICE ALLOCATION

In December, half of our Sunday morning offerings will go to LCPS Backpack Coalition, a program created to provide food for the weekend to local elementary school children who are in need. Donations to LCPS Backpack Coalition are matched by 100WomenStrong.

CHRISTMAS PAGEANT

December 21, 10:30 am

Rehearsals begin at 9:00 am

There are still non-speaking roles available for the December 21 holiday pageant. Contact Director of Religious Education, Linda Weaver, if your child would like to be an angel, shepherd, lamb, or other animal or if you would like to help behind the scenes. Angels and shepherds will be asked to attend a rehearsal before the service. No rehearsal is required for animals, making this the perfect role for the youngest children. They will be invited to sit on the floor in front of the platform and can come and go as they like. Parents are welcome to accompany them.

CALENDAR

Stay Up to Date With UUCS Events

D E C E M B E R	
Friday, 12/5	6:00–9:00 pm Holiday Decorating and Gift Making Party Come one, come all to the all-ages holiday decorating and gift making party. Bring a dish to share for the potluck and help decorate the building for the holidays, create ornaments and gifts, or just sit back and enjoy food and fellowship. All ages are encouraged to participate. Sign up <i>online</i> or on the signup sheet on the events table in the Hospitality Room.
Sunday, 12/7	10:30 am—Worship service: “Hope, Getting Out” Youth Brandy Trevino will pair her voice and vision with Rev. Anya Sammler-Michael to offer this creative and emotionally charged worship service on hope. Lisa Fiorilli and her jazz trio will offer the sounds of the season and the sounds of transformation. Noon—Inquirer’s Class in Rev. Anya’s office
Friday, 12/12	7:00 pm—WEBS: Women’s Earth-Based Spirituality group Take time out of your busy schedule to unplug, meditate, talk, listen, and laugh. We will take a moment to check in with each other and give thanks as we prepare for Yule and our annual Solstice service. We are open to all earth-based traditions; just bring yourself and perhaps a snack to share. (Held at Patty McKay’s house- email <i>Patty</i> for address)
Sunday, 12/14	10:30 am—Worship service: “Honorary Jew: Reflections on Religious Pluralism” Rev. Anya will reflect on the creative challenge of religious pluralism, especially during the rich holiday season. The choir will bring us gently into the rhythms of Chanukah and Christmas.
Wednesday, 12/17	6:45 pm—Evening worship service: “Hope” A conversational, shared worship focused on hope; a way to find depth and meaning during the middle of the week.
Friday, 12/19	7:00 pm—Winter Solstice service Our Women’s Earth-Based Spirituality (WEBS) group leads this annual solstice service based on ancient faith traditions. Child care provided.
Sunday, 12/21	9:00 am—Pageant rehearsals 10:30 am—Worship service: “The Spirit of a Child” All ages are invited to celebrate the winter holidays and lift their voices in song as we present the annual Nativity Pageant. The children and youth choir will add its music to the celebration.
Wednesday, 12/24	7:00 pm—Christmas Eve Candlelight Service Reverend Anya and the UUCS choir weave traditional music with the stories of the season in this provocative and contemplative candlelight service. All ages are welcome and child care will be provided.
Sunday, 12/28	10:30 am—Worship service: “Renewal” We will wish Rev. Anya adieu on her January sabbatical and also celebrate the New Year with this Fire Communion service.
J A N U A R Y	
Sunday, 1/4	10:30 am—Worship service Noon—Inquirer’s Class in Rev. Anya’s office
Sunday, 1/11	10:30 am—Worship service