

Winter | 2021

Chalice Connection

A quarterly publication
of The First Unitarian
Church of Omaha

Volume 2 Issue 1



In this issue,
we focus on
imagination

Join us this
Sunday online at
10:30am via Zoom

**Mission of First Unitarian Church of Omaha:
Fostering the Whole Person, Compassion, and Justice**

www.firstuomaha.org

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Minister's Message

Thus We Do Covenant with One Another

By Rev. Shari Woodbury

Unitarian Universalism is a faith, not of creeds, but of covenants. This tradition traces to our Puritan ancestors, with covenants dating back in this country as far as 1629. This rather democratic organizational form was unusual for people of European ancestry at that time, reflecting a leap of imagination on the part of our religious forebears. Most people who attend a membership class before joining a Unitarian Universalist church like ours hear something about the *congregational polity* found in our tradition—how our congregations elect their own leaders, call their own ministers, and design their own process of becoming a member.

But just as important as that bottom-up structure is what brings discipline to our collective undertaking—which is how we covenant with one another in our congregations, and in our association of congregations, to serve each other and the world. We use covenants to express the values that will guide us as we work together to carry out our mission. You can see this in the Seven Principles and Six Sources of our living tradition, which are prefaced with these words: “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote...” After the Principles and Sources are listed out, the covenant concludes: “As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one

another our mutual trust and support.”

Covenants are about practicing right relationship. By agreeing to do the work of living into the promises in our covenants—even through times of disagreement or hurt feelings—we make possible a greater degree of intimacy and trust in our relationships with one another. We are asked not only to be kind, but to be real with each other.

You may know that this congregation adopted a new congregation-wide Covenant of Right Relations in May 2019. (You can find it linked from the [Right Relations Council](#) page of our web site.) You may not know that other kinds of covenants are also utilized at the congregational level. In particular, small groups and religious education classes in UU churches often adopt their own covenants, spelling out the commitment that members make to the group.

Covenants are often developed, as well, to articulate commitments among professional religious leaders and lay leaders. This fall, our core staff worked together to update our staff covenant; it is printed on the next page and I invite you to read it. The board and I have also been working on a leadership covenant, which we will share with you when it is complete. And I have begun the process of establishing collegial

covenants with colleagues in ministry who are affiliated with this church.

Since the earliest days of Unitarianism in this country, the need to establish and continually renew our covenants has been recognized as central to this free faith. Samuel Barrett, an early Unitarian minister, believed that what should be stressed, instead of outward confessions of creed, is something inward: “the unseen, unwritten sentiment of love in the heart.” I share this core commitment of our tradition, and I invite you to practice it with me as we live into all of our covenants together.

Covenantally yours –

Shari

How to Reach the Minister

Email: minister@firstuomaha.org

Church phone: (402) 345-3039 ext. 102 (any messages left here forward to her cell)

Cell phone: (531) 600-8313

She typically checks email on Tuesday, Thursday and Friday. For a pastoral emergency any day, please call or text her cell phone.

To schedule an appointment, go to: <https://calendly.com/rev-woodbury>

First Unitarian Church of Omaha Staff Covenant

We covenant to:

- Ground our work in the Seven Principles and Six Sources of Unitarian Universalism.
- Start from a place of curiosity, assume goodwill, and seek to know the impact of our actions.
- Keep staff meetings and any private information discussed there confidential.
- Honor the gifts, priorities, and limitations of each staff member.
- Be especially mindful of our covenant in stressful situations.
- Listen with empathy and practice clear, compassionate, and direct communication, and avoid any attempts at triangulation in both staff and congregation interactions.
- Respect others' time by not monopolizing the conversation.
- Support one another to strengthen our roles at the church and speak as a unified voice once a decision has been made.
- Express and maintain clear personal and professional boundaries, and equally respect the boundaries of others.
- Be mindful of our respective social locations and work proactively to be anti-oppressive.
- Within our relationships with one another—staff and congregation—maintain the highest loyalty to our staff roles, and to the mission and well-being of the church.

Signed by Rev. Shari Woodbury, Cat Dixon, Carrie Helmberger, and Christina Strong



Rev. Woodbury delivering part of the Prayer of Rising Hope, from our sanctuary, as part of the 2020 Interfaith Thanksgiving service.

Chalice Connection

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and Carolyn McNamara

Please submit articles, poems, photos
to admin@firstuomaha.org.

Word count limit: 1,000 words. If your plan involves a longer piece, please contact the office. Notes: 1. Articles will be approved by the Editor, the Office Team, and in some cases in conjunction with the staff and MTC. 2. All articles will be subject to editing. 3. Articles must comply with the First Unitarian Communications Policy. More information can be obtained by emailing the church office.

Deadline for the April 2021 issue is 3/1/2021.

April Issue Theme: Becoming

More details about “becoming”: The practice of discovering that inside you that wants to be born. The practice of no longer hiding. The practice of continual growth.



A Letter from Sharon Piehler,
Board President, 2020-2021

The Power of Imagination

"Imagine life a year from now..."

Most of us enjoy a good book or a great movie, even a not-so great one to pass time on a gloomy day. We know the formula, meet the characters, something perilous happens, a hero emerges, and everyone lives happily ever after.

Are we halfway through that movie as we enter winter? We know the characters: friends, family, national figures. We certainly know the perilous happenings! COVID-19 and resulting needs, political strife, environmental disasters and the pain of loneliness for so many.

Have the heroes emerged? I believe so! The heroes in this are not political figures, but rather the everyday workers, caretakers, steady friends, and strangers stepping up to help. We have seen the lines, miles long, of people in need waiting for food donations. Imagine how the food became available for them—the power of sharing. Imagine the promise of vaccines, just months away and think of the heroes who stepped up to act as test patients for development of these treatment. Imagine all that happens behind the scenes to lessen the pain: caretakers, medical professionals, cleaners, transportation workers, educators, first responders. Imagine how much they give of themselves while they, also, endure the stress of Covid and everything else in play these days.

Can we imagine the happily ever after? I think that is a pretty big ask right now, but the door is cracked open and the sunlight is starting to fill the room. Many of us have learned a new normal and found personal ways to lower the stress and maybe did some self-reflection and grew a bit in our isolation.

Let's all try to imagine life a year from now. Breathe deeply and think about us settled into a new political climate, vaccines are in play, and we can gather again. Imagine what that looks like, feels like, sounds like.

I imagine we will never forget what this journey has been like, and I imagine we will revel in the joy of togetherness.

In gratitude,

Sharon

Book Club Meets with Best-Selling Author

By Dave Richardson

The Book Club had a great time on Monday, Oct. 26th discussing Kurt Andersen's book *Evil Geniuses*. The author joined us on Zoom and answered questions and gave interesting insights. The warmth and wit of

his writing style was evident in the conversation. Many of us also knew him through his long-running show on NPR titled "Studio 360."

Kurt is a native Omahan, and a 1972 graduate of Westside High School. He has connections to First Unitarian. His parents were members who were married in this church. Their memorial services were also conducted here. Kurt says he attended Sunday School "intermittently."

The evil geniuses in his book are largely wealthy conservative business and political types who used the cultural upheavals of the '60s as a warning against progressive change. What has resulted is what Andersen refers to as a "cultural paralysis" whereby wealth is the only measure of a fulfilled life. Needless to say, there was much grist for the mill of discussion.

After our meeting, I was reminded of a passage from Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* where he has the narrator, Holden Caulfield, say, "What really knocks me out is a book that, when you're all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it. That doesn't happen much, though." I think our Zoom discussion with Kurt was as close as we will ever come to Holden's dream of being able to talk with the writer of a book that "knocked us out."

Kurt was sent a copy of our church history book. I will admit a degree of anxiety about sending something I had written to a prize-winning, nationally-known writer whose works have made the *NY Times* bestseller lists. He said he received the book and liked the cover, but had not had a chance to read it yet. I told him to please judge the book by its cover.

Living Our Principles Through Civic Engagement: A Summary of the UU the Vote Task Force Activities

By Dave Richardson

For more than 200 years, UUs have led the way in progressive social justice and the promotion of the ideals of democracy. Unitarians were abolitionists, suffragettes, social reformers, education reformers and Civil Rights activists. UUs marched at Selma, and at the Stonewall protests for LGBTQ rights. UUs are environmental activists, migrants' rights advocates, and involved in so many other ongoing endeavors that they have made our communities, our country, and the world better places.

In the fall of 2019 the UUA created UUtheVote as a nationwide network of congregations dedicated to encouraging participation in the democratic process consistent with our UU principles.

Recognizing the importance of this election and the presence of existential and potential threats to our voting rights, in June 2020, the Board of Trustees gave their blessing for our congregation to form a UUtheVote Task Force. Beginning in June, the group met monthly to plan and execute various ways to participate in this year's election within the 501(c)3 guidelines of non-partisanship.

The project sought to ensure that the right of people to vote is not abridged or inhibited in any way. It was deeply rooted in our seven principles. Chief among these are the inherent dignity and worth of all individuals, justice, equity and compassion, the right of conscience and the democratic process as well as the responsible search for truth.

The following is a summary of our activities this year:

- Participated in a training session conducted by Civic Nebraska on how to encourage voting and ensure it is free from barriers preventing voter participation.

- Reached out to several non-profit, nonpartisan groups with similar goals and values (see the list on next page).

- Mark Loscutoff prepared a "dashboard" to keep a record of the activities of members of the group. Activities directly connected with our group must, of course, be non-partisan in nature. However, individuals are not prohibited from working for specific candidates on their own.

A partial list of these groups and activities:

- League of Women Voters
- Diverse Women Lifting Our Voices
- Vote Forward
- Civic Nebraska's Outreach Circle
- Phone banking in "key swing states"
- Poll watching for various "Get out the Vote groups"
- Numerous participants donated to our non-profit partners
- Participation in weekly zoom seminars sponsored by the UUA's UUtheVote leaders

Another important activity was our congregational canvass. Catherine Plumlee created a spreadsheet with contact information for all members and friends of the church. Volunteers contacted members regarding their intent to vote and whether they were voting early or in-person on Election Day.

The results of the canvass confirmed we are a congregation that takes civic responsibility very seriously. **Here are a few statistical facts from the canvass:**

- Nine volunteers from UUtheVote were able to contact 207 of our 231 members.
- Only two of those contacted were not registered voters and one of those intended to register.
- Only two members said they did not intend to vote.
- 188 of those contacted had already voted early or planned on voting early. They voted or planned to vote either by mail, drop box or at the County Election Commission offices.
- 16 of those contacted indicated they would vote in-person on Election Day. One person could be categorized as a "fair weather voter" as they indicated they would vote "if the weather is nice."

A few other observations:

- On Sunday August 30, the UUtheVote team conducted the Sunday Service on the theme of the importance of participatory democracy and voting.
- Christina Strong wrote and implemented a RE program on the importance of voting.
- We were pleased that several members of Second Unitarian joined us and actively participated.

Observations and thoughts for the future:

Twenty-two people participated in various ways on this task force. Their willingness to spend time and effort was gratifying. We knew from the start that conducting an election during a global pandemic would create unique circumstances. We also appreciated the strong support of Rev. Shari Woodbury as she was just getting started as our new settled minister. The voter turnout in Douglas and Sarpy Counties and Pottawattamie County in Iowa was high. We can't take full credit here, but it did prove that the election was critical to

Article continues on next page.

Cont. from previous page Living Our Principles

By Dave Richardson

the voters of this region and that we had something to do with it. Nebraska's unique system of sending individual electoral votes by Congressional districts made us even more aware of the importance of voting. Looking to the future, the work we did should help prepare for "get out the vote" efforts in upcoming election years. Should we choose to do this again, we would have the nexus for planning in our records.

Here are a few random thoughts about the future:

- We chose not to get involved in ballot issues this time around. The 501(c)3 status allows us to do that. If future ballot initiatives come into play, we might want to consider if we want to take a stance for or against them. This, of course, should be done judiciously and with care that we act according to our principles.
- We can get a running start on any attempts at voter suppression.
- We also might consider lobbying or letter writing to our elected representatives on measures that we support or do not favor. Again, this is allowable under 501(c)3 guidelines.
- Another way to enhance our awareness of issues and our understanding of the pros and cons on either side is to do "Dialogues" along the lines of those conducted in the past by Elaine Wells.
- In future "non-pandemic" times we might consider holding candidate forums.

Let me close by thanking the Board of Trustees for their support for our work. It is a joy to work with Unitarians in general and this board in particular. If you have any questions, please contact me at drichardson821@gmail.com.

Annual Vision of Ministry Church Year 2020-2021

We have three vision areas for this year:

1. Connection: Overcoming social and spiritual isolation is a defining feature of religious community in any age. In this time of uncertainty, anxiety, and heightened divisions, nurturing connections – among people, and with all of Life – is both essential and revolutionary. We will provide pandemic- adapted opportunities for our members to connect with each other and with that "transcending mystery and wonder" which renews and sustains them. We will also lovingly sustain connections between our church and other groups, including our sister church (Clair Memorial) and other Unitarian Universalists.

2. Transformation: We will take purposeful action, in our local area, to rectify inequity, to build the Beloved Community, and to support the self determination and flourishing of all people through the democratic process. Recognizing that we are at the center of our locus of control, our church will also work to "be the change we wish to see in the world." Thus we will educate ourselves about systems of oppression and the ways we ourselves are inevitably caught up in them; take tangible steps to practice radical hospitality, grow our multicultural skills, and dismantle -isms within our own church culture; and continue to nurture church leaders of diverse identities and gifts.

3. Future: The high-minded, great-hearted tradition we inherit inspires us to live and to love at least as boldly in our own time as the religious liberals before us did in theirs. Mindful of the tradition on which we build, with our new called minister we will look to the horizon and prepare to set a fresh course. This year we will focus on discerning what type of process might effectively engage the congregation and result in a unifying statement of our mission, vision, and goals, with the intent to then carry out such a process in the subsequent church year.



Why I Joined First Unitarian

By Kim Dunovan

I joined First Unitarian Church because life is difficult and we humans need each other. This church has been my spiritual home for more than thirty years, nourishing my questioning spirit and offering me friendship, respite and support. Membership deepened my commitment and fostered in me a greater sense of belonging in this religious community. After the birth of my sons I was grateful for a religious education program that reflected my values and encouraged children to explore life's mysteries with a sense of awe and respect for all of the world's religions.

First Unitarian Church continues to meet my need for loving connection and nurtures my appreciation and gratitude for each beautiful moment of my life. I've served in many leadership positions over the years, but am now content to mostly offer quiet support and do my part to create a culture where anyone drawn to our Unitarian Universalist values will feel welcome in our church.

Below: "Star Mountains" by Pele Strong

Staying Connected: Text Messages from First Unitarian

Beginning in January, First Unitarian Church will introduce **Remind**, an app that allows church staff to text members and friends.



Remind is a communication tool First Unitarian will use to reach you. Church staff will be able to send urgent messages (such as weather closing alerts) and reminders of important church events (such as the annual meeting) all via text messages to your phone. With Remind, you can send or receive messages by downloading the app, logging into the web browser, or simply replying to messages via SMS text.

On Tuesday, January 26, every church member who has a cell phone number recorded in the church database will receive a text message from this phone number: **810-10**.

The message will read:

Hi, this is First UU Omaha. I'm using Remind to send important updates. Reply YES to this text now to avoid missing my messages for church. Reply NO if you do not wish to receive messages from this church.

Please do reply with **YES** to this message so you can be added to our church text messaging. If you have questions, please contact the church office.



Stuffed Animal Sleepover

Story and photos by Christina Strong,
Lifespan Director of Religious Education

One day in the Fall of 2020, twelve stuffed animals arrived at First Unitarian Church for the first ever Stuffed Animal Sleepover.

These animals weren't just here to play.

They were on a sacred mission, to reconnect their human companions to the historic First U building, their pre-pandemic weekly rituals, and their beloved church community.

They created a covenant to commit to being in loving community together.

They worked together to light the chalice.

They sang their favorite hymn in the First U sanctuary.

They enjoyed circle time in the Nursery.

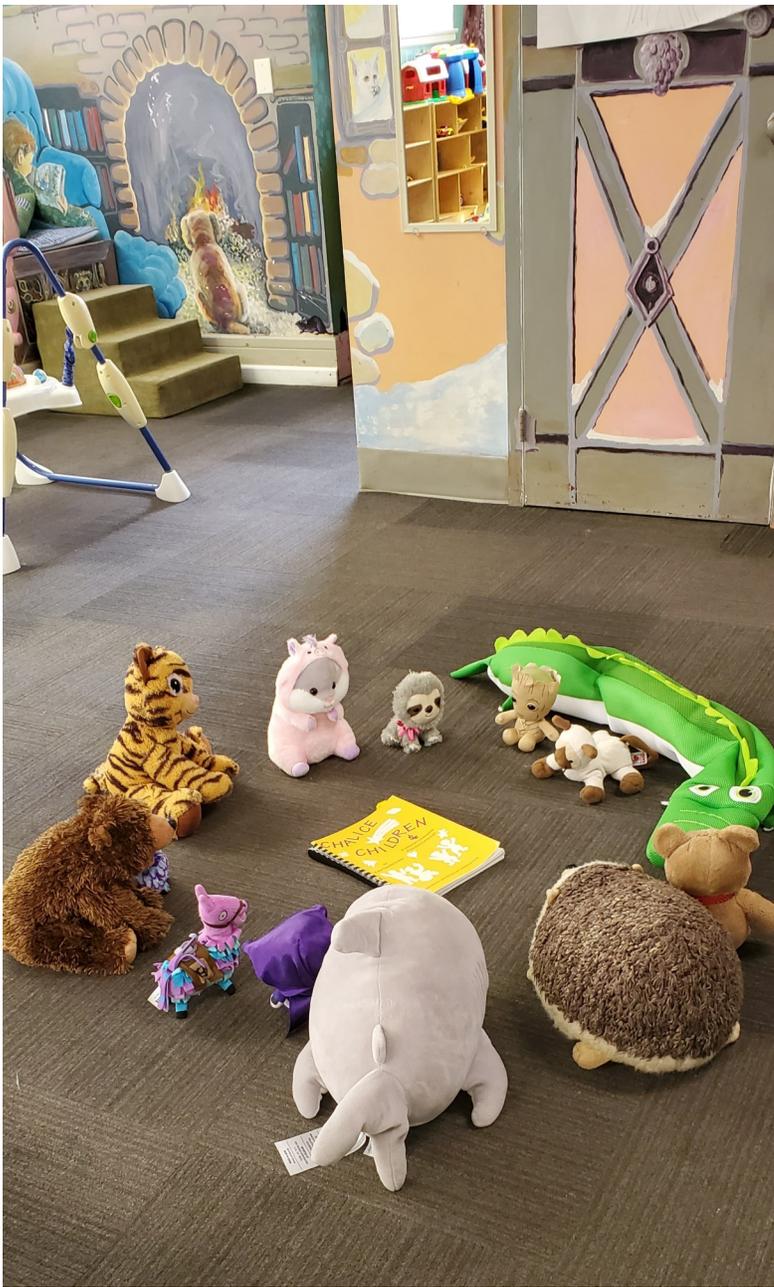
They created art in the Elementary RE classroom.

They played the Pandemic board game in the Whitney Young Room.

They sat down together to enjoy Coffee Hour.

See more photos of the Stuffed Animal Sleepover on the next page and soon on our church website!





Haiku

We asked church members to write a haiku based on animals they identify with or to write a haiku about imagination—check out the submissions below.

Photo below by Lillian McEvoy.

“Possum”

By Vanessa Timberlake

In darkness, busy
Eating nuts tossed out for birds,
Possum’s white face shines

“Squirrels”

By Kay Lynn Goldner

Squirrels busy planting
Acorns in their garden beds
Ready for winter

“Morning Haiku”

By Suzanne King

Winter weaves her web
Corona spider creeps in
We must cross to spring

“Spider”

By Kim Duvonan

Spinning in the air
A solitary weaver
Of unique designs

“Song Bird”

By Rev. Shari Woodbury

Songbird in the trees
Flashes of color and sound
Witness to our lives

“Dog”

By Carrie Helmberger

Rushing, excited
Joyful, but so sensitive
To any harsh words

“Haiku”

By Suzanne King

Imagination
The heart of innovation
Spurs new inventions



“Gravy the Cat Doesn’t Want to Go”

By Sarah Voss, three days after the exhausting election

Hates the cage, hides, fights,
Angst-filled eyes hound Dan, whose sad
Hand leaks fresh-scratched blood.

“Haiku”

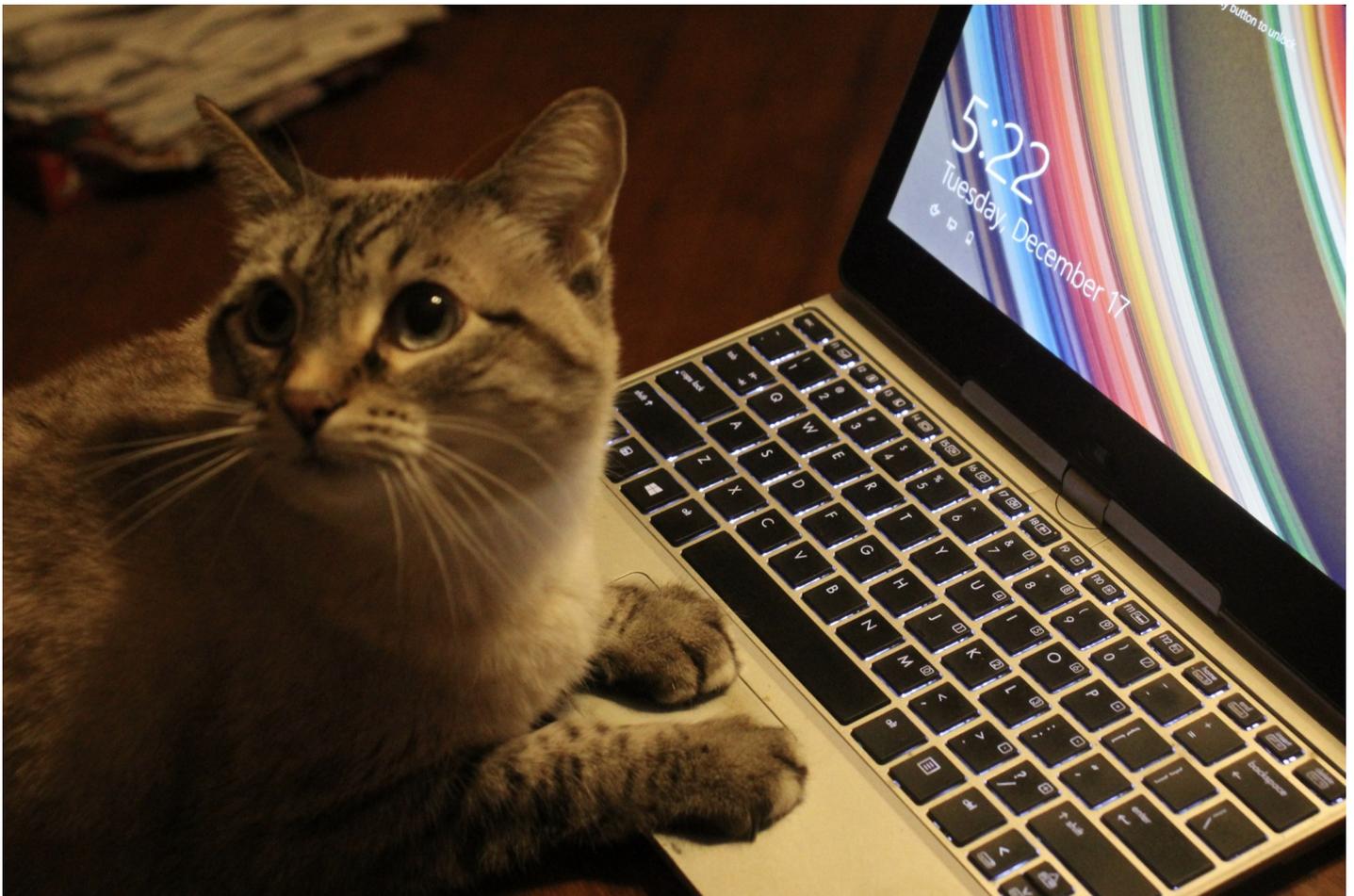
By Dan Sullivan

Cat draws blood
So close, so far
From the heart

“Cat”

By Cat Dixon

Silently slinking
Along walls, wave the long tail
Hello, stalk the hall



An article by Donna Neff & Sara Switzer, Auction Co-Chairs

Imagine That! Our First Successful Online Auction

Lots of things take imagination to make them happen during these strange times, and one of them was the 2020 Halloween Heart & Hand Auction. This annual fundraiser for the church operating budget usually involves a crowd packed into the Common Room to eat, drink and be scary with costumes, then jostling in the sanctuary to see all the items up close and bid. Not this year. We went entirely online, from auction to party, and it worked remarkably well. Thanks to all of you generous donors, enthusiastic bidders and helpers, the Auction raised \$7,848 for the church! And nothing inspires creativity like a costume contest, MC'd by the horned "Pan-demic Medic" Steve Switzer. AJ Gustafson the Dragon won "Masked Disguise", DJ (father) and DJ (son) Lewis won "Family Photo" as the battling King Kong and Godzilla, Midnight Brewer won "Posh Pets" as his Black Cat self, and Catherine Plumlee won "Spook's Choice" as Gum Stuck on the Bottom of a Shoe." We celebrate the success of this year's auction, even as we imagine next year's auction back at church and together again.

Questions about Auction?
Email: auction@firstuomaha.org



The Seven Principles

Our congregation is part of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA). This membership means we're free to discuss any theology, and we affirm and promote these seven principles:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

The living tradition we share draws from many sources:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront the powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit
- Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions that celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

Notice of the Mid-Year Congregational Meeting

Date: Sunday, January 10, 2021

The Board of Trustees would like to invite you to our second mid-year Congregational Meeting scheduled for Sunday, January 10, 2021 at 10:30am. This tradition began last year as a way to check in with the congregation and bring forth new business that the Board, the Ministry Team Council (MTC), and other leadership is working on more routinely rather than just once a year. We seek your input and welcome discussion.

This meeting will also begin the Nominating Committee's solicitation for award nominees and future leaders. The leadership slate will be voted on at our Annual Meeting—scheduled for Sunday, May 16th. If you can't attend the meeting, but would like to nominate a member for a leadership role or an award, you can go online to make your nomination here: www.firstuomaha.org/nominating.

The meeting will take the place of the Sunday service on January 10th. Due to the ongoing pandemic, we will host the meeting via Zoom using the same Zoom link we use for our regular Sunday worship services.

We encourage your participation.

If you need assistance with Zoom, please email zoomhelp@firstuomaha.org.

Thank you,
First Unitarian Church of Omaha Board of Trustees

Note: This letter was sent to all church members on Dec. 11th via regular mail.

Interested in Church Events?

Be sure to sign up for our weekly enews. Delivered to your inbox every week, this email will keep you informed about upcoming church events and activities. Email the church office at admin@firstuomaha.org today to get signed up! Be sure to include your first and last name with your email request.

New to First Unitarian Church?

At our church, you'll find a vibrant group of religious seekers who have found a common ground where the deepest values of life can be shared. Our growing congregation offers ever-increasing opportunities for life enrichment, spiritual growth, and social justice. Our members and friends are caring, thinking, progressive people of all ages.

Our Membership Coordinator, Carrie Helmberger (pictured to the right), would be happy to meet you at one of our upcoming online visitor classes. Go here for all the details:

www.firstuomaha.org/visitorclass

Our Pathways Class begins in January. We'd love to have you join us for that online class. We look forward to getting to know you better!



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