

FUSIT Service July 28, 2025. Sermon by Carol Whitlow

Title: UU's r Us

I want to talk about how we UU's can be a shelter in a time of storm. A refuge from the storms of life. A place of open doors and open hearts and hands.

I'm a Red Cross Disaster responder. I have seen the impact of storms. And heard about what it feels like to be in the midst of fire, or wind or flood. In each of our lives we are in storms: personal, family, and on a larger scale political, economic. Some become crises. Climate crises for one.

Oh, but let's dial it back down a little. When we feel in need of just a little company or structure to our day, we may find it having coffee with a friend, a phone call with a sister, even a social media support group. Where else can we eat together, sing together, laugh together, learn together?

We might seek out the shelter and comfort of a Unitarian Society.

I wonder, what beckons us to "come on down?" and then, what makes us feel comfortable and welcomed and engaged?

In Maui, where I was working the wildfire response, Red Cross gave us Sunday mornings off from our 12-hour shift, recognizing the need to recharge. Down a winding coastal road, perched looking out over the ocean in Wailea, I found a welcoming place, greeters donned matching Hawaiian print scarves so they were easy for newcomers to identify. There was a familiar-looking building, pews

inside, an order of service, and hymnals. But also differences: the OOS was also in Hawaiian and the hymnals had hymns in both languages, and they were sung in both languages. That gave me this message: we are all welcome and respected. All given a seat at the table. That felt deeply comforting to me.

[Carol sings “Lokomaika-i He Nani No (Amazing Grace) in Hawaiian]

A couple of months later, I was back again and visited a Unitarian society in Kehei, on the way to Lahaina. A familiar building, greeters, programs, a sermon, food. This service included ukelele music and hula dancers. Midweek evening they had a ukelele singalong with the same hula dancers. Often we need more than words to feel the welcome.

When I am in Florida in the winter, I seek out Unitarians on Sunday mornings and during the week. One group had a book discussion of a social justice book and a regular Monday night vegetarian potluck dinner. The Venice church had tables and brochure racks in the parlor with flyers and pamphlets about local activities. The Ormond Beach church had a table in the back with free books donated from a congregant's estate. He had a fascinating collection and it was a good way to share his spirit. And to engage with others about the books. A couple of Unitarian buildings had Little Free libraries outside. I was donating a book I'd just finished when a member came to talk, and took the book home on my recommendation.

At one service, a member played her guitar and sang Canadian singer-songwriter Ferron's tune, Our Purpose Here, one I hadn't heard in years, which gave me a close connection to the UU who sang.

The food table after the service was ample, with chairs lining the perimeter of the room so folks could talk and eat in a leisurely fashion.

And talking of eating, I discovered a little congregation in Brooksville. The address on the website seemed not to exist, so in disappointment I called the phone number. A woman answered immediately and offered to pick me up, but I was sitting right in front of the building! Underneath and behind the building, members were putting out a small sandwich board identifying the UU service and I gingerly approached. Not the familiar church building, No pews, but comfy couches in a low-ceiling-room adorned with guitars and a drum set. A member explained that they rented this recording studio while they planned to build a church nearby. I was warmly invited to sit on a couch and offered coffee and I got to know the folks on either side of me like long-lost relatives. People were coming in bearing dishes and platters. After the service was a hearty potluck lunch and free homegrown fruit on offer to take home. I wanted to empty my purse in their coffer and to return to see their progress or new building.

One church had a 9 am discussion group that I felt lucky to notice on their website. About 30 folks sat around the room. They had a timer made of two quart plastic soda bottles filled with sand so it was easy to see. Each person had 5 minutes to talk about anything they wished, although there was also a question of the week to talk about if they chose. I really got to know all those folks well, and there were a variety of thoughts about politics and personal matters.

The church in Fruitland outside of Tampa had an art gallery attached. On the Wednesday, the League of Women voters had a program there with a solo performance of an Eleanor Roosevelt play, where I saw some church members again.

What is happening when we join in these activities?

We are social animals, our brains and neurobiology evolved to help us maintain social bonds for our survival. We need to socialize like we need food and air and water. Touch releases natural opioids, endorphins, which help us reduce heart reactivity to stress, and help us to manage pain and our mood. Singing, dancing and emotional story telling, an element of a good sermon or talk, also release endorphins. Through social activities, we increase our self-compassion, soothing ourselves rather than blaming, helping us tolerate the woes of the world. Being together also helps us appreciate positive experiences more, kind of like getting higher, naturally, turning up the clarity or brightness or contrast or reducing unwanted noise.

Joanna Macy, who died week at 96, was a Buddhist environmentalist. She calls us to be Shambala warriors, not with uniforms but with weapons of hope and insight that we are deeply connected. She says this gives us the creative power to “face the mess we’re in.” We need new ideas and we need everyone to work on them. Her concept of “The Great Turning” confronts the myth of the rugged individual which reinforced competition and suspicion between people who view themselves as separate. So, when we come together, here or anywhere we recognize our common humanity, we are helping to make a great change.

One example is our own Judy Jones, who joined with Medical Debt Relief to help thousands out of the financial crisis from health issues. This helped people stand up against the old order of monetary gain from people's problems. Acting together we were able to harness the power of compassion.

I have shared some of my experiences of feeling welcomed into a new Unitarian congregation. There were familiar elements: food, song, discussion and learning. There were new elements, cultural, extracurricular. I'm curious about your experiences in visiting other Unitarian societies, and your ideas about things we could try here. For example, I'd like to be able to sit and converse while eating after the service.

What do you think folks are looking for and how can we offer sustenance for the body and for the soul?

We are each and all dealing with storms and we are also part of the process of moving on in the great turning. We can help each other take the steps to make the change we hope to see.