Trusting the Process

A Sermon by the Rev. Angela Herrera Koren

First Unitarian Church

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I've done just about everything there is to do as the minister of a church: preached, taught, visited people in the hospital. I've blessed babies, married people, buried people, joined in the scattering of ashes. I've greeted refugees with nowhere else to go. I've traveled to the border and to Africa and South America on behalf of our church. I've gone to the state house countless times and to Washington D.C. three or four times. I've overseen many millions of dollars in fundraising in the last fifteen years. I've broken ground with you for a new building. I've blessed busses full of children and blessed courtyard trees… and chickens and dogs and cats.

I've accidentally tripped our security alarms, causing the police to barge into a board meeting at a moment when I was hoping to look extraordinarily competent. I've pulled weeds and spread rocks and cleaned up unmentionable messes on campus when necessary. I've looked into the eyes of a squirrel that was living in the church ceiling. I've even participated in a city permitting hearing that had to do with the angle of our underground bathroom plumbing between the building and Carlisle Blvd.

I have really done it all… except for one thing. I have never said goodbye.

And now, with less than three months left before my last day, which is June 1, we are entering that last phase together.

For the congregation, this goodbye ushers in a ministerial transition as well. A new minister will arrive in a few months. Our congregation's President EmmaLia Mariner spoke eloquently and sagely from this pulpit a couple of months ago, laying out some of the knowns and unknowns about the year. She and other members of the Board are working together to lead the congregation through this time. They met with our denomination's Transitions Office, which offers guidance to congregations and coordinates the search process for ministers looking for congregations, and congregations looking for ministers. In this, the board is guided by the process and resources that UU congregations across the US and Canada all turn to for transitions.

Typically, after a long ministry, congregations hire an Interim Minister before they call their next long-term minister. An Interim Minister is a specialist in transitions. They help the congregation prepare for a new chapter. An interim ministry gives the congregation an opportunity to reflect on the ministry that has ended, and time to think about what kind of ministry they'd like to do next.

At our annual meeting in January, you, the congregation, voted to empower the Board to hire an Interim Minister. The Board plans to interview candidates for that position in April, and hopes to sign a contract with someone in May. The interim will most likely begin in June and will most likely serve for two years. This is all standard and this all aligns with our congregation's bylaws about interim ministry.

During the Interim Minister's two-year term, the process for selecting a new Senior Minister will begin. The church also has bylaws outlining this process. You can find the bylaws on the church website if you'd like to read them. I'm not going to go into a lot of detail about that process- you'll have lots of time to talk about that later. But I want to highlight a couple of things.

The process for finding the next Senior Minister is a democratic one. When the time comes, the congregation will elect a search committee. That search committee will engage with the congregation to learn what kind of new Senior Minister is desired. The search committee will then do a lot of vetting and interviewing of candidates, until they find their top pick, and then they'll introduce that person to the congregation for a weeklong interview. Then, after all that, the congregation will vote on whether to call that person as the Senior Minister. So, it's a participatory process, and a democratic one.

Where does Bob fit in? Bob is our Associate Minister. As Head of Staff, I hired him in 2019. I worked with a search team that I put together to help with that- and he was our top pick. It was a different process, one that did not require a vote. That is also according to our bylaws. To recap: the board selects *Interim Ministers*, the congregation selects *Senior Ministers*, and Senior Ministers select other kinds of ministers.

Sometimes, a congregation decides to make an Associate into a Senior Minister. That's what happened with me. I was in Bob's role before I was in this one. Bob is a wonderful minister. We've become friends, and I will truly miss working with him. But it is too early for you or him to know who the next Senior Minister of First Unitarian should be. I can't possibly know the answer to that question either, by the way, and even if I thought I did know it would not be my place to say so. It is not my place to predict, recommend, or speculate.

You all have some discernment to do. A lot has happened since the last minister transition. This congregation needs some time to reflect on the ministry it wants to do together going forward, and what you need from your next Senior Minister in order to fulfill that dream. Bob needs some time to discern what his hopes and dreams are for his next chapter, what kind of ministry he feels called to do.

You don't know what will happen yet. Which means that right now, your job is to trust the process. *Woyaya!*

I'm trusting a process too. I don't know quite what life will be like, or where I will live or work, in my next chapter. I do know that I will be moving away. After I announced that I would be leaving my position, my wife interviewed and was granted admission into Hebrew Union College. She is going to become a rabbi. Our plan is to eventually relocate to New York, where the school's campus is. I am excited to support her in her path. My hope for myself is to transition into work as a therapist for a while and do a bit of writing. How will these dreams and moving pieces come together? I don't know yet.

The other day, I got a letter from a friend who was reflecting about all the stuff they and their loved ones and all of us are dealing with these days- the good, the bad, and the

impermanent. (And it's all impermanent). This friend said something both obvious and really smart. They said, "Though challenges are countless, the moments of our lives come to us one at a time."

Though challenges are countless, the moments of our lives come to us one at a time.

Trusting the process is trusting that all we really must do is whatever this moment calls for. It may be planting a seed. Preparing. Breathing, resting, learning, loving. Speaking out. Reaching out. But whatever it is, it isn't everything everywhere all at once. We don't have to have a handle on everything everywhere all at once. And that's a good thing, not only because it would be overwhelming, because there are good things that will be part of our path that we cannot even imagine yet.

Just like being a fish in the Netherlands. Does anyone know where I'm going with this? With the fish in the Netherlands? This is a good story. And very much to my point.

In the Netherlands, there's a town called Utrecht that has a river running right through the middle of it. The river runs through town in a canal, and the canal has a dam, all right in the middle of the city. It's the kind of dam that can be opened and closed- the kind called a "lock." That's great for managing the water level, which is great for the city. However, it creates a real obstacle for fish. In fact, the lock is right in the migratory pathway for many spawning fish. Some of the fish need to travel all the way to Germany to spawn and reproduce. If they can't get through the lock, it really causes a problem for the fish population.

So. There is a worker stationed at the lock, whose job is, in part, to open the door for the fish. The problem is, it can take a while to open it. I mean, the fish are swimming up, off and on all through the day, and if too much time passes, it might be too late by the time the door is opened. The fish could pile up, waiting to get through, and meanwhile the birds that like to eat the fish would have an absolute free for all. Bye bye fish.

So. About five years ago, a team of scientists and ecologists and urban planners put their heads together to figure out a solution.

What did they come up with to help the worker know when to let fish through the door?

A doorbell. Of course!

A doorbell for the fish.

Now, you're wondering: how do scientists, ecologists, and urban planners train fish to ring a doorbell? What are the fish supposed to do? They don't have hands. Do they boop it? Do they enlist an octopus? No. There are no octopuses in the river! What there is, however, is an underwater video camera.

Every spring, starting in March, there is a live stream of the fish as they swim up to the lock.[1] If you go to the fish doorbell website, you'll see the live camera feed, showing the

[1] https://visdeurbel.nl/en/the-fish-doorbell/

lock in the river, and there's a button you can press to ring the doorbell whenever you see fish.

The livestream came back online last Monday. When I looked at it on Friday, there were over 900 people watching with me. People all around the world, watching for the fish, and ringing the doorbell, by clicking it on the website. When the doorbell has rung a certain number of times, the dam worker is alerted to open the door!

If you are wondering how you say "Fish Doorbell" in Dutch, it is pronounced "visdeurbel." But spelled very differently. You don't have to know how to spell it in Dutch to find it online though. You can just search for "the fish doorbell," and it comes right up.

I learned about the fish doorbell from my friend Claire, who told her congregation about it, too. She says:

> Humans do all kinds of weird, terrible things to each other and to our planet all the time. And we also do all kinds of weird, wonderful things for each other and our planet all the time.
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> I wonder what the fish think, when the door opens and they can swim freely on their journey. Maybe they think nothing of it. Maybe they think it is a miracle. And it is kind of a miracle, that hundreds of people, all over the world, care enough to check that live feed and press a button to help the fish on their way. It makes me wonder, when have I been the fish? And when has some unknown hand pressed a button for me? Probably lots of times. I know I've been the person opening the door and smoothing the way for others. They may never have known.

Though challenges are countless, the moments of our lives come to us one at a time. Helpful powers, a bit of luck, the care of community, and the fruits of hard work and of seeds planted long ago often help us along the way when we aren't expecting it. Sometimes they open a path before us, where it wasn't clear there would be one at all.

Trusting the process doesn't mean being passive. The more we meet the moments of our lives with awareness and intention, the more we help shape the process. Trusting the process is an active choice. But it's one that acknowledges we don't know everything and aren't in control of everything.

Trusting the process is an act of faith.

I've shared before that in Pali, the language of many Buddhist texts, the word for faith is "saddha," which means "to place the heart upon." I have returned to this definition over and over. I have lived this kind of faith, and sometimes forgotten it for a bit, and then come back to it. Unlike faith as a religious claim, or as something you either have or don't, in Buddhism it is a verb: to place the heart upon. We don't have faith, we *faithe*.

One thing we can place our hearts upon is that the nature of the universe is change. One way to frame this is that nothing lasts forever. That's technically true, but I think it sounds a little nihilistic. Another way is to frame it is that new things are always being born from the old. I like that better. That captures the bigger picture. There is change, but things are

connected. What came before, what we brought to it, how we met it one moment at a time, shapes the future. We can place our hearts upon that.

I have faith in our process of parting as well.

I have never said goodbye before. But as that time comes into clearer view, I am filled with such gratitude and affection for all of you. I love this congregation, squirrels and all. The ministry we have shared will always be a part of this place, and it will always be a part of me, too. As new doors open for me, I will pass through them with more love, wisdom, and joy because I was here. And as doors open for you, you can place your heart upon the knowledge that I will be out there somewhere, cheering you on.