

**Theodore Parker Church**  
**Our New Becoming**  
**March 7, 2021**

*Stewardship*

If this year has shown us anything, it's that Theodore Parker Church is resilient, adaptable and strong; and, that post-pandemic, our church will look different than it did before. We are excited to be looking forward to what that means for us, even as we celebrate our ongoing care for each other, the new accessibility of our Parish Hall, and our commitment to building Beloved Community across generations.



OPENING WORDS

**We Summon Ourselves**

By [Gordon B McKeeman](#)

We summon ourselves from the demands and delights of the daily round:  
from the dirty dishes and unwaxed floors;  
from unmowed grass, and untrimmed bushes;  
from all incompletenesses and not-yet-startednesses;  
from the unholy and the unresolved.

We summon ourselves to attend to our vision  
of peace and justice;  
of cleanliness and health;  
of delight and devotion;  
of the lovely and the holy;

of who we are and what we can do.

We summon the power of tradition and the exhilaration of newness, the wisdom of the ages and the knowing of the very young.

We summon beauty, eloquence, poetry, and music to be the bearers of our dreams.

We would open our eyes, our ears, our minds, our hearts to the amplest dimensions of life. We rejoice in manifold promises and possibilities.

Come, let us worship together -

Story for All Ages      Rose Gallogly, Coordinator of Religious Exploration

In searching for butterfly-themed stories for this week's service, I came across a book that really surprised me. It's called *Summer Birds*, and tells the story of a German naturalist named Maria Merian. Maria was born in 1647, and during that time, Europeans had widely adopted an idea from Ancient Greece that said butterflies and moths emerged spontaneously from mud in the summertime. It was thought that any kind of metamorphosis — like the kind of transformation that caterpillars go through to become butterflies — was the work of the devil, and so this spontaneous creation was the only other possible answer.

As a child, Maria loved being in nature, and she loved observing and drawing the natural world around her. In her closer observations she saw that, of course, these beautiful winged creatures didn't just come out of no where, they started as caterpillars, spent time in a cocoon, and then transformed into butterflies. Her drawings and observations went on to be important discoveries in the emerging field of western biology, which eventually changed how Europeans understood this natural process.

While it was so fascinating to hear about the story of a woman whose childhood observations changed this part of western science, this story also made me fascinated in the idea that had been accepted by her culture: that metamorphosis is evil, and so these creatures must just emerge spontaneously out of mud. It made me wonder: are there ways in which that's still the narrative we hear about how change happens? After all, the dominant Western culture we live in grew out of the culture that believed that. And aren't we so often told that change is only what happens at the end of the process — when the bill is signed into law, or the policy is

passed — instead of being the messy, in-between, somewhat mysterious process of what happens in between?

I wonder if we can start to think more like Maria Merian, whose love and close observation of the natural world told her a difference story. That change happens in the in-between, that transformation is not as neat and simple as spontaneous generation, but it's all the more beautiful, fascinating, and worth celebrating for its magical messiness.

HOMILY      OUR NEW BECOMING      the Rev. Anne Bancroft

In August, the year after my father died, my mother and I were sitting in the sun on the porch of a cabin in New Hampshire sharing a glass of wine and waiting for someone to bring us lunch. Someone's name is Dan.

It was a warm and languorous August day at the family camp we visit on Squam Lake. Two of my daughters joined us on our little piece of deck and we waited together, chatting and laughing as we noticed a beautiful monarch butterfly dancing nearby. It circled around us and lingered. In a strange way it seemed especially interested in us. "Maybe it's Dad," I suggested. It hung around for a long time, landing on the edge of the porch within feet of us. After sitting on my finger for a minute or so, it left. "Bye, Dad," I called out.

A few minutes later, lunch arrived with the butterfly in tow. "Look what's been following me!" Dan called. "We've been walking down the whole road together!"

Those of you with more butterfly experience may be familiar with their behavior. I was not, and I'm also not beyond imagining that the spirit world has wonders to offer us: who can know for sure whether there was some amazing intersection of realities offering itself to us on a beautiful afternoon near the lake. My dad adored my mom. I wouldn't put it past him to figure out how to spend more time with her.

But in whatever way it came to its time on this earth, this butterfly – like every butterfly - had become, wide-winged and graceful. And if the intersection was only in my heart, both the butterfly and my dad had given something up to be present to us the way they were on that beautiful sunny afternoon. It may be that the butterfly just liked the way we smelled that day; and that my dad's spirit was tenderly present in the place we had loved to be together year after year.

Either way, becoming something new means losing something old – the something that was before. Well attended, it is a beautiful process. Becoming is the change that moves beyond the grief of loss, beyond the sometimes oozy, messy in-between, in order to offer something fresh and different, even though even that will not remain static. Becoming is only fixed until the next one, right?

Not long after I arrived at Theodore Parker Church, I read a post by church consultant, Carey Nieuwhof. He was considering the attitude differences between growing churches and declining churches. Attitude, he maintains, has a lot to do with how and what we become.

“Growing churches believe they can. Declining churches believe they can’t. They’re both right.”

I have observed, in my tenure with you, that you function as a “can” church, even if sometimes cautiously. And so many of the things that you aspired to before I arrived have come to fruition during these seven years. The first year I remember scaffolding going up in the front of the church – a huge structure built to allow workers to climb up and remove the angled stonework in order to repair and replace mortar and make the front of the sanctuary look new and beautiful again – and not leak! That was part of the ongoing care for the buildings that continued with shoring up the supports underneath the minister’s office so that I wouldn’t fall through – I am very grateful for that! And among other structural corrections, you built an accessible restroom in the narthex – the front of the church that you now know is the narthex (!) – so people didn’t have to go next door to find a bathroom other than the little funky one between the admin and minister’s office.

Over these years you welcomed new people into your congregation – and deepened your own commitment to having a presence in the community around you so that even those not connected by membership to Theodore Parker Church know it is an engaged and engaging congregation. You have been present to justice movements, providing space for non-violent civil disobedience training, being a part of supporting people in sanctuary round the clock for nearly three years, and working with local groups and faith communities to encourage education about issues of equality. You have welcomed musicians for services and Music on Centre, and artwork, and Winter Fairs and Plant Sales, and children into your services, all while taking good care of each other.

You set goals for yourselves and lived into them as you have continued to become something ever new, fresh, vital and vibrant.

You have survived nearly a year of Zoom worship services, barely laying eyes on each other through the entire time and yet staying connected and committed.

And, you will be celebrating, later this spring, your newly accessible Parish Hall, heated by your own solar panels! Come on, dudes – this is awesome.

Growing churches – in numbers and depth - believe they can. And you have.

But one goal has eluded you, even yet. When I started as your minister, you talked about wanting to be able to support full-time ministry – and in some ways, you have achieved that, as well. I fully believe that ministry is a team sport, both lay and professional. Everything we do in church life is ministry, from mowing the lawn to washing the dishes, to singing in the choir, to dedicating your children, to welcoming new visitors – everything is a ministry. And from my perspective as the capital m “Minister,” every staff person represents a ministry, as well. Nothing I can offer you happens without the support of lay leaders and the rest of the staff, which is why it was important to me to make sure that before bringing the Minister’s salary to full-time, all other staff members had the hours they need to serve this community well, to work with and support lay-led gifts, and that they were compensated according to the recommended guidelines. Ministry at its best is a team effort.

That said, you have also generously moved my compensation to the mid-range of the 5/6 position I now hold. AND, I think it’s time. I think you’re ready. I know that going forward your capacity to support a truly full-time minister is a stated aspiration of your Standing Committee and one I believe is within your reach.

Growing churches believe they can.

If you’re visiting today, you should know that members and friends of Unitarian Universalist congregations ARE the church. They support and afford everything the congregation determines it wants to provide for its own services and what it wants to offer the community around it.

This year the Standing Committee has asked the Stewardship Team to try to raise an impressive 202,200 dollars. Get it? 2022 hundred for the FY 2022. The Finance Committee has discerned that with those funds it would possible to offer a full-time position to an incoming ministry while continuing a strong team presence, as well.

Oh, let me say this again: growing churches believe they can.

Consultant Carey Nieuwohof also suggests that if you can't remember the last time you made a major decision that changed the course of your church, your leaders are wasting their time.

That's so awesome because church life is not about safety – not healthy church life anyway. It's about transformation, evolving, might I say “becoming”? In the Report from the Commission on Institutional Change that you will hear more about in a few weeks, called Widening the Circle of Concern, the authors write, “covenant and commitment, not comfort, should be the binding fabrics of Unitarian Universalist congregations.” Covenant – promise – and commitment, not comfort, should bind us – which is not to say there is never comfort, only that it is not the thing we lead with because comfort invites us to stay as we are . . . growth requires change. Consider the butterfly.

We know that when the risk of infection fades sufficiently, the return to church life will look different. We don't know exactly how, but we know there will be opportunities beyond what we have known before. I am so excited for all the possibilities in front of you. Remember, as you each are deciding how to pledge this year, how much this church has meant to you over the past year and years. Remember how much it will mean to you and those you know would love to be a part of it going forward. And give, give, give, knowing what an honor it is to do so because you are giving to a growing church. Indeed, you ARE the growing church. Doesn't it feel great?!

Stretch your wings, friends; make a pledge that fills your heart, and then let us sing together about the metaphorical next step . . . the next stage . . . the next very beautiful becoming.

#### BENEDICTION

(a message from Unity Church in St. Paul - from Widening the Circle)

“. . . We want to create a religious institution that is known throughout the neighborhood, the city, and beyond, as a place of loving, welcoming, joyous Unitarian Universalists who are not afraid to live out their values. Can we imagine a day when (our church) bell peals and the whole neighborhood takes comfort, knowing what that ringing symbolizes?” Ring on, all of you - ring on.