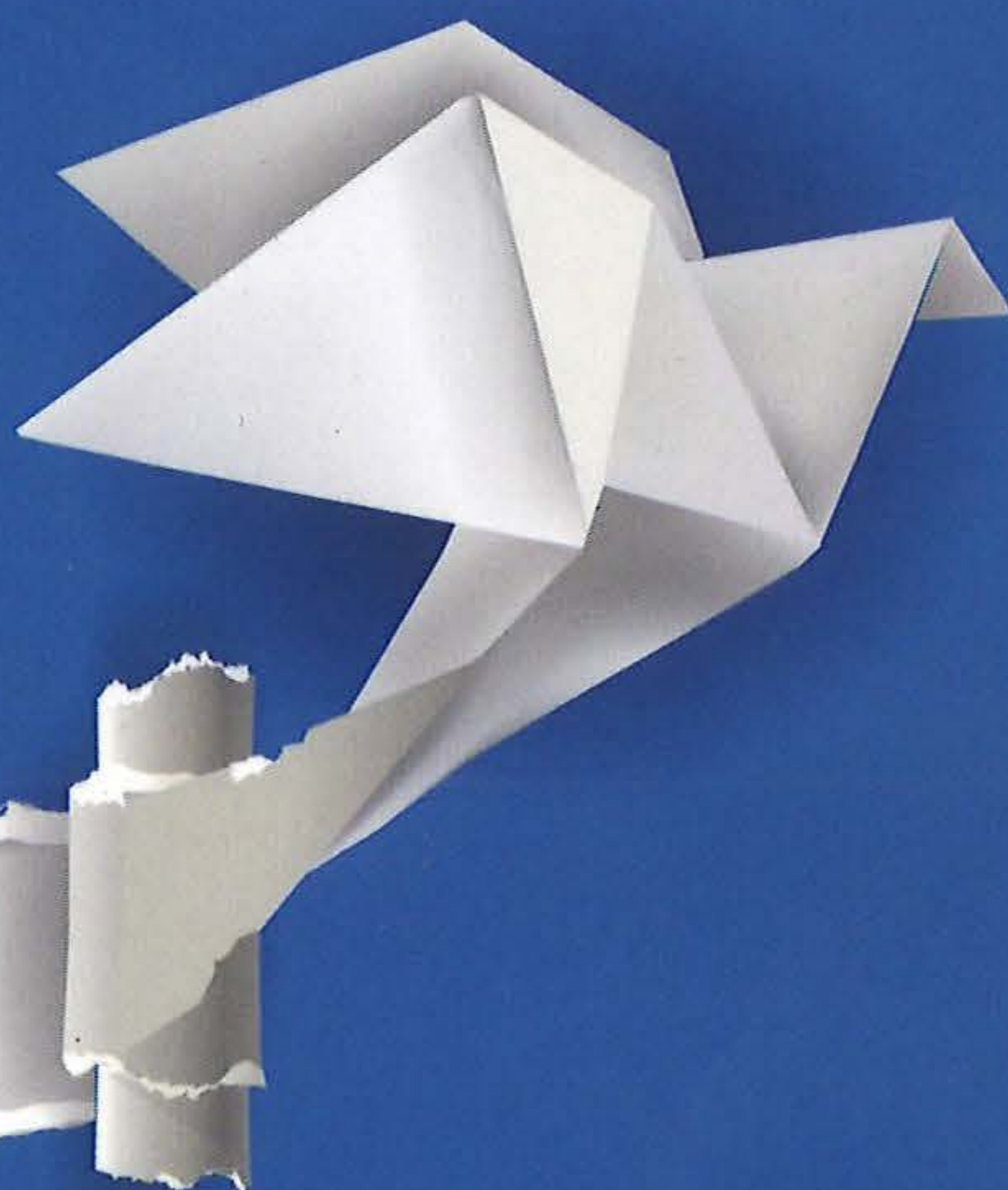


# turning point



essays on a new

Unitarian Universalism

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## First Unitarian Church of Rochester, New York

### The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Canandaigua, New York

## The Remedy of Connection: Theme-Based Church

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Many years ago, at the two congregations I serve, First Unitarian Church of Rochester and The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Canandaigua, New York, we started theme based church. Theme-based church is simple. Each month, one concept, theological precept, or way of being in the world unique to Unitarian Universalism sets the tone and content for that month's inquiry, engagement, and ministries. At the churches I serve, we use themes that directly speak to what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist by asking the question, What does it mean to be a person of . . . ? The themes might include Resilience, Evolution, or Letting Go, for instance. However, other theme-based churches use traditional church language, such as Prayer, Transformation, or God. It matters not. What matters is how much easier it is to offer comprehensive meaningful programming and services when you are not flitting around from one idea to the next.

We began with worship, music, and small group ministry. At first this new approach made me anxious. I worried that one of the other ministers might steal my angle for a sermon or that the worship theme might restrict my creative juices, boxing me

in. I was also worried about our people. Might they get bored or feel so doused in a particular theme—grace or vulnerability or resilience—that they would be like groundhogs, not rearing their heads again until the first of the next month, when a new theme was introduced? Suffice it to say, I had reservations.

And yet, as life often does to me, I was surprised to find just the opposite. The congregation was elated with the change. They experienced the alterations as an opportunity to immerse themselves in worship rather than flitting from one topic to the next. They relished the chance to come at the theme from many different angles, and perhaps most important, the themes became their guide for their own musings, reflections, and reconnections to self, others, and the needs of the world. I benefitted professionally; I got to bounce ideas off my colleagues and inquire about their own musings or personal implications. The church's music director came with arrangements and choral pieces drawing on various aspects of the theme I never would have thought of myself. In the end, it made our work more collaborative not less.

In worship, the themes worked. But what hooked me was the corollary step of using the same themes in our small group ministry program. Ministers often say that we want parishioners to give of their time, talent, and treasure; we want them to understand that church is a co-op, not a consumer product or service. But this theme-based ministry work changed my perspective by changing the question from "What do we want *from* our people?" to "What do we want *for* them?" That's the better question to be asking. What I want for them is more compassion; to know their lives matter; to be spiritually connected to the grace of life, to their best selves, and to a larger community; to know that they, with others, can make a difference in the world. Only through theme-based ministry did this emphasis on what I wanted for them connect for me.

Perhaps one of the best ways to get at what I'm talking about is to explain the guts of what happens in a small group I lead. Each month we sit in a circle, do a check-in about our spirits, then dive into the spiritual assignment, reading, video, or question that cap-

tered our heart that particular month. We are a motley crew: two organic farmers, two environmental scientists, an MBA student, a special education teacher, an artist, a librarian, a retired CEO, a retired news anchor, a small-business goat-soap entrepreneur, and me. We are young and old, introverts and extroverts, patient and impatient, expressive and reserved, contemplative and impulsive. Yet with all our diversity, this little band of Unitarian Universalists manages to work with a monthly worship theme in depth. That's the magic of the small group work: the depth to which we can explore a particular theme.

I've been in the ministry almost twenty years. I've known the joy in worship when grace arises, and we are all connected, flawed, and fabulous together. I've sat with parishioners as they disclose their tales of woe: lies told, hopes dashed, revelation received. Over the years, I've loved these moments of ministry, yet none of them in their totality compare to the richness, the jaw-dropping courage and vulnerability that float through and around our little circle. When our Soul Matters group is together, there is no fixing, no saving, no setting each other straight. We offer each other space to hold one another's pain, elation, trepidation, anger, inspiration, tragedy, joy. It seems such a simple gift: Deep listening. Each person tells what assignment they completed, what story they sat with daily. Each one does this without interruption; no one is allowed to ask questions or offer a follow-up until we all have said our piece. My group is half men, half women. The men cry without embarrassment or worry that anyone will think less of them. The women rant, strutting their mighty testosterone with glee. We laugh; we weep. There has not been a month where stories aren't told about a spouse betrayal, family secrets that kept a person hostage, or the ongoing peeling back of layers of sadness associated with mental illness or addiction. But we also tell tales of the resurrection of one's spirit, the sharing and giving of unconditional love, the faith in our common, extraordinary, vibrant humanity that leans toward the light.

At the end of an evening, I often drive home in silence, running through what just transpired in the course of those two hours.

Every time, I am reminded how lucky I am that there are people who hold me, accept me, honor me, and encourage me. I come home each month with the best of who I want to be and become, and I have a net of forgiveness and trust to go back to when I've disappointed myself and others.

Our sessions together are not just an evening of good discussion or an opportunity for intellectual stimulation or even a chance to make new friends. Rather, they are a path back home. The Soul Matters groups are unlike other small group curricula that give people a time to reflect on the past. In our groups we explore how the theme, right now, spiritually connects us to greater mindfulness; to family, friends, co-workers; to our commitment to a life of service. The small groups are organic and central to everything we do now at both First Unitarian of Rochester and Unitarian Universalist Church of Canandaigua.

Small group ministry is so important that after new people go through the requisite steps toward membership, they are immediately placed into a Soul Matters group with their peers. These small groups become people's support networks, their lifelines in a harried world, and central to how they behave in and out of the group. In fact, they are so well embedded now in our church culture that oftentimes the group takes care of its members quicker and faster than any minister ever could. For instance, one parishioner tragically lost a child, and by the time the ministers got wind of it, her small group had claimed detail for food, laundry, and child care for her other child for months to come.

Worship, music, and Soul Matters were just the beginning of our theme-based church. Once the themes were firmly embedded in those ministries, we cast our net even farther. All our adult education and spiritual development groups came on board: from Buddhist discussion groups to guest speakers for social justice gatherings to our academic Bible study group taught by the local college's religious studies professor. Social justice task forces and ongoing ministry projects now had a means to further their mission when a particular theme resonated with their members and the church's

monthly events. Most important, in my opinion, was the web of theme-based ministry integrated into religious education. Many parents have told us that they can now connect adult worship to their kids' worship and workshops to their small groups quite easily. Primarily because it offers a family a chance to see and talk about a theme, which has been explored from a four-year-old's perspective all the way through to a fifty-year-old's, and they can all talk about it as they pull out of the parking lot from church on their drive home.

Theme-based church is integral to how our church functions and behaves. I'm convinced the reason this works is because Unitarian Universalism is about connection. We are a religion that sees people struggling, not against our own sinful souls but against a shallow, frantic, and materialistic world that all too often leaves us disconnected. Our congregations—at their best—work to heal that divide by helping people listen to their deepest selves, open up to life's gifts, and serve needs greater than their own. In our congregation, Soul Matters, worship, religious education, and faith in action support this theology by embracing deep listening, which in turn sets the stage for us to welcome grace and the needs of the world.

As we do all this work, our theme-based ministry focuses us on a spiritual value that our faith tradition has historically honored and emphasized. We are reminded that our faith dreams of a preferred way for us to be in the world, challenging each of us to ask, What does it mean to live a life with these particular values front and center? Unitarian Universalism is not a religion of "anything goes." Rather, our faith has a unique vision of the good life. Yes, we affirm personal choice and individuality, but our faith asks us to engage some core values, take them seriously, and apply them to our daily living.

Both a theology of connection at our center and the particularity of the Unitarian Universalist life in practice are key to our growth at First Unitarian. In the last ten years, we've grown from a congregation of 700 members to 1,050. We've partnered with a small congregation (80 members) in Canandaigua, New York, for staff and resource sharing. But perhaps it's more accurate to say we've grown internally, which in the end is what matters. These people—the

parishioners in these two congregations, in the Soul Matters group, in faith in action projects, in nonstructured, engaged conversation over coffee about the themes—make us better individually and as a community. They challenge, love, tweak, and kid me. They conspire against arrogance of thought and action. We remind each other to be patient with oneself and others. We're reminded that our inherent humor, wisdom, and courage are always available if we just make the effort to listen long enough. People do so because this theme-based church is integral to their living and loving. At times they lead me more than I lead them, often with a piercing insight and a vulnerability that opens the human condition to me with such courage and clarity that I feel weak in the knees. They often reflect that without this structure, without theme-based ministry, they'd feel a little bit like fish out of water. That's a powerful affirmation that the church is not only a place they go on Sunday or where they drop in for social justice activities but also the hub of where they find meaning, connection, and growth.

I believe this to be the center of the religious life in the twenty-first century. It is said that the twenty-first-century American feels they have, on average, one person to whom they can confide their fears, hopes, dreams, and worries. One? If one is the average, then that means a number of people are saying they have zero friends to confide in, to sort through what matters in life and what doesn't, zero connections to another's story for inspiration or solace, zero safety net when their life feels like they have to go it alone, zero depth in their living and loving. Zero. That's a scary number. Yet that zero makes theme-based ministry one of the best gifts we as Unitarian Universalists can offer. We've got the remedy for the sin-sick soul. We just need to apply it and live into our calling for the twenty-first century.

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