

Healing Spirits and Changing Hearts
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First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
February 22, 2026

Chalice Lighting by William F. Schulz

Come into this place of peace
and let its silence heal your spirit;
Come into this place of memory
and let its history warm your soul;
Come into this place of prophecy and power
and let its vision change your heart.

Reading by A Powell Davies, abridged¹

Sermon

Why do you come to church?

You could be doing lots of other things right now. But you're here. Some of you are here even knowing we're going to talk about money - that's commitment.

Why? Why do you choose to be here, with these people, in this place?

We heard some reasons in our reading. You might have some of the same reasons – perhaps you're seeking courage, hope, understanding, comfort or a sharpened conscience (I like that phrase). Maybe you're here for the community of people – or an undefined spiritual longing calls you here. Maybe you're trying to make a little more sense of it all, or to make a difference. Maybe the first thing you think of is the music, or words, silence, or ritual. Or it could be a feeling – love, belonging, connection, peace

We come for many different reasons – good reasons - and why we come changes over time. And that's OK, because this place is special - it's one of the few places where we might find all of those things, where we can be, do, connect, serve, rest, learn, be challenged ... heal and change.

However you articulate why you're here, whatever it is you need today, this church is here to help us thrive, and equip ourselves to do the hard work of being human. And to soften us so we might be changed along the way.

What happens here, in the words of our chalice lighting, is healing spirits and changing hearts.

¹ *Why I Come to Church*, from "Without Apology: Collected Meditation on Liberal Religion" by A. Powell Davies, Forrest Church, ed., Skinner House Books, 1998.

This purpose is much greater than I understood when I first came to Unitarian Universalism. For me, back then, it was all about my kids – their education, their community. I was just fine, thank you very much. In time, I found my church to be a place where I could try new things, mess up and still be loved, where I could be challenged and comforted, and serve others in meaningful ways. I could be inspired to be more like my best self over and over, as often as needed. And I need it often. I found healing. And it changed me.

And that is what we're here for.

There's a true story we often tell from the First Unitarian Church of Chicago. Some might remember that I shared it in one of my first sermons here, about a year and a half ago, but I think it's worth revisiting.

This version is adapted from Jessica York. It was back in 1948 – when only white people were allowed to join that church. Many of its members came to believe that living their values required them to desegregate, but not all. And when the Board met to discuss that proposal, there were objections, on the grounds this would make desegregation into a creed, forcing everyone to support this particular approach to combating racism.

The Board debated long into the night. Finally, James Luther Adams - the famous liberal theologian and social ethicist – who was on that Board - asked the all-important question. To the person who was making the strongest objection, he said: "What do you say is the purpose of this church?"

After a long pause, the Board member is said to have finally replied. "Okay, Jim. The purpose of this church is to get hold of people like me and change them."²

The First Unitarian Church of Chicago desegregated.

We all come here with wounds, fears, narrow perspectives, ways of being that hurt other people or ourselves. It's a foundational tenet of Unitarian Universalism that everyone is worthy of love and is loved as we are. I believe that.

And ... we can all use a little work. Along with everything that's been named so far, the purpose of this church is to get hold of us and, in some way, heal our spirits and change our hearts. So that we might ... save the world.

The changing of our hearts, here, may not be as sudden or dramatic as in that story, but it happens – in small interactions, little “aha” moments, experiences of connection. Just in the time I've been here, I've seen changes in: responses to disappointment and conflict, sensitivity to forms of oppression, and attention to the impact of our actions. I've seen individuals nourished by being here, becoming more who they are. We're all works in progress, and always will be, but this place is healing spirits and changing hearts.

² <https://www.uua.org/lifespan/curricula/river/workshop2/creed>

And that makes Albany UU special and significant. There are other ways to serve, rest, connect and learn. But here, we strive to blend all that into healing and changing. And boy is that needed. The big problems we face in the world today will only be resolved with a whole lot of healing and changing. And you're doing it. Right here. One human being at a time.

Amid ... all the things ... Albany UU is doing what it's here to do, and learning how to do it better. And while there are no guarantees (there never have been) there are good reasons to be hopeful about supporting this church now. I'm going to share three:

(1) This congregation has weathered some challenges, and has emerged stronger.

The pandemic years were rough. They were hard on everyone, and churches took a hit. Those years were particularly challenging for families with children, many of whom drifted away from churches altogether. Some churches lost their entire religious education program.

That didn't happen here. The cohort of kids who were tweens in 2020 did shrink. But the program is growing. The number of adults with young children is growing. This clear sign of congregational health bodes well for a long future of healing spirits and changing hearts.

In addition to the pandemic, there have been the challenges that come when a long-time minister leaves. Ministers always come and go, and congregations survive the loss of even the most beloved ministers. But when a congregation has had the same minister for a quarter of a century, the ways of being together and getting things done adapt to that minister and become more entrenched as the years go on. It takes time and intention to crack open the system and prepare to welcome a new minister. You've been at it for almost three years. In that time you have loosened your grip on ways of being that no longer serve you, and have opened and changed. You are ready to start your search for a new settled minister, and to embrace the change that will bring. And that is good news indeed.

You're also finding new ways to do the work of change, from the Inclusivity Team to the Democracy Crisis Response group, to the past and ongoing work to improve governance and resolve conflicts. And while doing change you are tending your resources, so you can continue to do the things you're committed to, like supporting those children and families, sharing good music, becoming more inclusive, advocating for causes dear to you, and serving your neighbor.

Healing spirits and changing hearts, within and beyond these walls.

The second reason to be hopeful:

(2) This church is not like other institutions.

My colleague Kimberly Debus wrote a blog³ in which she cited a piece by Erin Wathen, who objects to using the word "volunteer" in a church. Wathen says: "To volunteer means that you are an outside resource, stepping in to help an organization in need. Volunteering is what we do when we pick up trash at the park, ... or help sort food at the local pantry." She goes on, "Volunteering is what I do at my kids' school on Fridays. In other words, it's what you do at a

³ https://holdmychalice.substack.com/p/complaint-corner?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email

place that is important to you – but not at a place that belongs to you. You cannot volunteer at your own church,” she says, “in the same way you cannot babysit your own kid.”⁴

If you’re new here, no one expects you to be there right now. It takes time to build that level of connection and commitment. But there is a significant group of folks here who get this. Maybe not in so many words, but in their actions. You know who you are.

What if more of us internalized this understanding?

And what if we extend this idea to money? We might say that we donate to organizations that are important to us, but not to organizations that are ours. We don’t donate to our families. Belonging to a church means caring for it and paying for it, not because of what we get, not even because it’s important, but because we are it. And it is us.

And, because it is us, even in uncertain times, gifts to Albany UU are gifts to ourselves, and to people we care about. They’re more like acts of kindness, than donations to a cause.

In this congregation, that is not like other institutions, that reframing invites us out of the transactional and into the relational. It asks us to appreciate past acts of kindness that we receive now. And to pass that kindness along. I can’t predict the future, but I am confident that people (possibly including future you) will need a thriving Albany Unitarian Universalist to heal their spirits and change their hearts for a long time to come.

(3) Which brings me to the third reason why this might be a time to be hopeful in supporting Albany UU. At this moment, you’re not just trying to continue along a well-worn path. Beginning the process that will lead to calling a new minister is a moment of great possibility.

And what is possible will be determined, in part, by the resources given now. It’s in your hands. And from what I’ve seen, your hands can be trusted to hold that future with care, courage and generosity.

This church that belongs to you, that is you, is special. I really mean that. Your next minister will be fortunate to find their way here - to this congregation that overcomes challenges and keeps on striving to do what it’s here to do - healing spirits and changing hearts. And saving the world.

Whatever brought you here today, whatever you need in the future ...

May we make it so.

Amen.

⁴ https://www.patheos.com/blogs/irreverin/2017/04/church-not-need-volunteers/?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email