



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

“Return Again”

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Centering Thoughts:

*“In returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be your strength.”--
Isaiah 30:15*

“Originality consists in returning to the origin.” –Antonie Gaudi

*“The person then takes off on a series of adventures beyond the ordinary, either to recover what has been lost or to discover some life-giving elixir. It's usually a cycle, a coming and a returning.” — Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces**

Reflection by Lee Cornell, *Immediate Past President of the Board of Trustees:*

There is something hard to explain that occurs when a congregation's faith leader steps away. Something real, powerful, and deeply meaningful attaches itself to the pastoral relationship. Something that is at the same time both symbolic and personal. During a sabbatical, “it” is missing, and “it” is missed. The absence of this “it” was felt on the Board of Trustees during Rev. Alison's sabbatical.

Our Minister has a non-voting role on the Board of Trustees, improving insight into our programmatic activities, mentorship in managing a congregation, pastoral care during trying times, and to bring with her the training and experience of a professional religious leader. But these roles were not the “it” that was missing.

To maintain clear communications between the Board and the Ministry Council and to bring programmatic insight, our Lay Ministers gave us yet another few hours of their time so that, on a rotating basis, one of them could attend the Board meetings. This practice, while intended to be temporary during the sabbatical, proved so beneficial to both groups that we plan to continue it. Yet that “it” was still missing.

As President there were times that I needed mentorship, guidance, institutional knowledge, or just a sounding board for my thoughts. Thankfully, I was able to call upon our Past-Presidents during these times and find the support I was seeking. Yet that “it” was still missing.

This past spring, as the congregational meeting drew close, the Board found itself in need of pastoral care to work through the growing emotions and tensions around the upcoming votes. Reverend Don graciously agreed to meet with us and provided the care and wisdom we needed. Yet that “it” was still missing.

We prepared for the next steps of our building expansion. We thanked committees for their service and called new ones together. We elected new officers. We balanced the budget. We fine-tuned our policy documents. We faced challenges, questions, and problems; we discussed them, and when possible, resolved them by calling on our loving community to be part of the discussions. All the while that “it” was missing.

Being without helps us appreciate what we have. This mysterious “it” was missing on the

Board during Alison's sabbatical; I felt "it" missing in the choir and our music program during Amber's sabbatical; and I'm sure some felt "it" missing in RE during Morgan's sabbatical. Through it all, we carried on. We came together to provide the tangible support, wisdom, knowledge, and love that was needed. Still, at the end of the sabbatical we are very grateful for our leaders' returnings, the return of that mysterious "it," and to once again feel whole.

Reflection by Hilda Kurtz, *Connections & Outreach Lay Minister*:

There was quite a bit going on at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens (UUFA) and in the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) as the time for Alison's sabbatical approached. UUA President Morales had stepped down early amid concerns about diversity and inclusion in the national organization. Closer to home, the UUFA Ministry Council had decided to act upon the UUA's encouragement to bring the UUA's Declaration of Conscience to a congregational vote. Months of work by the Exploring Racial Justice Taskforce had led to a proposed resolution on racial justice, and, as you know, these two resolutions, one from national, one homegrown, were slated for votes at the annual congregational meeting in late May. After months of work by the Exploring Our Vision (EOV) Committee, a vote was slated at the congregational meeting on moving forward with the building expansion. Morgan, UUFA's Director of Religious Education, had announced her resignation, effective at the end of May. People were tired, maybe a little worn out, and still, there was a lot on the plate of those members of the Fellowship who had found themselves in leadership positions. So there was some disruption, uncertainty, and some trepidation about how all of these things would resolve.

But here's the thing: We had processes lined up for moving forward—yes, we revisited some of them, and collectively recognized that there was little to do but go forward. But the processes which fellow members of UUFA had crafted over countless hours of care and thought served the Fellowship well during Reverend Alison's absence, as they do in the normal course of things. Processes which set important guidelines for what can be done and how, and thus focus collective attention on moving forward to resolve various issues. The Ministry Council itself is a set of processes set in motion by Reverend Alison—the Lay Minister training, the formation of the Ministry Council, its relationship to the Board, and so on. The processes were like train tracks, pointing us along a path of work. A hiring process through which to find Morgan's replacement. A voting process through which to bring congregational resolutions to a vote. And so on.

To continue the analogy, if the guidelines are like train tracks, then we can respect and appreciate the work of those who laid the tracks, and those who may lay future tracks for our Fellowship.

I was quite new to the Ministry Council, having only started in late January—so had attended no more than three Ministry Council meetings before Reverend Alison departed. I was still getting used to the ways of UUFA leadership. And still am, I'm sure. And here is what I learned: The engines in my analogy are the leadership committees of the Fellowship, who work with tremendous good will and good grace and just plain smarts, to push and pull the train along the tracks. As Reverend Alison left for sabbatical, there may have been a little fog on the tracks, but the Ministry Council kept doing what it does, respecting its own processes, listening, discussing, deciding, recording, acting. And the opportunity to do so while Reverend Alison enjoyed a well-earned sabbatical was an opportunity for growth. An opportunity to settle in to how well our processes work, how important listening is, how much good will and kindness matter.

I'd say that the leadership committees have done well keeping the trains on the tracks, and perhaps cresting a hill to consider a broad new horizon of possibility.

Reflection by the Rev. Don Randall, *Affiliated Community Minister*:

Rev. Alison, you will be happy to know that while you have been gone we have taken pretty good care of ourselves. We have grieved the loss of some treasured members and welcomed new folks. We have had accidents and illnesses. There have been hospitalizations, along with more hours of inpatient and outpatient rehab than some folks care to remember.

With Susan Ponsolt's finger on the pulse of the Fellowship, we have survived. But, as you know, pastoral care was more than Susan and me. The regular pastoral care team played tag-team all summer, as someone was almost always away. But most enlightening to me was my awareness of the general membership visiting, phoning and feeding those of us in need.

I have learned that modern technology is a two-edged sword. Information flows more rapidly but it also flows without direction. That is, in the minister's direction. After a few days away from Facebook, I have been surprised to learn someone had surgery or had been ill, and I was the last to know. (I'm sure none of you are guilty of that!). Amazingly, many responses of support and caring had already flowed out from our membership.

It has been truly impressive to see the members of the Fellowship take care of one another. When it comes to pastoral care, you've facilitated this congregation to be a caring committee of the whole.

And, we are so glad to have back our pastor-in-chief!

Welcome home, Rev. Alison!

Reflection by the Rev. Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, *Minister, returning from sabbatical* (an approximation of spoken words):

(*Lightly responding to earlier remarks*) Rev. Don, don't think your job is over just because I'm back! And, Lee, I don't think I've ever had the privilege of being someone's 'it' before. Thank you.

And thank you all for giving me the gift of a sabbatical. You'll hear more about my adventures and activities particularly during the next two Sundays, but for today I was asked to share at least one way I was changed during my time away.

What changed is that I return to you with a greater sense of *aliveness*.

Of course, I'm as much alive now as I was when I left, but my spirit, my sense of awareness of the beauty, wonder, and joy of being alive, burns brighter. I didn't realize just how feeble my spiritual flame was when I left in March. In our seven years together we made many significant changes together. Here are just a few:

- We reduced responsibilities of Board members,
- Added a Lay Ministry training program and a Ministry Council to take on what the Board let go of ,
- Added a second Sunday worship service to ease sanctuary seating and parking lot congestion,
- Added 3 fun summer camp programs,
- Adopted two racial justice resolutions,

- Approved designs for building and parking expansions, and
- Conducted a successful capital campaign to pay for these improvements.

These accomplishments occurred after many committee meetings, surveys, Town Halls, and Congregational Meetings, offering time for reflection and comments from as many people as possible.

Making all these changes was exhausting for me, and I know it was for you, too. But you can step back anytime you choose; I cannot. I needed the sabbatical to step back, recharge, and get ready for what comes next. And I am recharged and ready to immerse myself in the life of UUFA once again.

The highlight of my sabbatical was a Celtic spirituality pilgrimage. Visiting ancient holy sites restored my body and spirit. For nearly three weeks I enjoyed rainy, windy, chilly, days in beautiful Ireland. Far from being made miserable by the weather, I loved fully feeling all that the earth and sky brought me, especially the many, many rainbows that appeared when the sun came out. In one day I saw at least eight rainbows!

While exploring ancient church ruins I imagined hearing the ghosts of praying monks. While watching newborn lambs frolicking in emerald green pastures alongside graveyards, their joy made me smile. I felt alive to what has been and what will be, a connection to the great circle of life and time.

Just as I had difficulty leaving you for five months, when I was in Athens I had difficulty staying away. Paul claimed I was in a witness protection program, but I often felt exiled, as required by a sabbatical's intentional break from normal routines and responsibilities. I valued the break, but it reminded me how important you are to me and how intertwined our lives are. Coming full circle back to you makes me come alive, too.

While I was gone, I know you took good care of each other – you furthered our mission, and you welcomed many newcomers. All this was possible because of UUFA's terrific leaders serving on the Board and Ministry Council, the Worship Arts Committee, Pastoral Care Team, and Religious Exploration Search Committee, plus Sabbatical Liaison Jane Mayer and pastoral minister Rev. Don Randall, as well as staff members Amber Fetner, Crystal Wu, Kelli McConnell, and Shaye Gambrell. Thank you so much for your excellent stewardship.

The year ahead offers us all new opportunities to brighten our beacon. I look forward to sharing that journey with you.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. What do you think is the purpose of "sabbatical"? Explain.
2. How did Rev. Alison's sabbatical impact your UUFA experience? Why?
3. When, where, how have you taken a sabbatical away from your everyday life? What did you learn from that experience?