"The (Un)Choreographed Community"
A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
at the First Parish in Wayland, MA
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As many of you know, here at First Parish we have a monthly newsletter entitled *The Unitarian*. As the name suggests, the newsletter predates the 1961 merger of the Unitarians and the Universalists that created the Unitarian Universalist Association. Indeed, per the research of one of the members of our Archives committee, Liz LeBaron, the first volume of the Unitarian was published Feb. 1, 1951.

Several weeks ago I stopped by the sunroom to visit with the archive committee and was shown one of these early volumes of the Unitarian. A short article on the page caught my eye. The blurb read:

> The 1640 Club will meet again one week from tonight, Friday, March 28, at 6:30pm. A covered dish supper will be served. The accent of the meeting will be on getting acquainted. There were so many new faces at the last meeting that it was decided a social meeting designed to get better acquainted with the new members was definitely needed. Therefore, an evening of dancing has been planned: all kinds of dancing, popular, round, square, reel, and all other, if ther [sic] are others. So plan to attend and bring your friends whom you feel would be good members.

There is so much I love about this short blurb. I love that it is for a club that is meeting *again*. In this one word, "again", there is a whole history of meetings. This is not a one-off gathering, but part of an ongoing group that signifies continuity and commitment.

While this may be one gathering in a continuing series, apparently not all meetings were the same. Rather, the blurb specifies that there is a *particular accent* and purpose to this meeting. *This* meeting is intended to help people get acquainted. A problem has been identified—there are lots of new people and not everyone knows each other. Having recognized the issue, a plan is hatched to help people become acquainted. You can almost imagine the planning:

> "Did you notice all the new people at the last meeting? ... Yes, I did. There must have been a half dozen new faces that I didn't know... Me too. I think we need a way for everyone to get acquainted, but how? .... Well, I always like a potluck...Yes, but we *always* have potlucks...How about a game night? .... No, Ann, not everyone likes Bridge as much as you.....What about a dance? Everyone likes to dance!....Betsy, I

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think you're on to something....Yes, let's host a dance....I think we should still have everyone bring a covered dish.....Ok, a dance with food."

And an event is born.
I wonder how many people came to that dance. I imagine that the dance happened right below us in the vestry—where we will again be holding a dance this Friday . . . more than 60 years after the one advertised in this historic *Unitarian* blurb.

Indeed, the dance is not the only the event in the historic *Unitarian* that resembles our life together today. There is also a call for singers to join in the choir for the special Easter music. And, there is a lengthy blurb about the upcoming Alliance Rummage Sale to be held on April 5.

And yet, some things have changed. There is a short blurb thanking two women, Mrs. Pierpont Blair and Emily Blair for addressing the *Unitarian* as well as requests for other volunteers to address future *weekly* editions of the *Unitarian*. While we can and do mail out a dozen or so Unitarians monthly, we do now have the convenience of computer printed labels!

Another difference from 1951 is the weekly attendance that was recorded. On March 9, there were 43 at the church service, 24 in the church school, and 8 teachers for a total of 75 people in attendance. Our service last Sunday on March 8 had a total of 120 which included all ages as it was the Youth Service.

This volume of the *Unitarian* also announced a gathering of area-wide Unitarians for a conference featuring four panels whose names may sound quaintly dated, but whose content remains very relevant:

1) "Making the Standing Committee Run" – or, as a blog I read last week was titled, "How to Spend Your Board's Time."
2) "Raising the Where-With-All" – there's no surprise here that raising funds is a perennial topic!
3) "Winning New-Comers"—or, as we often hear today . . . "outreach" to attract new people and families.
4) "Church School Vitamins"—I'm going to guess this was a clever way of indicating conversation about how to create and sustain a "healthy" religious education program. A topic still *very* important to us today!

As the Hebrew Scriptures say in Ecclesiastes 1:9, "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun."

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There is indeed much about our life together that does reflect ongoing programs and needs, challenges and cherished practices. Yet, there *are* also ways that our community shifts and changes. For one thing we're no longer sending out weekly *Unitarians* with handwritten labels!

Yet, even in these historic *Unitarians*, we can see the shifts and changes of congregational life. The headline article of the very first issue was entitled "Teen-agers Organize." The article recounts how 16 teenagers gathered to *create* a new group. They chose to affiliate with the national organization, American Unitarian Youth, and they elected a slate of officers. They also had a party of "delicious hamburgers, salad, potato chips, soda-pop, cup cakes and brownies." Apparently they liked eating together because they also made a plan to bring food to future meetings and to charge dues of 15 *cents* each week to pay for beverages. After listing the names of all those in attendance, the article concludes with this sentence: "Rev. Manker led the group in games, square and circle dancing, and George Butler played the piano for the group singing."

There we go again—more dancing! So why is there so much dancing going on at First Parish?! Let me say that growing up as an evangelical Christian we did *not* have *any* dancing at church!

I'm glad that dancing together is a part of the history and ongoing life of First Parish for a couple of reasons. First of all, dancing is a bodily action. Admittedly, some of us may move more of our bodies than others when we dance. Yet, even if your speed is simply sitting on the edge of the dance floor tapping your foot to the music, dancing inspires bodily movement. We're a pretty heady bunch in this room—I'll include myself in this. And while the life of the mind holds many merits that bring both intellectual pleasure as well as social benefit, there *is* more to life than what goes on within our heads. We are bodily creatures who move through our lives with muscle and bone, blood and sweat. As your heartbeat quickens and your lungs gulp for more air, dancing reminds us of the gifts of embodied movement. As blood and oxygen flow through every capillary to every fingertip and toe, we are reminded of life itself pulsing through us. As dancer Pearl Primus said, "Dance is life."

Dance *is* life. It is a bodily expression of life *and* it is a cultural expression of our life together. It is hard to imagine human culture without dance. Dance is a worldwide phenomena spanning millennia. Dance is referenced in ancient religious texts from Hinduism to Judaism, Greek myth to Buddhism.

And dance continues to permeate our own culture including formal performances, celebrations such as weddings, social gatherings from high schools to churches, or even in

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your living room in your underwear like the famous scene with Tom Cruise in the movie *Risky Business.* Once you start to look, you realize that dancing is everywhere in culture and in history.

Yet, dance has not only functioned to retain cultural traditions through familiar songs and movements. Dance has also functioned to *challenge* cultures. Early 20th century African-American scholar, choreographer, and dancer Pearl Primus exemplified both in her life. As an anthropologist of African dance, she researched, learned, performed, and taught African dances both in the U.S. and in Africa. But she also used dance as protest to the contemporary lived experiences of African Americans *within* the U.S. as well. For example, she widely performed a dance set to the 1937 poem "Strange Fruit" by Abel Meerpol—words made famous by Billie Holiday's song of the same title. In the dance, Primus' haunting choreography conveys a woman lamenting a lynching—the "strange fruit" of Southern trees.

In these ways, dance can be a bodily expression of our best traditions *and* of our longings for something more, something better. Sometimes words are not enough to express an idea, a memory, or an aspiration. Sometimes we need bodily expression; we need material form.

I think our life as a community is a lot like a dance. *As a community, we are the embodied form of our traditions as well as the expressions of our aspirations*. Let me explain what I mean.

As a community, we embody a number of traditions that have been passed down to us from prior generations. As the historic volumes of the *Unitarian* suggest, there are certain traditions that have been a part of congregational life for decades—such as the Women's Alliance Rummage Sale. While some traditions we can date as relatively recent—such as the beginning of the *Unitarian* or a Sunday evening youth group, others come from even older traditions than our 375 years—such as gathering for worship on Sunday mornings.

By continuing these traditions, we embody a set of movements and practices that resemble a kind of community dance. By following familiar patterns such as Water Sunday in September, Rummage in April, and Flower Sunday in June, we are a *choreographed* dance in which people know their familiar places and movements. As someone new to this community, this established choreography feels evident as I try to learn its moves and rhythms.

Yet, dance not only embodies inherited traditions of movement, it can also serve as a vehicle to express new and creative ways of moving through the world individually and as

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a community. Like her near contemporary Martha Graham, Pearl Primus helped to reimagine dance. Short, stocky, and dark-skinned, Pearl even challenged the very idea of what a dancer should look like. By blending emerging ideas of modern dance, research on traditional African dances, and the lived experience of African Americans of her time, Pearl creatively expressed herself through dances unlike any others previously seen. Through the creation of new dances, she expressed her aspirations not only for new ways of moving, but also for new ways of being in the world.

So also, I believe that as a community, we too need to explore how to blend tradition, new ideas, and the lived experiences of our contemporary world. This blending is in fact itself not new. For example, in the third week of publishing the new *Unitarian,* we learn that "the church now owns a mimeograph machine." Blending the need to communicate with new technologies is part of the ongoing dance of community life. So also, the emergence of new hymnals every few decades reflects the blending of the tradition of congregational singing with shifting cultural sensitivities of language and song.

Yes, we gather for community and we value this community. But community does not just happen. Like an intentional relationship, building our congregational community takes work. It takes some rather intricate choreography. Many of these patterns of movement are beloved and well-known. This familiarity gives us many of our cherished experiences of connection and community. Yet, sometimes, we also need to make space for new kinds of dances. For each generation to be able to express their own song and their own moves as they find their place in our shared community dance.

While we may not know what the First Parish community will look like in another sixty years or six years or even six months, what we do know is that one reason we gather together is *for* community. We are intentional about being in relationship with one another—even in our differences, even when it's not simple or easy. We gather in community in order to affirm our sense that a life *together* is better than a life lived alone.

Pearl Primus wrote, "I dance not to entertain but to help people better understand each other. Because through dance I have experienced the wordless joy of freedom, I seek it more fully now for my people and for all people everywhere." At its best, I believe that the dance of community can help us to better understand each other. From the inherited traditions embedded in our choreography to the creative innovations of new generations, dancing together in community helps us to learn more about one another.

Around the time of the New Year, Keith Sims shared a Youtube video on our UUWayland list-serv. I included this link in last week's e-blast and you can watch the video during coffee hour if you wish. This video of a man, Matt, dancing with people all over the world

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inspired this sermon. Watching the diversity of people and of dances reminds us of how very vast our human community is with all of its particularities as well as how very similar we are in our love of dance. Dance embodies our traditions and also allows us to express our innovations and aspirations. By uniting *for* community, we enter into a dance together with both a well-known choreography as well as creative innovations that blend in new generations and cultural contexts. We dance together to express our joy, to care for one another, and to learn about one another.

So may it be. Amen.

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