

“A Sustainable Future”

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First Parish in Wayland

My son was born at 21:12 at night. A time that made my then-husband very happy as “2112” is the name of an album by his favorite band *Rush*. All I knew is that I was exhausted, hungry, and cold. After all the bustle of the hospital staff checking over me and my son as well as first glimpses and photos with grandparents and great-grandparents, I was relieved to finally be settled into a darkened room for some sleep. Except there beside me was a little bassinet with my tightly swaddled son and as I tried to fall asleep, I worried, “is he breathing?!”

There, in that moment of worry for his sustained life I felt like I became a parent. A quarter-century later, I still catch myself wondering where he is and if he’s all right. Sometime in high school as he became more independent from me, he learned to accept that sometimes he would get texts or calls from me simply seeking “proof of life.” *Are you still breathing?*

Taking responsibility to sustain life—for oneself or another—is not small thing. As Maggie Smith writes in her poem “Good Bones,” there is much in life to be worried about. “*The world is at least fifty percent terrible, and that’s a conservative estimate.*” She tries to keep this from her children, she writes. I don’t blame her. It seems a pretty natural thing to do to wish to protect children from the awfulness of life.

Recently, I tried to remember what it felt like to be a kid. To be innocent of so much of the conflict, heartbreak, injustice, and destruction that my adult-self mucks through daily. Sometimes there are glimpses, right? A sunny spring day of bird song, the cold sweetness of ice cream on a summer afternoon, the openness to a day with no agenda but play. Even as adults aware of all that could and does go wrong in the world, we still know the good. There *are* the children that are loved, the strangers who are kind, the delicious ways we enjoy life. There *is* the fifty percent wonder that resides amidst the fifty percent terrible. There *are* the good bones of a world that could be beautiful, right?!

For me, being part of a religious community sustains me as I live in a world that is both terrible and full of beauty. Last fall, in a sermon entitled, “Why Bother with Religion?,” I laid out my belief that we need multi-generational communities of love where we feel we belong. Amidst the flood of all that life brings, we need ways to navigate the complexity of choices and relationships. We need to be able to make sense of what is happening, or at least, to not feel alone as we encounter the inexplicable. Religion meets that need by bringing people together into communities of care and a shared search for meaning.

But like life itself, religion evolves, shifts, and changes. Throughout this year, we have caught a glimpse of this as we explored a variety of religious traditions—each with its own story of beginnings, expansion, and change. We embarked on this journey because of our awareness that the religious landscape within the U.S. has become vastly more diverse in recent decades. Deepening our knowledge and respect for the religious diversity among us cultivates a sense of perspective for our own Unitarian Universalist tradition, for this congregation, and, for our own spiritual search. Religion is bigger than any one of us, any one congregation, any one tradition. Religion is the story of how people come together in diverse ways in a desire to live meaningfully and well.

As we look to the future, the story of religion has many places of uncertainty and change. For example, in the latest analysis of the Pew Research Center on the [future of religion in America](#), the most likely prediction is that Christians could make up less than half of the U.S. population within a few decades. To reach this forecast, they track trends of “religious switching,” which is to say the patterns of people changing religious affiliation—many from Christian to “none.”

Unitarian Universalists are generally too small in number to be effectively tracked by Pew. But membership statistics on the Unitarian Universalist Association website for 1961-2020 suggest decline in UUism as well. According to the 2020 [“Widening the Circle of Concern Report”](#) issued by the UUA, there were closer to 819 congregations in 2020 rather than the 1000 congregations often referred to in UU discussions. While the numbers are not yet available online, the impact of the pandemic has stressed many congregations and there are likely more congregations that have elected to merge and/or close.

In the face of decline, religious leaders and congregations are seeking ways to reverse or at least slow the loss. Uncertain about the path forward, it can be easy to look back to times with more members for ideas on how to “fix” today’s problems. But today’s world does not look like the world of yesterday.

The *Widening the Circle of Concern* report also points to national demographic shifts towards more racial and ethnic diversity, including a rise in those who are multiracial. Increasingly we do not live in monocultural contexts, which changes expectations around cultural competency. We need new skills and mental frameworks for living in pluralistic communities of cultural differences.

Additionally, *Widening the Circle*, names the bleaker future that many newer generations face relative to those nearer retirement. Rising costs of education, student loans, housing, and childcare places significant financial strain on today’s younger adults.

And, after decades of headlines linking religion with violence, anti-LGBTQ bigotry, sexual misconduct of religious leaders, and more, many have soured on the very idea of religious affiliation.

All of this is to say, there are some pretty stiff headwinds for religious congregations these days—especially those that do not adapt to address the shifting multicultural context, the challenges facing younger adults, and the negative press of religious life.

As your minister these past nine years, I have sought to help this congregation strengthen its capacity to respond to the current challenges and context in which we find ourselves. We live in a world that is at least fifty percent terrible. And there is a lot of pain around us. Loneliness, addiction, and bigotry. War, poverty, and climate Change. And, just this week we saw headlines of another push of immigrants at the U.S. border fleeing untenable situations in their home countries. All around us people are seeking to simply *live*, to foster life for themselves, their children, their families. All around us there are people clinging to the hope of good bones, of a more beautiful world.

For all of us the future is hazy with unknowns. Living through a global pandemic imprinted this deep in all of us. And yet still the future beckons. When I think about the future, the word that comes up again and again is sustainable. What does a *sustainable* future look like? How can we sustain ourselves, our communities, our ecosystem? Sustainable is more than a trendy word; sustainable points to a commitment to helping life to flourish. While I cannot go as deeply as I'd like, I'll sketch out a few thoughts for what a sustainable future might look like.

As individuals, I think sustainability means following the old adage to “know thyself.” Know what restores you. Know what wears you down. Say no and seek balance between what drains you and what renews you. As I understand it, this commitment to balance among many younger adults is what is driving trends to shorter work-weeks, continued remote work, and, yes, perhaps lower volunteerism. To me, this is okay. We need to live sustainably with how much we can in fact handle. We also need to be deeply mindful that we now live within an economy actively vying for our attention through ads, social media, and media of all kinds. To what will we give our precious, *limited* attention? It's okay to make choices and to not do it all. Know thyself—your passions and values, your weaknesses and limits, and your best practices for sustaining your spirit.

As congregations and religious communities, I think a sustainable future responds to the current context while being rooted in the past. The past has a role by providing a sense of story and meaning that feels substantive and grounding. But the throughline from the past to today and on to the future is meeting the spiritual needs of the present. What do people

need *today* from First Parish? What capacities does First Parish *currently* have to meet some of those needs? Sustaining the life of a congregation means evolving and changing as the world evolves and changes. That does not mean everything changes—core values remain, even if the language we use to express them changes. Sustaining this congregation—and Unitarian Universalism more broadly—means engaging in the process of a change which inevitably comes. The question is not *whether* to change, but *how* to continue adapting to the current context of human spiritual need.

And today's context includes the reality of a climate changed by human activity. Sustainability in the eco-system means letting go of our ease exceeding the limits of what the planet can bear. All the enthusiasm of an ever-expanding "progress" born from an industrial revolution must now be tempered with the knowledge of real harm. While technology from wind farms to heat pumps will have a role to play in a more sustainable future, I suspect we will also be asked to change how we daily live, how we vote, and which values we place first as we try together to mitigate the worst of the harm. I think it's fair to say that there will be a good percentage of terrible in the years to come from extreme weather, failed crops, water wars, mass extinctions, and more. But amidst the harm, I want to be the realtor looking at the good bones and asking, "This place could be beautiful, right?"

This place could be beautiful and life affirming. This place could help sustain individuals and families and communities and a whole eco-system. *This* place, First Parish, can and already is a part of that work of actively hoping for a more beautiful world. After more than 383 years, 5 meetinghouses, 32 settled ministers, and tens of thousands of people gathering each Sunday, First Parish is still breathing, still alive. If you need "proof of life," just look around to see one another, read the e-blast or Unitarian to see all that is happening, and come next Sunday to hear from several of our high school youth and to vote in the Annual Meeting as the congregation moves together into another year.

In a living world of ongoing change, you can shape the future of First Parish by continuing to show up and engage. You could sustain the beauty found here. And while I no longer be among you next year, I believe that you will not just keep breathing, but that you have all the capacity you need to continue sustaining the life of one another and this congregation. I believe you will keep making something beautiful here.

So may it be.
Amen.