

TO EVERYTHING THERE IS A SEASON  
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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Gainesville  
(The final sermon)  
June 10, 2018

Twelve years ago, a once-upon-a-time Canadian left her North Carolina home to brave the wilds of ministry in Atlanta. And thus did this minister and her partner begin the biggest adventure of their lives. Transition ministry – moving every couple of years. . . Atlanta . . . Philadelphia. . . Vero Beach . . . Bethesda . . . St. Louis . . . San Antonio . . . then to Gainesville, for a three year gig with you.

I'll tell you a secret: Transition ministry is weird. Our job is to enter a congregation, to help with some very specific things. Then, when the time comes, our job is to LEAVE. To help wrap our minds around this, maybe to normalize our nomadic life, many transition ministers adopt a symbol. I settled on a PANDA.

The Panda, remember. She walked into a café, munched down a sandwich. Then from heaven knows where, she pulled a gun. Shot off two blanks, and headed for the door. The counterman was stunned. *“What the heck is going on?”* The Panda shrugged, threw him a tattered (and badly punctuated) wildlife manual. *“I’m a Panda,”* she shrugged. *“Look it up.”* Sure enough, there it was on Page 43: *“PANDA. Large black-and-white bear-like mammal, native to China. Eats [comma], shoots and leaves.”*

Yep, as a Transition Minister, I’m a bit of a Panda. I eat, I shoot off my mouth, and then I leave.

Think about it: we’ve done a whole lot of eating over the past three years.

- Something like 80 people sharing annual Thanksgiving dinners.
- Potlucks that could be legendary.
- Stewardship luncheons,
- celebratory cakes, and of course,
- the weekly coffee hour magic.

UUFG has the eating part nailed.

And then for “shooting off our mouths” – we’ve done that too! Taking, sharing, getting things done. Let me just lift up some of what we’ve been about.

What comes to my mind first isn’t very sexy. Stuff like bylaws. Whether this grabs you or not, *flexible structure is THE* foundation of congregational health. And so a Governance Task Force of **Pete Runyan, Harry Mangle, Aaron Broadwell and Marilyn**

**Kershner** (and me) gave dozens of hours to draft a streamlined and functional set of bylaws – and you, the congregation, dug in and got them approved. Your board accepted an organization structure flexible enough to see you through many years. Okay, your policies still need attention - but, hey, you need some tasks for the year to come!

You now have re-energized teams in **Worship, in Membership, Leadership Development, Finance, CYREC** and more. Thanks to **Heather McAuslane and Sandra Topp**, it looks like coffee hour cleanup is now shared. The Young Adults group is booming. Plans for **adult religious education** are ready to roll.

When it comes to outreach, your impact in the wider world has significantly increased. You've more than doubled your exposure on Facebook, and that led directly to last year's major article in Our Town Magazine.

- Your monthly Share The Plate collection - wow! – did you know that to date you've donated **\$15,170.62** to the wider community?
- Under **Peter Marino's** leadership, the monthly letter-writing campaign is making it easier for you to put your values out into the world.
- You've recommitted to Family Promise, with a new partnership with Temple Shir Shalom.
- Your minister's activity with Alachua County Faith Leaders Alliance has amplified UUFG's footprint in the progressive faith community and has led to a number of opportunities to present UU values in the wider world.
- And through your new membership in Welcoming Gainesville, there are several exciting interfaith activities on the horizon.

Do you see what I mean? **We have done good work.** Which is what it is about.

### **Shared Ministry.**

And in terms of shared ministry, my gratitude is boundless toward **Thomas Royal** and the Chalice **choir**. With **Heather Arata** as your Director of Religious Education, you now have a skilled and competent religious professional for whom UUFG is not just a temporary placement but a potentially life-long career. And, let's not forget the absolute anchor of UUFG, **Cam Pierce**, **THE finest administrator** with whom I've had the privilege to serve.

(I think it's important to note that, **with the exception of your minister**, all your staff now receive salaries at what the Unitarian Universalist Association calls "fair compensation level." This is fabulous, and no small accomplishment! But that "exception" – your minister's compensation – will need attention as you search for a settled minister to start in 2019.)

In the money can be fun category, we owe thanks to **Sandra Topp** and her team for another really fun silent auction fundraiser and **Lynne Capehart** and **Deborah McEdward** for fabulous fundraising parties. But surely the **Most Awesome of the Year Award** goes to the stewardship team (**Liz Stewart, Mary Bahr, Debby Jo Malickson, Paul Avery and Tom Mareci**) who pulled off the most successful – and the fastest! – stewardship campaign ever. And to all of YOU who, with your pledges, said loud and clear: We believe in this congregation. We care about its future.

**My friends, more than anything:  
THIS MATTERS.**

We came together in this Developmental Ministry to do good work – and my friends, that is part of what we accomplished.

Is everything perfect?

No.

Did everything get done?

*Not entirely.*

But we're not here to make a movie. This is a community of humans, being and becoming.

- There's been all that other stuff – like hurricanes, and floods. Like Richard Spencer . . . and elections . . . and the rising impact of hate.
- Like losing far too many good friends to the end of their lives.
- We've stopped off to celebrate holidays and anniversaries and baby dedications and weddings.
- You installed a new carpet, and added a roof.

So much has happened. **At today's speed of change, three years is an AGE.** But here's a truth of Transition Ministry: even ages come have to end.

From serving seven congregations in transition, and spending 17 years as a settled pastor, it is clear to me that, no matter how long or how short **ALL** ministries have a beginning, a middle, and an end. **THE** primary reason ministers – and indeed senior church staff - the primary reason they get into trouble is that **they stayed too long.** I've seen it in every congregation I served. I see it in the history of UUFG.

Things are going well. Everybody's happy. The minister or the staff member stays. Then there's a bubble here. A misunderstanding there. But leaving would cause enormous upheaval. So in a "see no evil/hear no evil" kind of way, everybody digs into denial. Nothing gets fixed, and sooner or later – with whole bunch of pain – things explode.

*It's a basic rule of thumb: the successful minister leaves BEFORE everybody else decides it's time.*

Which is part of why Transition Ministers commit to leaving cleanly and completely, at the originally agreed time. Remember the bridge builder (from the reading)?

How the siblings urged her, "Stay on a while longer. We've got more work to do." "I'd love to," said the bridge builder. "But it's time for me to stop building bridges and find some of my own to cross."

I answered the call to ministry because I saw with my own eyes the healing and transforming potential of the liberal religious community. And for the past 32 years, Peter and I have invested ourselves almost 24/7 in helping that potential become real.

Let me be clear: Ministry is exhilarating. It is rewarding. Ministry can, in the most literal sense, be awesome. Ministry is usually challenging. And it is HARD.

It is time for the Panda to take a rest. Time for Peter and me to be deliberate about how we want to shape our lives. It'll be a different kind of adventure, heading out without a clear destination, but we're up for it. Twelve years of transition ministry have taught us about endings - and beginnings.

Peter and I plan to stay in Gainesville, but I remind you we will be absent from UUFG. I will be on call for serious pastoral emergencies, until August - (which is when your new minister arrives). **But other than that - it's time.** We're probably going to run into each other in Publix, or at a community event - and that's great! I look forward to greeting you, maybe sharing a hug. But in the wider sense, this "letting go" is a discipline of the spirit - for us all. Because, while some of us may grieve for a while, it is time for both minister and congregation to move on.

I pray that your adventures will be manageable, and your challenges strong enough to put your values to the test. From the Celtic tradition:

May the road rise to greet you.  
May the wind be always at your back.  
May the sun shine warm upon your face,  
and the rains fall soft upon your fields.  
And until we meet again,  
may you be held gently in the palm of God's hand.

With much love, Rev. Maureen

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