

Reaching Together: A Montage of Art Reflecting the Sacred Spaces in the Unitarian
Universalist Church of the Palouse

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by

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Authorization to Submit Thesis

This thesis of Alexa Brown, submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in Anthropology with a Major in Cultural Anthropology and titled "Reaching Together: A Montage of Art Reflecting the Sacred Spaces in the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Palouse," has been reviewed in final form. Permission, as indicated by the signatures and dates below, is now granted to submit final copies to the College of Graduate Studies for approval.

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Abstract

At the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Palouse (UUCP), emphasis is placed on the idea of community. This community stretches beyond the congregation, the city of Moscow, Idaho, and the greater Palouse region. The community of Unitarian Universalism believes that all humans have inherent worth and dignity, and this is reflected clearly in the actions of the congregants at UUCP. The research conducted in this study shows the deep ties to the community in this congregation as those shared values and a communal emphasis on activism are expressed by way of artistic expression. In this reflective interpretation of an ethnography, workshops and interviews focusing on art and community were the starting point for a reflexive, honest portrayal of the communal connections of UUCP. By way of poetry, paintings, and drawings, the findings of this qualitative research study thematically point to the focus on connections within and beyond the congregation of UUCP.

Acknowledgements

To my major professor, committee members, and the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, thank you for the constant support and wisdom throughout this process.

Dedication

Thank you to the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Palouse for the home away from home, my family for believing in me, my friends for standing by me no matter what, and to all the others who have been a part of this journey for sharing a piece of yourselves with me.

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Chapter 1: A Welcome Sanctuary

I remember the quietness of it all. The snow just beyond the windows fell to the ground in thick spirals, almost as if it was a barrier between the church basement and the rest of the world. There were only two of us there for the workshop, but the large and well-lit room felt warm and cozy despite its size. The two of us, surrounded by art supplies, alternated between conversation and easy quietness punctured only by the sound of paint brushes and colored pencils on paper. At one point, I asked if she wanted to listen to any specific music, and she suggested Loreena McKennitt. There was a brief moment in which we both sunk into our art, listening to the sound of new-age vocals, when I remembered a memory from my own childhood.

“You know, the first song I ever bought on iTunes was ‘Caribbean Blue’ by Enya when I was 11,” I said, breaking the spell of Loreena’s croons. Both of us laughed at the silly anecdote, but then she decided to share some of her own life experiences that went along with a new-age soundtrack. It was during this story that I recall feeling a distinct sense of something sacred joining us in the room. The acts of sharing, creating, and communing came together and formed a space in which two people became artists, became creators.

At the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Palouse (UUCP), where this workshop took place, artistic and spiritual exploration are encouraged and embraced. This ethnography is the product of reflexive interpretations of the stories I was privileged to encounter over the past year and a half. The people of UUCP and the stories they shared form a picture of human connection, artistic expression, and the importance of creating sacred spaces in which to commune. The paintings, poetry, and prose in the following pages are a direct result of the stories told by this welcoming community, and I sincerely hope I have done their stories justice.

Chapter 2: Methodology

The primary methodological tools utilized for this particular research endeavor consisted of qualitative techniques. These qualitative tools took shape as classic ethnographic staples including participant observation, in-depth interviews, communal focus group interviews, and reflexivity. Such qualitative units of measurement were and are still employed in the field of ethnography, spanning many theoretical schools of thought in the field of anthropology. This study drew on the work of several symbolic anthropologists, Clifford Geertz in particular. Geertz's favored use of 'thick description' to explain his ethnographic studies can be seen reflected in this thesis, albeit with a twist.¹ Thick description is a type of anthropological interpretation that utilizes in-depth description to humanize those participating in research and contextualizes what the ethnographer experienced and, as a result, interpreted during the process. Thick description places the researcher, and by proxy the reader, within the context of the research. I, the researcher, followed in the footsteps of many ethnographers before me by engaging in participant observation in Sunday morning services from the winter of 2016 to the spring of 2018, rich and fulfilling focus groups during workshops that developed artistic expression and community, four key in-depth, semi-structured interviews with church members selected by intensity sampling due to their knowledge of the community, and a healthy dose of reflexivity.

Instead of diving into a thesaurus-like description of my qualitative findings, I chose to process the information I learned in a way that felt, and still feels, more truthful to my own reflexive interpretation in regards to the community of the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Palouse (UUCP). The way that participating congregants chose to share their thoughts is reflective of some thematic threads that I found to be woven into each conversation, each service, and each interaction that occurred throughout this study. People did not sit down in the workshops and write essays detailing how they felt about themselves, Unitarian Universalism, or their beliefs. Rather, I asked participants to talk freely with me and each other while creating art in a casual setting. The resulting atmosphere was one of genuine companionship and communal reflection.

¹Erickson, Paul A., and Liam D. Murphy. *A History of Anthropological Theory*, Fourth Edition

However, due to the nature of the workshops and Sunday services, settling in to write a several-page-long research paper was never going to be the best way to portray the truth or heart of the study. Given that art is a primary mode of expression for the congregation at UUCP, as well as a form of communication that is close to my own heart, expressing my findings in works of art seems to be the only way I can convey this information truthfully. In the following pages, the reader will encounter paintings, drawings, and poetry that reflect the thematic elements drawn out of this study.

In order for this study to occur in the first place, there were some ethical guidelines that had to be met. I went through the IRB application process in collaboration with Dr. Rodney Frey, Reverend Elizabeth, and the church board at UUCP. I wrote a research proposal, created informed consent forms tailored to fit the qualitative nature of the study, and presented these materials to the church board and awaited their approval. Once I received the church's approval, I sent in my IRB application to the College of Graduate Studies. Participants in the subsequently approved study were all given informed consent forms to review and sign, as well as an extra copy to keep in case they had any questions later on and needed to either contact me, my committee, the university, or withdraw from the study.

Due to the personal and introspective nature of this autoethnography with UUCP, constant self-reflection was imperative. Autoethnography is a form of ethnographic research that connects the researchers autobiographical self-reflection and experiences to a wider cultural context, such as the community culture of UUCP. Autoethnographic research is reliant on reflexivity, and it almost became not just a tool, but also grew into a life of its own in the art presented later on in this thesis. Under the teaching of Dr. Rodney Frey, the importance of reflexivity has been deeply ingrained in all things I do now, not just in the world of research. To clarify, reflexivity involves maintaining an awareness of personal biases and worldviews while being aware of how those things may affect research.² This project became its own unique autoethnographic endeavor due to my own personal biases and worldview as presented through my own artwork. In the spirit of transparency, I feel it is imperative to explain my own personal history and ways of knowing because I believe it has quite clearly impacted this research.

² Ellis, Carolyn, and Arthur P. Bochner(2000)

As a child and as an adult, art has been a way to express my own feelings and thoughts about my identity and place in the world. Ever since I can remember, colors, shapes, textures, and aesthetics have subtly ruled the way I view the world around me. I grew up in an Evangelical Christian environment, and still maintain many of the beliefs imparted to me during those formative years, but the openness and ways of expression of those in the congregation at UUCP drew me in in a way that could be explained only by a reflexive interpretation in the form of art. At most Sunday morning services, there is a time for reflection after some form of art is shared. I have seen presentations of music, poetry, and storytelling shared freely and openly with the congregation and watched as the community, myself included, embraced these gifts time and time again. I was, and still am, quite taken with the beauty that is so willingly shared and celebrated in each interaction at UUCP.

My biases are relatively obvious. As a young white woman given the privilege of pursuing a graduate degree, as an adult who grew up in a middle class Christian family in the Midwest, and even as an artist, it is clear that my fascination with and eventual love for UUCP has left me with a research study that can portray the community only in a positive light. I only hope that, with sound methodology and theoretical ethnography as a base, I do the community of UUCP justice.

Chapter 3: Community Context

Unitarian Universalism may be a relatively young religion, but its roots are ancient. Unitarianism goes back to the theological debates and subsequent divisions of the Schism of 1045. The core ideas of Unitarianism are a rejection of the Holy Trinity and the idea of Jesus Christ as a deity, which was in turn rejected by the Western Church. Universalism, at its beginnings, stemmed from the beliefs that there is no such thing as Original Sin, Hell does not exist, and that reconciliation is universal, or that there are more ways to achieve eternal life than belief in Jesus Christ. These grew and melded together throughout the past centuries, eventually culminating in Unitarian Universalism. The official Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) was founded in 1961 and officially marked the collusion of Unitarianism and Universalism.

Unitarian and Universalism, religions based in liberal Christianity, rose in popularity in the 18th and 19th centuries, and the similar beliefs and practices culminated in the 20th century as they merged into Unitarian Universalism. In this particular instance, liberal Christianity was less theological and more focused on Enlightenment-inspired philosophies that look at religious texts within their historical contexts, and therefore is not a creedal faith. Ralph Waldo Emerson is a classic example of a Unitarian thinker and philosopher, and his work has influenced Unitarian Universalism as it exists today. Given these origins, there is no official creed for Unitarian Universalism, and congregants draw from most major world religions for spiritual growth and wisdom, and each individual Unitarian Universalist may have their own personal beliefs that vary widely within the wider international community. Faiths and beliefs commonly found in Unitarian Universalist congregations cover a wide range, including atheism, Christianity, paganism, Buddhism, Humanism, and many more religious roots that ultimately tie the community together in the common search for truth.

UUCP, or the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Palouse, mirrors this range on a smaller scale. UUCP's history is reflective of the religion's path, as UUCP can trace its roots to two different groups: the Pullman Unitarian Fellowship and another fellowship in Moscow, that came together in 1953 in Pullman, Washington. Over the next 30 years, the group consistently met despite not always having a primary meeting location until 1985, when they purchased the Swedish Lutheran Church in Moscow, Idaho. Thus, the Unitarian Church of the

Palouse, now called the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Palouse, had finally found a home. The congregation of UUCP is full of warm, kind, and welcoming people who are all striving to better both themselves and those around them.

There is a focus placed on community outreach at UUCP, and the church as a whole often participates in varying local events and marches. The church is a safe space for all people, no matter their sexuality, skin color, gender, or any other factors that may be discriminated against in some settings. The weight placed on communal ties and empathy for our fellow humans is inspiring, which in turn led me to invest my own time into understanding more about UUCP and its community so that others may know how welcome they are.

As it stands today, the community of UUCP shows a great appreciation for and participation in the arts. On the walls of the sanctuary, the lobby, and the basement fellowship room, various art pieces are often on display. The pieces are sometimes rotated out, showing the work of varied congregants. There are also some sculptural pieces in the sanctuary that seem to be relatively permanent installations. Unitarian Universalism, as a faith, focuses on the search for truth and human connections, and this particular community seems apt to artistic expression as a mode of understanding and processing these shared beliefs and principles. There are some groups made up of congregation members that meet regularly and engage in the process of spiritual, emotional, and intellectual growth by way of artistic mediums.

The Purple Paisley Quilters, for example, have been meeting weekly for over 20 years to quilt, knit, and participate in community outreach in a fellowship setting. Other congregation communities, like the choir or the folk dancing group, meet weekly and share in the joys of music. Other events, like the workshops Ginger Allen and I put together, do not meet in the same regular fashion as these established groups, but still allow for artistic expression, communal engagement, and spiritual growth in a relaxed setting. As Director of Lifespan Religious Exploration, Ginger often focuses on events and workshops that aid the community in personal growth as a whole.

In tandem with these ‘extracurricular’ activities outside of Sunday morning services, Reverend Elizabeth and Music Director Jon Anderson curate weekly services that share varied gifts of artistic expression. Through song, poetry, dance, spoken word, paintings,

drawings, and all other methods of storytelling, the services themselves become an active, cohesive work of art in a sense. All who are present are active participants in the masterpiece, in something that becomes sacred.

In these moments of confluence between active participants and creation, normal ideas of time and space are dissolved and replaced by liminality. As Eliade may have put it, these connections and spaces create what he referred to as 'hierophany,' or a manifestation of the sacred. These subsequent spaces between all participants become what can be referred to as sacred spaces. It is both intellectual and affective; it is a moment in which participants may 'feel' something. These sacred spaces usher forth truth and meaning, letting what is holy shine through as it is forged by the connections we make.

Chapter 4: Reflexive Interpretations

*In an instance, life becomes diaphanous,
 the only lines in life are created
 by us, by each other
 colors do not blur together
 they bump up against one another
 in this liminal space
 reflecting light and what we want to see
 our skin becomes a song
 we started mouthing the words to
 before we even understood
 the connections between them and us,
 you and I, one and the same,
 hands holding onto hands
 not for dear life, but in spite of it,
 creation cries out
 and we cry with it
 chests heaving, teeth bared,
 waiting for the sun to rise
 and show us ourselves again.
 -Alexa Brown, 2018*

Upon walking in the sanctuary doors of the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Palouse (UUCP), one is greeted by a warm and comforting atmosphere. Sunshine yellow walls, colorful glass windows that bathe the large-yet-not-too-large room in natural light, and artwork consuming the empty spaces all present themselves to anyone who steps in past the threshold. When I first found myself wandering into a Sunday morning service in November of 2016, I distinctly remember feeling immediately welcome, almost as if I had come home. Though I did in fact notice the sanctuary itself, the aesthetic impact of the space was next to nothing when compared to the people who filled it. Genuine smiles, exuberant engagement in the message, and kind words were shared amongst all of us aplenty. Though I had just arrived, I was considered a friend rather than a stranger.

There are seven principles in Unitarian Universalism, all supporting the primary goal of the religion: engaging in a “free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”³ These seven principles will be discussed and explored in further detail in later chapters, but to

³Buehrens, John A., and F. Forrester(1998)

refrain from mentioning them in an explanation of Unitarian Universalism would be remiss. In order, these are the principles:

1. *The inherent worth and dignity of every person;*
2. *Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;*
3. *Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;*
4. *A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;*
5. *The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;*
6. *The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;*
7. *Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.*⁴

Though there is no creed binding all members of Unitarian Universalism, this pursuit of truth and meaning brings congregants together in the quest for spiritual growth. By attending Sunday services and digging into conversations with fellow congregants, I found myself submerged in a rich community of kind hearts and giving souls.

A typical Sunday morning service follows a similar pattern each week. Music fills the sanctuary, along with the chatter and laughter of children, family, and friends all greeting each other after a week apart. The ceremonial gong can be heard throughout the space as an indication that it is time to begin the service. As people settle in, words of welcome and announcements are shared. The chalice, a symbol for Unitarian Universalism, is lit, and gifts of music, words, and art are shared. Joys and sorrows are shared by the lighting of candles and the congregation is invited into a time of thought and meditation. An offering is collected during the service, as well, and is usually accompanied by more music. The sermon itself is usually given by Reverend Elizabeth, but there are occasionally other speakers. By and large, the services at UUCP are focused on reflection, community, and pursuing truth and meaning. Afterwards, there is often a time for food and fellowship in the church basement. This has been a comforting space for many, myself included, as I have made quite a few friends while waiting for my tea to steep or when perusing the church library with a cup of hot cocoa in hand.

⁴ Sias, John, and Steve Edington(2007)

Over the course of several months, I worked with the Church Board, Reverend Elizabeth, and Ginger Allen to host three workshops based on the exploration of how participants from the congregation utilized art to express their own personal identities within and without Unitarian Universalism. Due to the personal nature of spiritual identities and the vulnerability of artistic expression, many participating members chose to remain anonymous. For the ease of reading and desire to honor the confidentiality the participants, no names have been used in the following discussion of the workshop interviews. These workshops, in tandem with Sunday services and some in-depth interviews outside of the workshops, painted a complex and beautiful portrait of a community in which people care deeply for one another and for all of humanity.

The next chapter shows the more direct results of this research study. Art was often described as a way to process, whether it was in services, workshops, or interviews. This is reflective of my own mental and emotional process, as I personally utilize art to make sense of the world around me. The connections forged between the participating congregants, myself, and the art created will stay with me beyond this single study. We are all connected, and the act of creation reminds us of where we come from. Given the cathartic nature of using our hands to create, the reflected paintings and drawings are subsequently my own reflexive interpretation of this interconnectedness and the act of creation. Again, I can only hope that these reflections show a genuine and honest understanding of my interactions with the people of the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Palouse.

Chapter 5: Art and Communal Identity

*To be human is to create,
to reach into the void
of shared consciousness
in order to blossom between each other.
We share
and bloom
and shed our feathers
until we're bare.
Creation breeds more
creation in the making.
Humans need
to discover, make, mold, tend.
Unchecked, you've left
the garden in my throat overflowing
with lush plants
I cannot give a name to.
Fill our lungs with new air,
create a sound
heretofore unknown
to our newly made eyes.
-Alexa Brown, 2017*

The poetry and paintings found in this thesis are the products of my own reflections and understanding as a result of my work and fellowship with the Unitarian Universalists. If anything has become abundantly clear to me throughout this process, it is that the community of UUCP is full of creative individuals who encourage spiritual growth both in themselves and in those around them. Taking their lead, much of this ethnography is represented by my own creative process because that is the way I have been able to grow personally, spiritually, and academically.

Aside from the seven paintings linked to the Seven Principles, the rest of the art in this interpretive ethnography is reflective of the stories shared with me during my time working with the people of UUCP. The collection of poetry, paintings, and prose in this thesis are reflexive interpretations of the Sunday morning services, workshops, and one on one interviews that occurred as a final portion of this research, digging into the conversations between myself and varied members of the congregation: Reverend Elizabeth, Ginger Allen,

Lysa Salsbury, and Jon Anderson. This chapter is primarily focused on the reflective art that resulted from this study.

In-Depth Interviews

In my interviews with Reverend Elizabeth, Ginger, Lysa, and Jon, everybody was asked the same question: How did you find Unitarian Universalism, or rather, how did Unitarian Universalism find you? The answers to this question in each interview led to an outpouring of stories and wisdom. In turn, each of these people inspired a work of art, a reflexive interpretation, because of their stories. I have included a brief description of the themes specific to the interviews as well as the reflexive interpretation that coincides with each conversation, all pointing toward overarching ideas that were present during all of these discussions.

My first interview was with Reverend Elizabeth. She and I met in her office, a cozy and welcoming room in the church, and discussed Unitarian Universalism, art, communal ties, and how Elizabeth's life fit into all of those spaces. Having grown up in a Unitarian Universalist church, Elizabeth mentioned that she has always felt free to explore her own beliefs, and it was "always a part of who [she] was." As reverend of UUCP, she has quite a bit of responsibility on her plate, but stated that she finds time to reflect, meditate, and participate in other forms of self-care. One thing Elizabeth told me, given the current political climate since the 2016 presidential election, is that she often uses knitting as a sort of art that relaxes her. In her own words, Elizabeth explained,

"Knitting, for me, it is more like breathing, it is very meditative... and you're focused on this very small scale, one tiny stitch after another... it is bigger and more complex, and that I think teaches us something important about life."

The connection between knitting and life struck me, as I had just taken up crocheting a few days before the interview. The way Elizabeth shared about knitting and her other favored forms of art like writing, painting, singing, playing guitar, and even gardening, pointed toward a common theme. Whichever way Elizabeth creates art, it is vast and varied and is reflective of the complexity of the connections we make. Elizabeth told me of the concrete, tactile connections brought about by gardening as an act of creation, telling me that,

“When you get your hands in the dirt, there’s something really primal that shifts, and I think part of it is that you’re in relationship...you plant the seed and it’s like you’re in a relationship, you’re in partnership with that seed, and you plant it and it grows, and it just feels good to crumble soil.”

Sometimes, the art is purely for her own relaxation and meditation. At other points, such as when she is writing sermons for church services, art becomes a way to connect with the community. One thing that Elizabeth said to me seemed to sum up the entire conversation in just a few sentences:

“Sometimes what I’m making feels like it comes from me, and sometimes I feel like I’m a conduit for something, for spirit itself... sometimes there’s something flowing through me and my job is to get out of the way, get ego out of the way, so that what’s trying to come through can get out without being distorted.”

Inspired by Reverend Elizabeth’s wisdom and vulnerability, I ended up following her lead and, whenever I needed to refocus myself, I would work on my crocheting. The result is the large, and admittedly clumsily done, market bag pictured below. With each stitch, I found myself thinking back on Elizabeth’s words, meditating on the idea that life is many moments strung together.



The next interview took place at a cafe in Moscow, where Ginger Allen and I reunited after the winter workshops to discuss art and how she fit into the community of UUCP, given that she grew up in this very congregation. Our conversation was focused on spiritual identity and the different ways that said spiritual identity can be expressed through varying forms of art and creation. When I asked what role art plays in her life, Ginger gave me a detailed and rich explanation of how the act of creating permeates many primary aspects of her life:

“In terms of more of what I would think of at first for ‘art’, I’ve always liked collage and a mix of media, and especially a mix of words and collage...words or phrases that stand out for me. I haven’t done that in a long time...being a single mom has precluded a lot of time. But I wonder how much of my work is art in its own way. I love doing the children’s story with the kids a lot, and I was explaining to somebody what I did and how I thought about it...and once I explained it...that in a way is kind of an art form, because it just requires so much thought and depth.”

⁵ Photograph 5.1

⁶ Photograph 5.2

Creating, in this instance, did not necessarily mean putting a paint brush to paper. Rather, forming shapes with the body in yoga or engaging in conversation with others can be acts of creation. In regards to movement as a form of creation, Ginger explained,

“That somehow is the only way I really find center. I have to be physically moving for my mind to rest. I used to make jewelry and do watercolor paintings and it felt similar due to the movement of it, so that’s where my spirituality is really centered.”

This center of self, of spirituality, of identity that Ginger spoke of with me permeated the entire conversation. Even in our discussion over coffee, Ginger and I had created a sacred space. The truth in her words and the vulnerability of discussing something as personal as her spirituality formed the interview into a metaphysical place, and she taught me an incredible lesson in the importance of self and how we each strive to find our own spiritual centers. After the interview, I found myself practically running home in order to get my thoughts out on paper. Though we had not talked much about poetry, Ginger’s words clanged in my head in a way that could be put down only in poetic form. The following poem was inspired by the space we had created that day.

*Open the door
and let me go free
into the aspens, into the pines
like some creature
half woman, half wolf,
completely my own
and a part of everything.
I was raised on stories,
a pup who learned
to chew raw meat too early,
with my teeth sharpened
and my fists clenched,
I take hold of these stories,
these shared tales of sacred places,
and I make them my own.
I hold them in my mouth
only letting the words tumble out
when it is time to feast,
when we are all here,
when we are all.
-Alexa Brown, 2018*

The third interview took place in the brightly lit office of Lysa Salsbury in the University of Idaho Women's Center. Lysa, a member of the UUCP congregation, shared parts of her life story with me. Unitarian Universalism found Lysa after she had moved to the Palouse with her family in 2005, but she had originally grown up in a Christian environment in the United Kingdom until 1993 when she moved to the United States. She described her upbringing in the following words:

“I grew up in the Church of England...so it's very close to Catholicism, same doctrine, same rituals... I found it very limiting and kind of oppressive, and so I wasn't very engaged in spiritual life. But I love to sing. I've sung in lots of different choirs and choral groups, so that kept me connected to the church because I sang in the choir there... I particularly like the way choral music sounds in really old churches, but I didn't really identify closely with the spiritual side of Christianity. For me it seemed very patriarchal, seemed really fear-based.”

Church, to Lysa, was a place to sing and commune with others, but it was not a place that she felt comfortable in spiritually. When she and her family found UUCP, the church's welcoming congregation and focus on community outreach struck a chord. In her own words,

“There are a lot of ideas that, even from a young age, did not sound quite right, and I think for that reason Unitarian Universalism made really good sense to me. It is like, here's basically some guidelines for how to live a good life in this world, and that was what I wanted.”

A common theme that came up so often while talking with Lysa was the importance of how we treat people and the world around us. In her upbringing, those values were not always exemplified. When we discussed the Seven Principles, the first and seventh principles in particular, Lysa further emphasized this sentiment.

“I think the principles in general...it's hard to argue against any of them, really. They really are, for me, just a good road map for how to be a caring, responsible, empathetic human being and so I try really hard to live them all in my life. I do better at some than others, you know, but I think all of them resonate very deeply with me, which is why I was drawn to Unitarian Universalism.”

These words, shared by such a kind and wise person, inspired the following poem. Given Lysa's story, it felt natural to respond with written words, honing in on the idea that creating a space for communication and fellowship is necessary for the community to thrive as a whole.

*Cries lifted in song
echoing back and forth,
calling to each other,
to Something above,
to ourselves,
the church quakes
as she feels the chill
of melancholy dirges,
crashing into and amongst
her stained glass windows.
"I cannot help you,"
she cries back
over and over,
waiting for the people
to hear more
than their own echoes,
waiting for the people
to cling to each other,
and not her stained pews.
-Alexa Brown, 2018*

Jon Anderson, my final interviewee, sat outside on the steps of the UUCP with me on a fine April afternoon as we discussed his art and his place in the congregation. As the Music Director, Jon is heavily involved in Sunday morning services, often playing the piano or finding other musicians to share their gift with the congregation. During our conversation, we discussed the way he personally views music when it is used in services, which pointed to a greater truth.

"I think of [music] as a gift...it is a sharing moment and sometimes you play a song, and even if it just helps one person reach something that they needed out there, it is a gift. You're just giving your gift, you're not performing. it is not about you, it is about what you're going to give to everybody else."

In response to this sentiment, I thought of the ways music is in fact a gift, and by extension how art is so often a gift to the world around us. In creating, we release something into the world. We talked about the cathartic nature of creating art, as well, especially in the creation

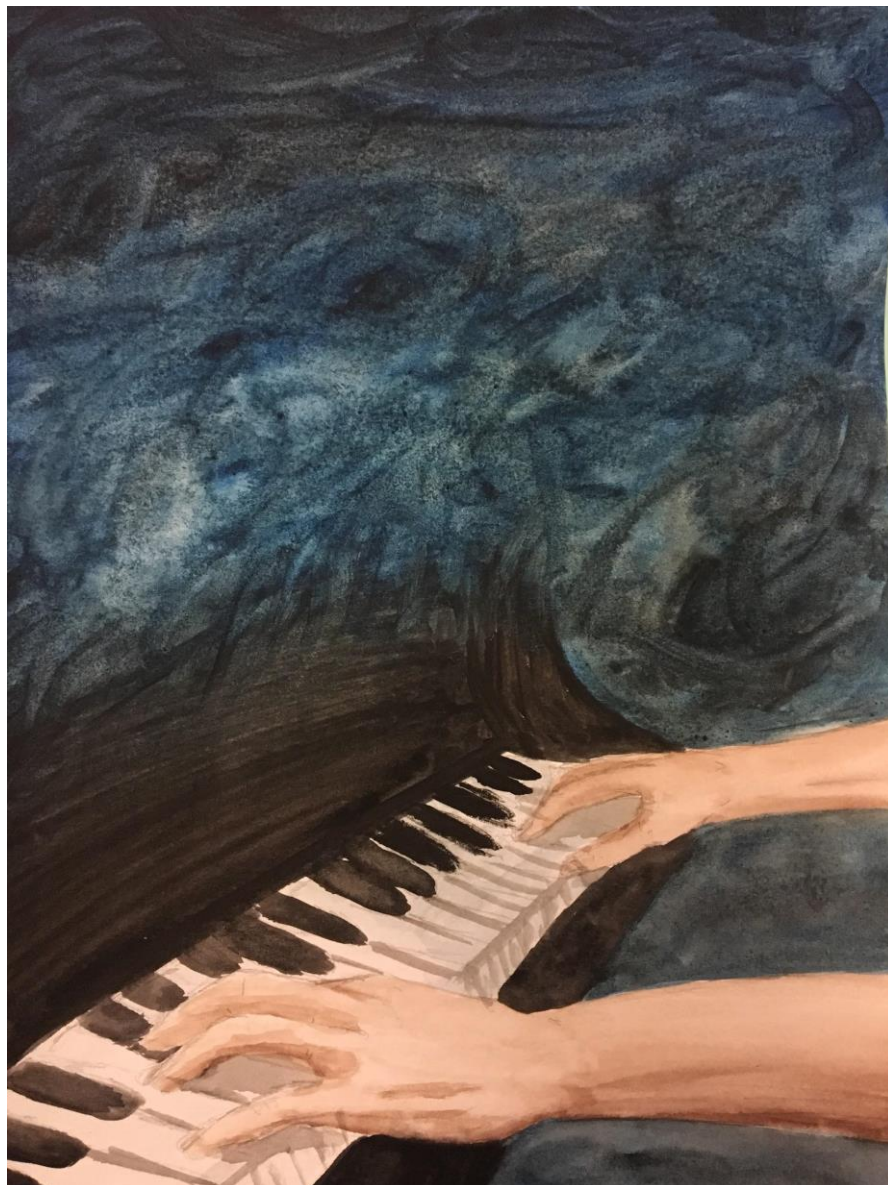
of music. For Jon, playing piano can be a healing process. When I asked if there was any sort of art that worked in a cathartic way for him, he expanded further beyond how it affects himself.

“I guess, for me, it’s piano beyond a doubt. In college, my piano teacher taught me how to relax... You’re in total control of how the music comes out...and I think I feel like I’ve gotten to a point to shape music to make feeling, and not just for me, but for other people to feel it with me.”

I found this fascinating, as the music became a way for not just Jon to feel in control and relaxed, but for Jon to connect with others around him. He further elaborated in more detail, providing an example of how this sometimes plays out in a Sunday morning service:

“Just improvising from behind when people go up for joys and sorrows, you can sense the mood and slip in and out of moods as people are talking... That’s how I use my hands in a healing way... when you play and study music, you think about that stuff all the time. Shape, emotion, and what you’re doing with your hands while you’re playing the music. You’re not just reading notes and playing notes.”

Music, the creation of it as well as the way people engage with it, becomes a powerful, emotional work of art. There is so much of a creator in the creation, and I think we all reflect a piece of ourselves in what we do. For Jon, it is about music and how it can forge connections; how art can heal. The painting below is a reflexive interpretation of Jon and I’s conversation, focusing on the idea that when we create, we put something out into the world and hope that it reaches somebody else.



In each of these interviews, I was struck again and again by the healing and connecting power art and creation have in our lives. In Reverend Elizabeth’s words, there is “something primal” about creation. When we share our stories, whether it be through painting, writing, music, gardening, knitting, quilting, or even yoga, we connect with each other, the world around us, and a deeper part of ourselves that we do not often pay much attention to.

⁷ Photograph 5.3

Sunday Morning Services

When I woke up on the morning of May 7th, my heart was heavy. My nephew, Lewis, had just been born about a week before and diagnosed with Trisomy 13, a chromosomal disorder. The prognosis was grim, and I was working on how to get home to Michigan to see him before he passed. I had debated just staying home that morning, rather than going to UUCP. I knew better than to sit around the house alone, though, and made my way to the church. When I walked in, I was again greeted by the warm and welcoming atmosphere, like the Sundays before this one. I wasn't in the most talkative mood, but I ended up sitting next to a very kind woman and we struck up a conversation. It was nothing more than pleasantries, but the willingness of a long term member to sit and casually talk with me before the service started is indicative of the value for human life found in Unitarian Universalism.

As 10:00AM rolled around, Reverend Elizabeth spoke the words of welcome, lit the chalice, and service began. There was a gift of music, and during this time I was reflecting upon what my brother and sister-in-law were going through, and whether or not my nephew would survive. As we approached the time to lift up both joys and concerns by lighting candles, a small voice in my head urged me to share my sorrow with the congregation. Palms sweating due to my fear of speaking to large groups, I made my way up to light a candle for my nephew. I distinctly remember that my hands were shaking as I lit one of the candles and placed it in amongst the others. After I moved up to the microphone, I briefly explained to the congregation what my family was currently going through. Before I could get through all the words, I found myself crying in front of everybody.

Reverend Elizabeth embraced me at that point, and I tried to wipe the tears from my face so that I could find my seat without blurry vision. At this point, I was crying in earnest, but it hit me as I sat down that I was not the least bit embarrassed or ashamed. There were people in the congregation who were grieving with me, and the woman I sat next to reached over and grabbed my hand. The service continued on after that, as we all received another gift of music and a sermon from Reverend Elizabeth. I had pulled myself together by the end, albeit with glassy eyes and a raw heart. I had been enveloped by this congregation's kindness and compassion, experiencing the result of human connection and empathy that abounds in us when we are open to one another. This is just one of many Sunday morning services that I

attended, but thinking back on this particular interaction with the congregation at UUCP I now realize that there was a transcendence of separated humanity that day.

Below, the reader will find three pieces of art. Each of these subtly mind-bending watercolor paintings came about when I thought deeply about the ideas expressed in both the workshops and Sunday morning services. There is no line between us and what we deem as outside us. In my mind, we are only separated from the rest of creation by our own decision to extricate ourselves. The specific interpretation is up to the reader, but these three paintings were the result of several hours spent meditating on the idea that the perceived boundaries of reality are constructed conventions.

In the first painting, petals flow from an outstretched hand, representing the way we can give our creativity to the world around us. The second shows a hesitant hand reaching out to touch the moon, breaking down the barriers we perceive between us and the universe that we live in. The third shows a representation of creation itself tearing open and pouring out from an outstretched hand, implying that it is an innate human desire to create and share those gifts with those around us. As stated previously, these paintings reflect my own exploration of the relationships and connections between humanity and the world, delving deeper into the idea that we are all a part of an interconnected web of existence. Similar to the paintings of the Seven Principles, it made the most sense to me to contemplate the way we utilize our hands to create and explore these connections. We may not be able to physically reach out and grasp the moon, but we can create and cognitively a realm of thought in which we can through art.



8



⁹ Photograph 5.5



10

The Seven Principles

¹⁰ Photograph 5.6

The following seven watercolor paintings are reflexive interpretations of the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism. Each piece corresponds with a different principle, exploring my own personal interpretations of these ideas in a format I understand. Given the cathartic nature of working with our hands that came up in each workshop, the watercolor paintings are variations of human hands as they connect to the Seven Principles.

1st Principle: The inherent worth and dignity of every person;



I decided to represent the first principle with an extended hand holding a newly sprouting seed, with both the hand and the sprout being a metaphor for us as humans. No matter what stage of life we are in, we all have inherent worth and dignity. Whether we are a newly planted bud or a vast tree, all persons are worthy of respect and kindness because we are all equal.

¹¹ Photograph 5.7

2nd Principle: Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;



12

What better way to represent human equity than to show the relationships we foster between and amongst one another in the form of joined hands? At the end of each service on Sunday mornings at UUCP, Reverend Elizabeth asks us all in the congregation to hold hands and close out the service with an uplifting benediction. Justice, equity, and compassion often sound like lofty goals in today's society, but they are ideals we can aspire to together through personal connection.

¹² Photograph 5.8

3rd Principle: Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;

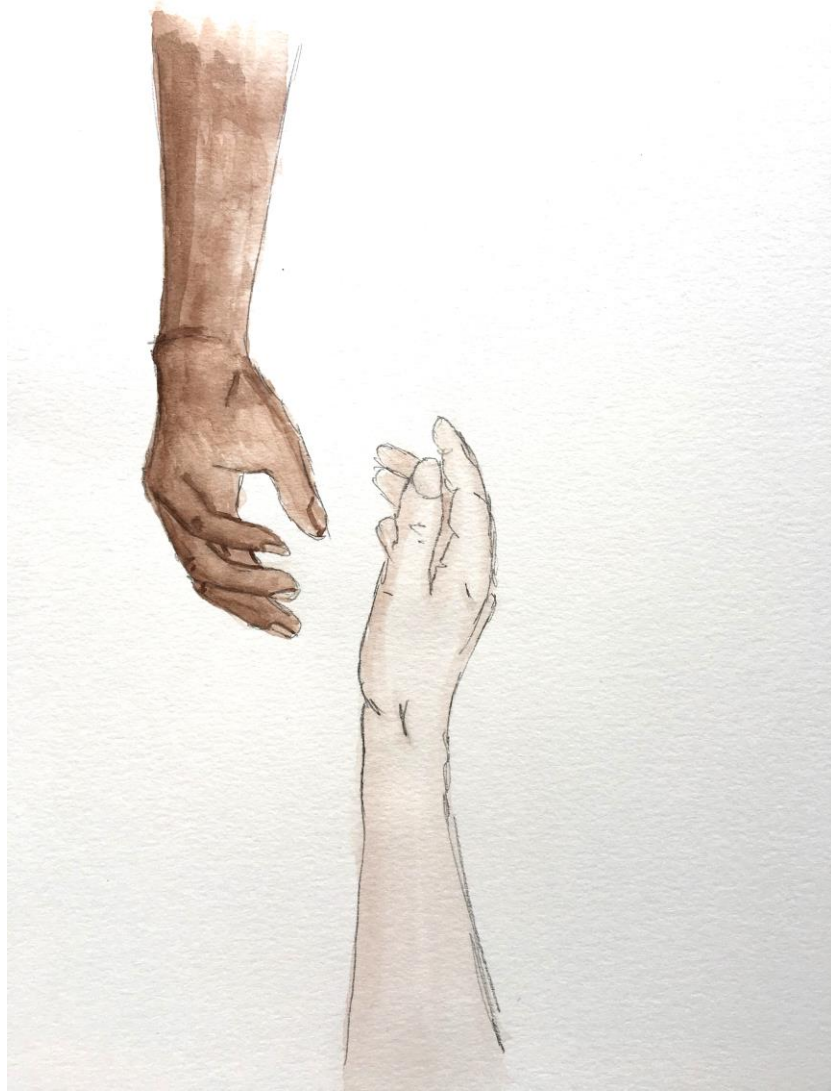


13

Hands are tentatively outstretched as a symbol of a willingness to connect with one another and grow together, pointing toward spiritual exploration and fulfillment. As a community, the people of UUCP are welcoming, compassionate, and accepting, creating an environment that both encourages and leaves room for personal spiritual growth.

¹³ Photograph 5.9

4th Principle: A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;



14

The two hands here are reflective of the gifts we have to offer to one another. It is purposefully unclear which hand is giving or receiving these spiritual gifts, showing that everybody in Unitarian Universalism is able to search for truth and meaning and that, often, those things can be found in communion with one another.

¹⁴ Photograph 5.10

5th Principle: The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;



15

This is perhaps the most literal interpretation of the paintings. The pen is often used as a symbol for truth and conscience, and the written word is a large part of the ‘democratic process’ in both Unitarian Universalism and society as a whole.

¹⁵ Photograph 5.11

6th Principle: The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;



16

This painting is not necessarily a direct representation of the 6th Principle. The point of showing a hand against a still pool of water is to present the idea of a reflection of reality. Peace, liberty, and justice are lofty goals that are seldom achieved in society, but that does not mean that they cannot yet be a part of our reality.

¹⁶ Photograph 5.12

7th Principle: Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.



17

The use of a more childlike hand was purposeful in this painting. I think there is something childlike within all of us, and I think this comes out when we understand the connection between us and the rest of the world, as shown by a child's hand holding a budding twig as if it is either a peace offering or a declaration of joy.

Workshops

The workshops were framed to be reflective of Sunday services. I worked with Ginger Allen, the Director of Lifespan Religious Exploration at UUCP, to set up the three workshops.

¹⁷ Photograph 5.13

We picked three separate dates and times that would allow for many different members of the congregation to participate if they wanted to, as we included one workshop where childcare could be provided. We came prepared with snacks, drinks, calming acoustic music, and plenty of varied art supplies to give people as many options as possible within our means. The initial plan was that I would not participate in the workshops, but simply lead and observe.

However, this proved to be a stiff and awkward form of engagement that did not yield honest or comfortable interview discussions. For the first workshop, I came prepared with a video of choreographed dance to show, as a reflection of the sharing of art in a typical Sunday service. The hope was that this might spark discussion and inspiration as those of us in the workshop pondered our place in the community, our identities, our spiritual beliefs, and how we personally used art to express those aspects of ourselves.

The first workshop consisted of myself and two congregants. I was perturbed by the low turnout number at first, fumbling with the video I had brought for us to reflect upon and sputtering out some of my prepared discussion questions: How do you identify spiritually? Do you take time to express those beliefs? How is your art representative of that? The three of us started in on a conversation that felt painful to me at first due to my nerves, but eventually I realized that we had begun to touch on and dig into some interesting thematic elements. Both congregants expressed throughout the conversation how much they cared for people, for the environment, for those things in life they felt deeply connected to. One participant verbalized it in such a poignant way in that first workshop; I cannot help but include it here:

“My spirituality is often changing, and it is okay for it to be fluid. Things flow through and intersect...the same central questions remain, but with new insights. I find it really cyclical that things double back on themselves and reflect what I care about. People are important to me, so it shows in my drawing.”

Little did I know that this was just the beginning of a greater thematic pattern reflecting the importance of connections between each other and the world. Both participants expressed a need for going into a more natural setting, like the forest or ocean, to center themselves. As one of them put it, “Sometimes you need to go to the beach and just...sit.” The pause here felt weighed down, as if it was reflective of that tiredness that seeps into all of us when we forget to take care of ourselves. The first participant agreed, stating, “I have to find time to connect with the world...There has to be that time where I just can be alone.” This desire to connect

showed in their artwork, depicting lush colors and natural elements like roots and leaves. When discussing the actual artistic process, it was brought to light that the drawings they'd created had lended themselves to a moment of decompression. There is something about creation that puts our minds at ease, whether it is found outside in the world or within us.

For the second workshop, Ginger and I felt much more prepared and we were in good spirits. The weather was snowy and rather foul outside, but we were ready with another spread of supplies and snacks. I was admittedly excited at the prospect of another potentially small group, given the results of the first workshop's conversations. This time, only one congregant was able to come. My heart soared, because I realized this would be a wonderful chance to dive into a solid one-on-one conversation that felt less like an interview and more like I was meeting a good friend for coffee. Our discussion, while it began as a guided interview, easily slipped into the pattern of two people swapping stories of life and how art had helped us both.

Yet again, however, the conversation always led back to the idea that art was a way to express the connections that were found to be the most important to each participant. The participant's daughter was present during this workshop, and the idea of parenthood came up in our discussion. In whatever the participant does, they explained their motivation: "It's for her." This idea of creation as a conduit for intergenerational connection, through gardening, art, or education, feels paramount. There is something so deeply personal about the act of creation, as it is not simply for ourselves alone. For the congregant in this second workshop, the connection between art, the earth, and humanity as a whole was discussed in the context of Unitarian Universalism specifically as they described their multimedia art piece to me:

"[The pipe cleaners] are like the UU principle like the web of life and respect for the web of life that we're all a part of. The watercolor background was a representation of the earth, a more radiant sun over top of that, representing that loving interconnected web of life with the shiny pipe cleaners. You know, hearts are kind of vaginal, a bit...and I put the seed in the middle of that in the soil, so the seed is resting in the middle of this female love symbol like new life."

The web of life referred to in this particular quote was an element that was referenced often throughout our conversation that spanned the participant's history with their own mother, their daughter, and how art and environmental stewardship helped to connect all of

these multigenerational relationships. The connections made and the stories shared with me during this second workshop inspired a short vignette from the perspective of the participant, and this has been included near the end of this chapter. I left that night feeling heartened after two workshops under my belt that had yielded excellent, genuine discussions of how art can be and is used to show our connections to each other and the world.

Finally, the third workshop loomed in the distance. Yet again, Ginger and I prepared the spread. Unlike the first two workshops, however, this one was right after a Sunday morning service, so we knew there would be more people coming to participate. It would be a totally different atmosphere, and I have to admit that my nerves were at their peak. All of the participants, who numbered 9 in total, were kind and forgiving of the noise level in the basement with children and other congregants still milling about after service, and we all managed to engage in a thoughtful group discussion about the art created during the workshop.

Though the length at which I was able to speak with each person was shortened due to the volume of participants at the final workshop, and a few participants were not able to stay until the end and discuss their artwork, there were many gems we were all able to extract from the experience. Many expressed that taking time to sit and create something was cathartic, relaxing, and a way to decompress. Much of the art was more reflective of individual connections to the world than as a web or greater community, which I found interesting given that we were in a group for this workshop.

It was as if, due to the larger size of the group and the hectic atmosphere, we all had become a little more introspective. We were separate pieces in a greater whole, rather than pieces that melded together into one entity. Still, however, the connections made between spirituality, art, and the earth were prominent throughout the workshop. One participant explained,

“I decided to do a collage, tearing pieces of different colors of paper and arranging it on paper, and once I did that, I had a connection to what we were talking about before...about connecting to the universe. So I added words that expressed my feelings about my sense of spirituality: a universe of colors and shapes and form and reform and blend and become individual and sometimes disappear into nothingness and sometimes reappear.”

Another participant echoed this sentiment in their own interview after creating a 3-dimensional sculpture of pipe cleaners all interconnected in a spherical web,

“The center, the core, that’s sort of me. All the little silver ones coming out are just the different ways that I extend myself in my life- the things I do- and then they’re connected by the people in my life. But it’s not concrete, it’s flexible and moving, and I see my spirituality as something that’s always a part of my life. It’s not a separate part of my life; it involves the people in my life and the things I do, and that’s part of my spirituality: giving back.”

In contrast, another participant admitted to me that they had not necessarily felt any connections that day during the workshop. They explained that their individual connection to art really depended on the day, telling me,

“I did not really feel anything about today...just because I’m not in a place right now to connect deeply. I identified with what everyone else was saying, but I wasn’t in the place to connect.”

I left the final workshop with mixed feelings, entirely due to my own projections and fears that I feel I brought with me to the space that day. Regardless of the vastly different atmosphere, however, I was surprised to listen back to the recorded discussion and interviews and hear the same themes and ideas cropping up over and over again.

The act of creation, even on the smaller scale of drawing or putting together a collage in a church basement, affected all of us participating to varying degrees. But the same words and refrains kept echoing back to me, again and again, as we all used our hands to mold and shape a physical representation of our connections. The workshops, Sunday services, artistic expression, and interviews reflected the ways in which congregants at UUCP connect. We all in some way connected with our inner selves, each other, and the world around and within us. These pages show the nights I stayed up thinking about the conversations we had all shared, the art I was privileged to see in its creation and its final forms, and the gift of wisdom I had been so freely and genuinely given by the congregants of UUCP. My own personal way to reflect and show these results is not necessarily through words, but through images.

A significant part of this journey, as noted previously, was the conversations I engaged in during the workshops. The second workshop was particularly insightful because there was only one participant, who was referenced in the introduction. We discussed much of the

participant's history with art, often relating it back to the cathartic nature of the workshop. The workshop itself had become a time to decompress for the both of us, which lead them to share a piece of their life as an adolescent. In the following piece of prose, I reflected on this cathartic phenomena from the point of view of the congregant in the brief story that was shared with me.

The participant discussed how art has always been a way to relax and process, verbalizing a time when they used to listen to music, ingest marijuana, and paint the whole night. They mentioned this story because the two of us had decided to listen to the same music during the workshop that they would listened to during this period of their past, and it they were transported back to their adolescence. This short vignette is not a word for word account of the participant's story, but instead it is a story inspired by the participant themselves and the cathartic nature of art that was often discussed in all three workshops.

The leaves under my feet are damp, robbing me of that satisfactory crunch I've come to associate with autumn afternoon walks home from school. I look up to investigate and, voila! The sky is a placid gray that matches the sweet aroma of rotting foliage that only comes around after a fall drizzle. I must have missed the rain while I was in class. I'm caught up in the idea that autumn precipitation always feels lazier than spring or summer storms when I'm rudely interrupted by a fat drop of rain hitting me square on the nose. I feel myself jerk back in surprise before I can fully process that there are more drops beginning to fall. it is as if the clouds heard my thoughts and decided to prove me wrong, and before long it is pouring.

Perturbed, I hasten my steps and practically run the last few blocks to my house in the hopes that I might stay dry, but my efforts are futile. By the time I cross the threshold and shut the door behind me, my clothes are soaked through and I cannot keep my teeth from chattering. I trudge up the stairs and into my room, unceremoniously dropping my backpack on the floor before changing into my comfiest pajamas as fast as I can manage. Once I'm relatively safe from the heavy type of cold that only comes from wearing wet clothes, I realize that I'm quite alone in the house. Unsure of what to do with this freedom on a Friday afternoon, I find myself wandering back downstairs and into the kitchen.

I immediately spot the box of black tea on the counter, sitting front and center as if it was waiting for me to get back from class. It doesn't take much time before I've filled a kettle

and set it on the stovetop. In the waiting, though, I think of something that would make this dreary day a bit lighter. I scurry upstairs and gather up all the necessary supplies, mentally counting all the things I need to enact my plan. I practically trip over my own feet in my haste to get back to the kitchen table and spread out my spoils from my bedroom: paper, brushes, paint, a palette, a pipe, and small bag of shake I snagged from that dealer in a now forgotten 100 level class I took the previous semester. I pack the glass piece, fill up a stained coffee mug with paint water, put an old Enya CD in the living room stereo, and light some candles.

I step back and appreciate the space. The kettle begins to whistle and draws my attention back to the stovetop. I pull it off the heat, throw in a tea bag, and wait for it to steep. While I'm waiting, the sound of the rain comes back into my senses. I find myself watching the downpour from my kitchen window, losing my surroundings in the drops racing down the glass pane. Partly due to impulse, and partly common sense, I open the window. I tell myself it is to make sure the soon-to-come stench of weed doesn't linger too long indoors, but I know it is really because I need to hear the rain and smell the wet earth. I want something or someone, maybe nature itself, to know I'm here, creating my own world while the one outside keeps turning.

I pick up the bowl and my lighter.

A few minutes later, I see that it is actually been hours. My shoulders have relaxed into the chair, my hands are splattered in yellows and greens, and there is a multiverse in front of me. I can feel my eyelids as if they are bound to weights, and Enya has long since stopped singing to me. The rain, however, is still keeping me company outside the kitchen window, and I know I was transported somewhere else, somewhere I can exist, somewhere I can breathe.

Chapter 6: What We Keep

When I first walked up the steps to the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Palouse, I did not understand the journey I had happened upon. In some ways, the whole picture is still unclear. There are bright bursts of clarity in which the influence of those at UUCP becomes a concrete entity beyond myself. Whether I am sitting with friends in the park on a clear Spring day or painting in the warm comfort of a room lit by string lights, the words bounce around in my head, demanding to be heard and understood: “We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person.”

At other times, the full implications of these words and the other things I have learned from this community come to me in bits and pieces, as if I am watching an old family video that has some fractures in the film. The comfort and the warmth are there, and the overall storyline is understandable, but I find myself hearing these lessons as if I am underwater. My own personal journey is still unfolding, and the stories I heard over the past year and a half are the first few steps down the path. In the workshops, in Sunday morning services, in the interviews, there was much to be learned and shared among us all.

Despite this personal journey that has so heavily influenced my research, these connections and lessons made themselves clear. Due to my time spent with the participating congregants at UUCP, these lessons can be put into words through the wisdom they shared with me. Art, when viewed as an act of creation, opens doors for us. It can speak in places that we cannot, forming sacred spaces in which we can connect more deeply with ourselves, each other, and the world around us. The people of UUCP shared something with me that will stay with me beyond these pages. I can only provide my own reflexive interpretations of their stories and wisdom, but my hope is that, at the very least, the people involved in this study understand the impact they had on my own life and, subsequently, the lives of those around me.

So, to the reader, to UUCP, to all those who shared their stories with me and created these sacred spaces, thank you for reaching, hands extended to reveal the manifestation of something holy.

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