

The USHer

the Unitarian Society of Hartford community newsletter



A note from Judy Robbins, your Editor:

Welcome to the pilot issue of *The USHer*, an experimental publication for our Unitarian Society of Hartford. An usher invites you in and helps you find your way in the congregation and *The USHer* aims to be a lively voice for this congregation. We hope to publish a wide, eclectic range of interesting items and stories based on your contributions and suggestions. Eventually a regular schedule and Departments may evolve but this issue starts with a look at our gardens, our Book Club, and the journey of one of our young members.

Future issues may include: visits with members, a look behind the scenes at Board activities, suggestions for travel and daytrips, poetry, recommendations of things you have done or discovered that you think others would enjoy, ways we take our UU values out into the community, recipes, cartoons, movies and TV we like, social justice initiatives, photos of your art or creative endeavors, pithy quotes, a Turning Inward section for moments of contemplation...in other words, we are wide open to your suggestions, input and help. Thanks for checking out this first issue. Contact The USHer via email at ushereditor@gmail.com

Surrounded By Beauty at USH

Beauty is an integral part of Hartford Unitarian Universalism. In its many forms, beauty uplifts our souls. We worship in a vibrant architectural work of art but we needn't step inside the church to be surrounded by beauty.



The Memorial Garden

In 1991, the congregation decided to create a serene Memorial Garden where cremains could be interred and congregants could sit in respectful remembrance. The Board decided to inter ashes without containers or markers. In lieu of markers, the names of the deceased are noted on a plaque inside the church near the entrance to the garden. In that same area a Book of Remembrance is available for more personal expressions about those who have passed on.

The area outside the south entrance was the logical place for a Memorial Garden but, at the time, it was a steep grassy slope, neither particularly beautiful nor serene. Like most gardens, this one started with a burst of enthusiasm, a modest budget and a cadre of volunteers. Perhaps all gardens have a history of trial and error and the church gardens are no exception. Thirty years ago, a landscape architect drew up a careful Plan, with specific vegetation recommendations. But he didn't take into consideration that this was a Unitarian garden with a mind of its own. Mother Nature, like all of us good UUs, saw the Plan as a mere suggestion and, instead, to this day, continues to find her own path to beauty and serenity. Some plants suggested in the Plan failed. Others grew too large and needed to be removed. Dozens of volunteers pitched in. The hill proved too steep to support a bench so eight years later in 1999, truckloads of fill were brought in and a terrace of pavers was laid. Benches were donated. Work parties were launched to keep the area weeded. Several visionaries doggedly held to the original inspiration: to create an area of natural beauty and tranquility for our departed loved ones close to our spiritual church home. Longtime Music Director Bill Willett, who had buried his own son in the garden, and Roy Cook, an architect and chair of the Building and Grounds Committee were two of these folks.

Tree of Life

In 2007, Roy Cook approached congregant John Stowe with a rough sketch of a Tree of Life. He hoped John could make it in his foundry. The Tree of Life is a powerful, universal symbol of the connection between ancestral roots and divinity while also pointing to growth and renewal. Roy thought that small leaves with the names of the departed could be affixed to the branches. This idea was later ruled out in favor of a name plaque inside the church but the ideas kept flowing. Bill Willett encouraged John, saying: "I want this tree in place on the concrete balustrade before I die." With today's technology, a large sheet of brass alloy could be laser cut with computer-guided precision in a few hours, but 20 years ago John Stowe had to resort to laboriously writing thousands of lines of computer code and then water-jet cutting the brass with 6000 pounds of pressure.

The Tree of Life sculpture is mounted with stainless steel bolts to the cement buttress outside the south door. Its symbolic presence sets a theme of past and present, earthly and divine. John met his deadline with time to spare. Today Roy and Marion Cook and Bill and Louise Willett are peacefully interred in the garden.

Pet Memorial Garden

In the mid-2000s, with the Memorial Garden established, congregant Helen Skinner, wondered if we might find a place for a Pet Memorial Garden. Perhaps rashly, David and Janice Newton said they would build it if she would finance it, and <gulp> she did. As you can imagine, it took many hours of planning followed by back-wrenching labor. With thanks to the Newtons, the Pet Memorial Garden is found adjacent to the USH parking lot behind the playground and it is a serene, tranquil spot with two stone benches, inviting folks to sit in remembrance of beloved furry companions.



The Labyrinth Garden

If you venture past the Pet Memorial Garden all the way to the foot of our parking lot, you will see a small path leading to the Knox Foundation public garden space. Since 1966, the Knox Foundation has created urban farming opportunities for Hartford residents by providing plots for people to grow their own vegetables and flowers. We at USH have a long history of partnership with the Knox Foundation.

While serving USH, Rev. Heather Rion Starr rounded up some volunteers and laid a canvas labyrinth inside the entrance to the Knox garden. It was not a permanent installation and seeing how shabby it was becoming, Susan Hope took on the renovation of this space as her personal project. Susan finds spiritual peace by working in the garden and also by walking a labyrinth so this felt like a natural place for her to give her time and talent.

The labyrinth is laid with hand-cast cement stepping stones that follow a traditional spiral path winding inward. At the center hangs a striker and a gong handmade by Don Hope from a discarded oxygen tank. Don painted it orange, one of the colors associated with Buddhist spirituality. Susan has accepted donations of many plants that now encircle and entwine the path, enhancing the meditative experience of the labyrinth walk. The gong resounds throughout the garden as walkers strike it to mark the end of a brief contemplative spiritual journey.

Susan says that a bonus for her has been getting to know the Hartford residents who garden there. Several are Jamaican immigrants who have educated her about plants like purslane and callaloo. Purslane is a plant in the portulaca family grown for its antioxidant properties. Callaloo is an edible-leaf amaranth, prepared in a similar way to collard greens. A few of these gardeners have become interested in Susan's work and one or two have even tried a labyrinth walk.



The Gardens Today

Evan Williams and Susan Hope are the main garden keepers today. They ensure that all the gardens at USH remain well-tended and beautiful. Both are serious self-taught gardeners with years of experience and an eye for what will flourish in our environment. At this time, they are not accepting donations of plants but they welcome help, especially with weeding. Dedicated others also volunteer. The planters and seasonal flowers near our front entrance are arranged and tended by Martha Bradley, another long-time self-taught gardener. Martha also landscaped the area to the east side of the front entrance as a memorial to her late husband.

USH Loves To Laugh at Ourselves

Here's one of Garrison Keillor's Unitarian jokes:

A woman is hit by a car.

EMT: "Call a priest!"

Woman: "No, I'm a Unitarian."

EMT: "Call a math teacher!"



USH Reads

The USH Book Club has been meeting 2:30-4:00PM on the second Thursday monthly since...well, a very long time ago! Currently Stan Kemmerer and Ginny Allen keep the Book Club on track. The Book Club is one of USH's small community-building groups so it starts with a personal check-in before moving on to discuss one book each month. Each meeting has a leader who guides the discussion and gives participants a chance to share their thoughts before the full group discussion. A variety of fiction and non-fiction representing different styles, eras and genres is chosen by the group and announced well ahead. At the end of each meeting people have a chance to share tips for other books, movies and TV shows they have liked.

The USHer checked in with a few of the regulars at the Book Club to see if they had recommendations to share more widely. Gloria Bent said that the Club has encouraged her to read many books that she would not have otherwise. She particularly enjoyed Trevor Noah's **Born A Crime**, stories of his South African childhood. She is on her second reading of Richard Powers' epic **The Overstory**. And she also liked Amor Towles' **A Gentleman In Moscow**. One highlight for many readers was a chance to read USH member Louise Harmon's book **Ashes to Bagshu** in its pre-published form. Bev Spence is an avid reader who reads non-fiction in the morning with coffee and fiction later in the day. She saves mysteries on her Kindle for when she can't sleep at night. Bev is a selective reader whose choices often vary from the Club selections. Two that she likes are **Honest Aging** by Rosanne M Leipzig and **The Creative Act: A Way of Being** by Rick Rubin.

For more information about the USH Book Club, email Ginny Allen at fiddlenurse1@gmail.com

Where's Walter?

The USHer caught up with USH youth group grad, Walter Johnston during a one week break from walking the Appalachian Trail, the world's longest hiking footpath. Walter, an Eagle Scout, was inspired to walk the 2,200-mile trail from Springer Mountain, Georgia to Mount Katahdin, Maine by a few of his scouting mentors. He worked for several months after high school graduation in 2023 to save up money and in February his dad dropped him off at the trail head in Georgia to start the trek.



To ease the transition, Walter walked with a group at first but he soon found their pace too slow and he went ahead by himself. Walter said that he often met the same people along the trail and most of these folks were helpful and nice. They needed to be since they often slept alongside one another in wooden three-sided, open-front shelters with only a wood floor to keep them off the dirt. Once, while alone in one of these crude lean-tos, Walter was awakened by a bear snuffling and pawing around right outside the flimsy shelter. It was one of the only times he was truly afraid.

Walter expected to be dirty and he knew his feet would hurt but he did not expect the loneliness. “Some days I would only see one or two other people and there might be just a few words exchanged,” he said. “It was completely different than anything I had ever experienced.”

Life on the trail consists of basic survival — walking, eating and sleeping. After six months of this routine, Walter finished his trek at Mount Katahdin, Maine. He laughingly says that even though he’s home now, his legs have a strong sense memory and want to keep walking. Walter is a trained welder so he likely will do some combination of welding and college at Eastern CT State University. We look forward to hearing much more of Walter’s adventures.

At Least

A poem by Rev. Bob Janis

At least
an elm tree
sitting amidst birdsong
under cloudy skies.

At least
this much peace
right now.

