

The USHer

Your guide to the heart of the Unitarian Society of Hartford



The spring came suddenly, bursting upon the world as a child bursts into a room, with a laugh and a shout and hands full of flowers.

~ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Why Go To Church?

Most people go to church to worship God, atone for sins, or listen to guidance from a spiritual leader. Without a common dogma, UUs attend for different reasons. We find church helps give us a sense of personal purpose and meaning. It helps us to define and articulate what we believe, know where we stand and why. We find comfort in being part of a loving community.

The Unitarian Society of Hartford recently welcomed nineteen new members. The USHer asked a few of these new members what draws them to USH. What do they go to church?

Alyssa McDonald, a young trans woman, especially appreciates the respect she is shown at USH. Her Christian confirmation mentor was Mike Rion, the father of UU minister Cathy Rion Starr. A pantheist, she came to USH on a whim and has stayed, feeling accepted and at home.

Carl Shields has been searching for a spiritual home for decades. He tried Judaism and several churches where he found the sermons focused too often on the evil in the world, leaving him dispirited. At USH, he has finally found an accepting congregation that consistently emphasizes the positive, even while acknowledging the dark side. A big part of his spiritual philosophy is seeing the light in other people and he finds that easy to do here.

Linda Duncan is a longtime UU who finds USH services spiritually uplifting and the congregation especially positive and welcoming. She has quickly made friends by taking part in numerous activities. Sam Moffett's music has been a highlight for her. Spiritually, she is a Buddhist and our silent candle-lighting ritual means a lot to her.

Deana David's work is mostly online so she particularly values time spent in-person at USH. She's found a kind-hearted, warmly accepting group here, a place where she can let her guard down and be herself. So much of her life is spent teaching, writing, and running her business that she finds it a joy to "just be a participant."

Carol Austad says that the UU Seven Principles resonate strongly with her as tenets she already lives by. Carol finds USH an open, non-judgmental place where she can be fully and freely authentic.

Bob Swarr is a busy retiree who wanted to carve out some time for reflection within a spiritual community. He appreciates the lack of dogma and the freedom to develop his own spiritual path.

Kyle Archibald is impressed with the consistently high caliber of Sunday services. Kyle finds USH sermons give him something to "hold onto" and think about during the week. He regularly leaves feeling uplifted, even when the world seems hopeless.

Laurie Costa was drawn to USH when she saw a pride flag displayed. She had driven past the building many times and wondered about USH. She draws strength from the USH experience and finds it a nurturing respite from the craziness of the world. She loves that we offer many opportunities for social action.

Like the tree that puts roots deep into the clay, each of us needs the anchor of belonging in order to bend with the storms and reach towards the light.

~ John O'Donohue



The Worth of a Tree

Robin Wall Kimmerer writes that in some native languages, the term for plants is “those who take care of us.” Kimmerer, the author of the bestseller *Braiding Sweetgrass*, is a botanist whose Potawatomi heritage informs her view of the natural world. She says we become “naturalized” when we understand our inextricable connection with the earth. We are naturalized when we know that our ancestors lie in this ground and we stand up to meet our responsibility to take care of “those who take care of us.”

The USH Memorial Garden is outside our southeast entrance. It’s a mature garden, so it’s seen a lot of different plantings come and go over thirty+ years. Trees have been an important part of the garden for both their shelter and their symbology. With roots reaching down and branches reaching up, trees embody the connection between heaven and earth while exemplifying strength, resilience and endurance. But sometimes a tree gets overzealous, growing too big and unruly, its roots and branches pushing out other species. Such



The Heritage River Birch shelters a bench.

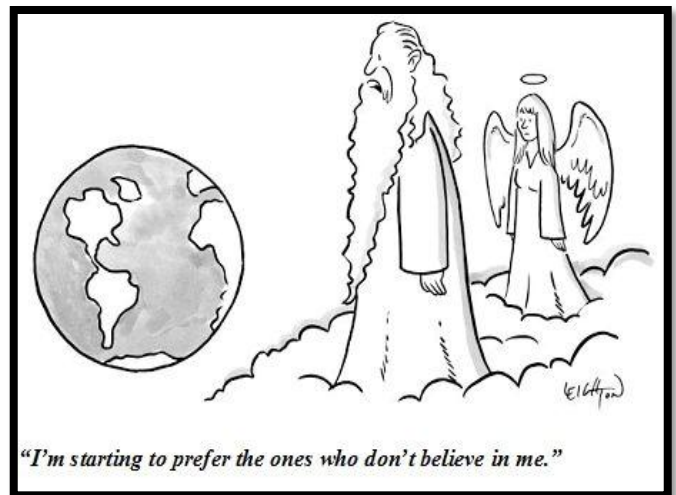
was the case with our large Heritage River Birch. Was it time for it to be cut down? Such a lovely tree and how beautifully it sheltered and shaded those who sat beneath it! What would be the best way to “take care of those who take care of us?” Tree experts were called in and the birch was shorn of its lower branches to encourage shade growth from above while new cables prevent splitting of the trunk. Now balanced on its root system, the tree will continue to grow productively and safely for years to come, continuing to provide shade and shelter to another generation of Hartford UUs. To paraphrase Robin Wall Kimmerer: even



a wounded tree continues to hold us, giving moments of joy, and we return the gift.



Humor is mankind's greatest blessing. ~ Mark Twain



A Fiery Speech in Boston

On April 18, historian Heather Cox Richardson was the keynote speaker at the 250th Anniversary of lighting the lanterns at Boston's Old North Church – the famous “one if by land, two if by sea” signal that triggered the start of the American Revolution. Her inspiring (and timely) speech is well worth reading in its entirety [here](#). Or watch it on YouTube [here](#). We especially take heart from her concluding point: neither Paul Revere nor any of the other revolutionaries knew they were making history. They were “simply honoring their friendships and their principles...doing the next right thing... Most of us will be lost to history but we will, nonetheless, move the story forward, even if just a little bit.”

Two Fiery Sermons at USH

Two consecutive sermons in April encouraged us to keep the fire of liberty in our hearts. On April 6, Rev. Bob Janis preached “Keeping The Flame” and on April 13, Rev. Sarah Pirtle took the pulpit with “Carry The Flame: Our Heart Sanctuary.” Both sermons dealt with this scary, painful, precarious time in our country’s history and our own efforts to do “the next right thing” to ensure the democracy our ancestors fought for.

Rev. Bob began with a list of the atrocities of the last few months -- flagrant violations of constitutional rights so shocking that we do not recognize our America. Rev. Bob said, “I am not always as brave as I hope to be but I am done cowering in a corner. I am not hiding or silent and

neither are you. Some of you are on the street with megaphones. Others are behind the scenes doing what you do every day, and that's good too. We all have different roles to play. That's how it should be. We are a diverse religion not a political caucus. But we are here for the worth and dignity of every person."

He picked up a refrain: "we are out, loud and proud" for the disenfranchised, for trans people, for immigrants, for Black and brown and indigenous people, for everyone who made this country and is being erased from the history books. We are out, loud and proud for women and our non-binary family. We need each other. He went on, "we are here, queer and ready to reappear" and we are keeping the flame alive together. We are not here by our power alone but because generations have cared for us, handed down dignity, compassion and peace and now it is our turn to keep the flame alive and hand it to our children. We needn't agree on everything to act together. But we must insist on dignity, respect and our constitutional rights.



The 30-member-strong Hartford Gay Men's Chorus punctuated his message singing, "You Are My Chosen Family" with its refrain, "we don't need to be related to relate. You are my chosen family."

The following week, Rev Sarah Pirtle picked up the theme. She cautioned that the political situation can trigger a panicky response: "Quick! Act quickly!" This is counter-productive and will only burn us out. Based on her decades of peace activism, the better course of action is to act authentically, doing what is right for each of us. She used the metaphor of the web of life, saying that all who pour love into the collective unconscious create an ever-growing hearthfire for others to draw on. Courage is contagious and we can draw courage from the light of love. We do not have to save the world alone. Our strength is collective. When we perform everyday acts of love and kindness we are adding twigs to a fire that will light many candles. People peacefully demonstrating in the streets are putting love into the collective unconscious, but so is a woman who attends her grandchild's birthday party. It's all love.

Rev. Sarah said, "Follow your heart. All the things you do for your congregation matter. Put your life and love out there. In the mysterious web of life, others are rooting for you. We are not carrying the flame alone."

The multi-talented Rev. Sarah is a folk singer and songwriter and she led us in her original *Strength Song*: "we are lanterns lit with hope; we are beacons made of strength. We are ambassadors of truth, so keep on speaking. When lightning lights the sky and we've heard too many lies, let's stay rooted in our hearts and keep on reaching. We are not alone."

Inspired by Rev. Sarah, Marye Gail Harrison wrote a poem, the first stanza is below. **Be sure to click [here](#) to read the entire poem.**

She Lit Candles In Our Hearts

She sang to us Pete Seeger style
in her tan UGG boots, long skirt and hair,
wide smile that reached her eyes and ours.
She sang and spoke of being one body
all connected, each with a flame
of love inside us.

We wanted to believe, to feel that at church that morning.

Mostly it was why we had come.

She lit candles in our hearts. ...



~ Marye Gail Harrison



*When the power of love overcomes the love of power the
world will know peace. ~ Jimi Hendrix*

Out & About

Nancy and Stan Kemmerer enjoy day trips and highly recommend these two destinations.

For a **gourmet luncheon** with unbeatable atmosphere, try Pickety Place, just over the New Hampshire border, a pleasant 2-hour drive from Hartford. The restaurant is literally a story-book setting, a 1786 cottage that was the model for the 1948 edition of Little Red Riding Hood. A prix fixe menu changes monthly. After your meal, enjoy a stroll through the greenhouse and gardens. Trip Advisor rates Pickety Place 4.6 out of 5. Reservations are a must. Click [here](#) for more information.

For a **relaxing, other-worldly experience** with a fabulous sound track, don't miss WaterFire in Providence, Rhode Island. Visitors find the experience hard to describe – somehow sacred. The river that flows through downtown Providence is fitted with huge braziers that are lit ablaze with wood fires. The nostalgic aroma of woodsmoke wafts through the air as hushed people stroll peacefully along the riverfront. Curated music, a mix of natural sounds and enchanting music from around the world, adds to the ethereal atmosphere, engaging all the senses and emotions. Click [here](#) for the 2025 schedule.

The Joy of Writing

Do you like to write? Or want to write but can't get started? This fun, free 4-session class will tease out your non-fiction skills. In a warm supportive group, you'll learn to write interesting stories in your own authentic voice. You will also learn some easy editing skills that draw readers in. This course is great for folks who are interested in memoir writing or who want to capture family stories or anecdotes. It's also tailored to those who might want to write for *The USHer*. Come as you are — no experience necessary.

Four Wednesday mornings: June 4, 11, 18, and 25. From 10:00 AM to noon in person at USH. There is no Zoom option for this class. To register, contact Judy Robbins at judyrobb2@gmail.com with **Writing** in the subject line.

Class will be offered by Judy Robbins, a freelance writer and editor for ten years before a career change. She is the editor of *The USHer*, the bi-monthly newsmagazine for the Unitarian Society of Hartford.

Special thanks go to Carolyn Carlson and David Newton for photos, Martha Bradley for flower arrangements and all the congregants who participated in this issue.

The USHer is on summer break. Watch for the next issue in September!

