

# The USHer

*Your guide to the heart of the Unitarian Society of Hartford*



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*Summer should get a speeding ticket. ~ Anonymous*

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**W**e Unitarian Universalists may be diverse in culture, life experience and religious beliefs but certain shared values are held sacred by all of us. We are committed to caring for our beautiful world with climate change, pollution, challenges that face us. This few of the many ways the our ecological values into visionary spirit, hopefulness and big and small that help us leave a



home, the Earth, as we struggle to deal energy use and the many ecological issue of The USHer takes a look at just a Unitarian Society of Hartford has put action. With a strong conscience, a joy, we have implemented projects both smaller footprint on the earth.

***“The earth does not belong to us. We belong to the earth.” ~ Chief Seattle***

## **Our Solar Panels**

The installation of solar panels to reduce fossil fuel dependence has been one of USH’s most ambitious projects. After an initial effort toward solar energy faltered in 2013-14, USH regrouped in 2015. A select panel of creative-thinking congregants with a range of necessary skills came together as a committee. Their *To Do List* was long and full of red tape: get USH Board approval, confront zoning issues, raise funds, solicit bids and negotiate contracts. A big hurdle was figuring out how to obtain federal and state tax credits and rebates. Since we have tax-exempt status as a church, we could not go through the usual channels. To greatly simplify a very complex process, it was determined that one of the committee members would serve as a proxy for USH, receiving the 30% credit as a “sole proprietor.” After five years when the panels were paid off, the ownership transferred from the sole proprietor to USH.



*Since March 2016 USH's solar panels have paid for virtually all of our electrical use, saving us thousands of dollars per year. The project was paid for by congregants' contributions.*



## What's In Our Backyard?

We have three ground-mounted arrays with a total of 132 solar panels worth approximately \$150,000. At the start of the project our building's electrical usage was estimated and the panels were designed accordingly. The panels began functioning in March 2016 and immediately started paying us back. For nearly a decade, these solar panels have paid for virtually 100% of our electrical power usage.

Solar power is clean. In the process of generating electricity, there is no carbon dioxide emitted. Consequently, solar energy does not contribute to global warming like most other ways to generate electricity. Our panels have a life expectancy of 20-25 years, during which time our electricity is virtually free. USH's budgeted expense for electricity for the entire fiscal year is approximately \$500, much of which pays for a street light and the fee for connecting to the grid. Compare this against a single month's pre-solar electric bill at \$888 -- \$1,183 per month in today's dollars. Solar is a remarkable savings!



*Paula Bleck designed and made this plaque honoring the names of solar donors.*

We are part of a grid system. The electricity we generate goes into a big grid. You can think of it as a large reservoir of electricity. Everyone who puts electricity into this reservoir, draws what they need from it. It's all measured by power meters. If we should put more than we use into the reservoir, Eversource credits us at .034 per kilowatt hour. Additionally, we get an annual payment from ZREC, a Zero Emission Renewable Energy Credit for generating clean energy.

No matter how you look at it, the solar panels are good for our budget, good for the planet and good for our collective conscience.

## It's Easy Being Green



The solar panels are certainly not the only green action USH has taken. Almost 20 years ago we replaced the original energy-hog oil furnace with three high efficiency gas furnaces, affectionately known as Snap, Crackle and Pop because of the sounds they make on ignition. These furnaces are built to last and can be repaired indefinitely. The furnace replacement made a very favorable dent in our heating bills and marked an informal beginning to many ecologically-minded updates that followed in the years ahead.

## We Are A Green Sanctuary

Since 1989 the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) has been sponsoring various versions of the Green Sanctuary Program, an ambitious commitment to climate justice. In 2016, USH met the criteria for certification as a green sanctuary church, one of 350 churches nationwide to qualify. Although the UUA's current program has expanded into other areas, our Green Sanctuary Committee focused on mitigation practices: reducing emissions from energy use, waste and consumption.

The Green Sanctuary Committee continues under the Social Justice Council, aligning our church with other churches and like-minded local groups including the Connecticut Audubon and the Knox Garden Foundation. To cite just one action, our Green Sanctuary group helped to build the labyrinth in the Knox Community Garden located at the bottom of our parking lot. On a nice Sunday after church, take a few minutes to walk down to the garden and be impressed with the beautiful work of our congregants. Contact Bill Simmons [bill@simmons3d.com](mailto:bill@simmons3d.com) for more information about the work of Green Sanctuary.



## Re-Gifting, Recycling and More

For many years, an adjunct to the Green Sanctuary Program has been an annual Re-Gifting Sale. Held between Thanksgiving and Christmas it was an opportunity to donate good items that were ready to be passed along to new owners. As of this writing, the fate of the Re-Gifting sale is to be determined.

Recycling is encouraged throughout the building with convenient bins located in each of our meeting rooms. Our lighting is provided by energy efficient bulbs and fixtures. Recently we replaced the original 1960s toilets with "comfort height" low flush models. David Newton, chair of Building and Grounds, smiles wryly as he says that the toilets were the only proposed improvement that didn't raise a single objection.



Energy Star is an energy-efficiency program established in 1992 and administered by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in partnership with the US Department of Energy. The USH Meeting House meets the EPA's energy efficiency specifications so we are eligible to display the ENERGY STAR logo.

## Urban Farming

We are a creative congregation that is always up for trying an environmentally intriguing experiment. You'll notice a small example of hydroponic gardening near our front entrance. This installation is in cooperation with Levo International, a world-wide effort started as an Eagle Scout project in Haiti to turn vacant urban lots and blighted properties into hydroponic farms. These non-permanent farms can be set up quickly. They provide work opportunities as well as generating a pound of produce for each square foot of space. You can get a look at one of Hartford's large hydroponic farms at 441 Homestead Ave just a few blocks from church near the corner of Albany Ave. That unsightly vacant lot is now expected to grow a million pounds of vegetables in the next three years to feed the hungry in our area. The aptly named Levo means "lift up" in Latin.



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## Meet Virginia deLima

Contributed by Gloria F. Mengual

Virginia deLima started attending USH in 1998 and became a member by "signing the book" in 2014 when she was asked to be on the Board of Directors. USH is a good fit for Virginia's moral compass. Here, Virginia witnessed the words and deeds of a community of good people. She says, "I saw selfless concern for others, concern for society and the world."

Virginia holds the position of President Elect to current President, Nina Elgo. She will begin her Presidency in July 2026. She previously served on the Board as Secretary, President-elect and President. During her past Presidency, Virginia was an integral part of the committee that acquired the solar panels, an accomplishment that's a source of pride for her. [See the article above for more about solar panels.] Virginia contributed to the imaginative, creative thinking that got this major project through a morass of complications to completion.



*Virginia deLima*

After early stints teaching second grade and then junior high math and science, Virginia made a career in environmental science. Her focus was on water resources for the US Geological Survey. She did research on ground water for ten years followed by twenty years in management.



“I’ve always been interested in and concerned about environment,” explained Virginia. She recalled the impact of a significant drought during her early teens. Her family’s property abutted a town reservoir which essentially dried up, striking fear, but also motivation, into her at an impressionable age.

“Trying to live lightly on the earth” says Virginia, “not using more resources than I truly need – that’s what’s important to me.” For example, a rain barrel provides water for her vegetable garden. While she waits for the water to warm up for her shower, she collects the water and uses it to flush the toilet.

Virginia is divorced with two stepchildren and two granddaughters in their twenties. Now retired, Virginia volunteers in multiple capacities, including Habitat for Humanity and for a civic Water Planning Council. Another passion is group facilitation. She has facilitated countless meetings for many organizations including Hartford Public Schools and the Hartford Public Library as they worked to share resources during particularly tight fiscal times. She has facilitated strategic planning sessions for the Bristol Carousel Museum and the Farmington River Watershed Association among others. Here at USH, Virginia facilitated a contentious discussion between the Green Sanctuary Committee and the Endowment Committee about divesting in fossil fuels.

Virginia is looking forward to her work on the Board. She hopes the Board will establish a more formal role for past presidents that would include mentoring and advising the incoming administration. She would also like to see the Board review and approve ideas presented by the Council Chairs and then give the Chairs the autonomy for completion. She applauds any effort to increase volunteerism at USH, saying “We have so many committed people with such strong skill sets here at USH, let’s give them room to shine.”

### **A Few Thoughts From Reverend Bob**

Climate change is a problem caused by our scientific advances. It is a problem caused by our own cleverness. The Inquisition couldn’t come up with the means to change the literal composition of the atmosphere. It took far cleverer people, using science, to make that happen.



Some say while science may have been the cause – or at least a cause – of climate change (and species extinction, and the destruction of our oceans, etc.) – it must also be the solution. It is of no real use to pray for an answer; scientific problems require scientific solutions. I agree up to a point: almost

surely, problems of this scale must be addressed by scientific mindsets. We need numbers and trials, hypotheses and results that can be scaled to the millions. Whether it is a bioengineered microbe that eats plastic, careful study of the interrelatedness within a jungle ecosystem, or the

social science's insight into human behavior, we need more scientific knowledge, badly. Smashing all the machines won't save us now (partly because we'd never fully do it).

Science is part of the solution. But the world also desperately needs religion today. I admit that religion is often prone to error and hypocrisy, wickedness and willful ignorance. It is tempting to think that the absence of religion would lead to the presence of good sense. I know so many non-religious people who are smart, funny, kind, justice-seeking, and well grounded. I don't believe every person needs to have a religious outlook to be a good person or live a full life. On the contrary. But I do believe our species, as a whole, needs religion – and better religion than we have now – in order to survive over our next ten critically important generations. The "old" religions taught us about the preciousness of humanity - made in the image of God. Now we need religions that tell the story of how we are all intertwined, and how we cannot survive alone. We need to give one another a felt sense that we are capable of caring for our own - and that *all* the Earth and her beings are part of our mutual family of care.

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### **The UU 7<sup>th</sup> Principle: Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.**

When **Joanna Macy** died last month at age 96, the Washington Post asked in the headline to her obituary: **What if we need a spiritual revival, not technology, to address climate change?**

What if the big underlying problem stalling environmentalism is human selfishness, greed and apathy? When people are inundated with too many overwhelming issues, we tend to go numb.

Macy taught people how to face our debilitating feelings of anxiety and despair and convert those feelings into action steps instead of numbness. In hundreds of lectures, workshops and writings, Joanna Macy, a devout Buddhist, echoed our own UU 7<sup>th</sup> Principle -- we are not separate individuals but rather an integral part of a universal network made up of every living organism. Humanity cannot be separated from the natural world, an idea that has profound moral implications.



*If this world is to be healed through human efforts, I am convinced  
it will be by ordinary people, people  
whose courage is greater than their fear.*

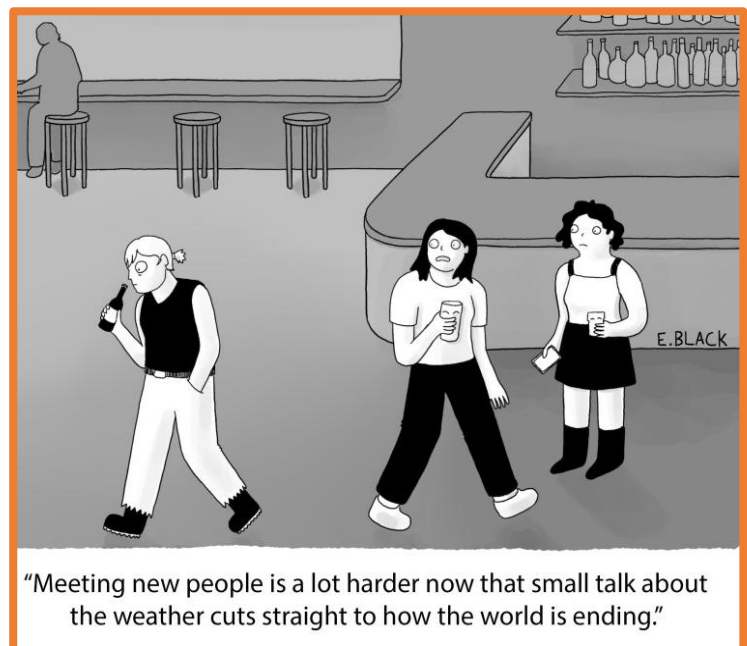
~ Joanna Macy

## Out & About

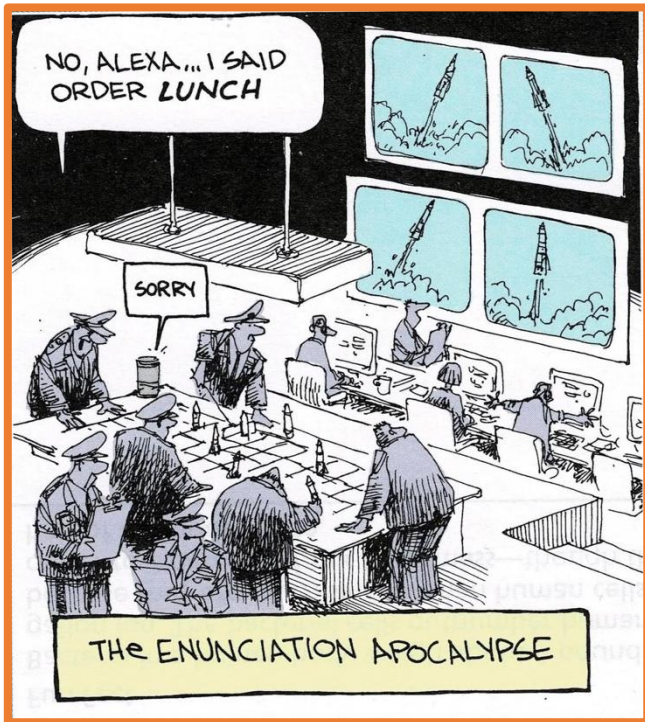
A **shoreline daytrip** may be perfection in September. The tourist crowds are gone and the weather can be ideal. Go for lunch at one of the many restaurants in the Mystic/Stonington area. Take your pick from famous seafood shacks like Abbott's or the laid-back vibe of Skipper's, both in Niantic. If you are in the mood for a fine dining experience there are many options open for lunch like The Mariner or The Oyster Club in Mystic. A quick online search will turn up numerous restaurants in this popular Connecticut tourist mecca. If you search on the Yelp app you'll see reviews and travel tips.

**Ender's Island.** After lunch you'll be glad you took a quick detour to Ender's Island located between Mystic and Stonington. It's a small island accessed with a short bridge. Owned by the Catholic Church, it is used as a retreat center but the grounds are open to the public. Lulled by water on all sides, the island experience is very relaxing. Paved paths wander through beautifully tended flower gardens. The island is not very large so walking around the entire perimeter is easy going. Many comfortable benches encourage quiet contemplation. Leashed dogs are allowed.

## Some Dark Humor for Dark Times









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***I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve the world and a desire  
to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.***

~ E. B. White

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Thanks to all who helped with this issue, especially Sue Smolski, Evan Williams, Gloria Mengual, Karolina Wojtysko, and Rev. Bob Janis. ~ Judy Robbins, Editor

