

The USHer

Your guide to the heart of the Unitarian Society of Hartford



“If only the world could borrow the leaves of autumn which connect with people through their diversity of colours!” ~ Nkwachukwu Ogbuagu, Nigerian poet

Beauty At USH

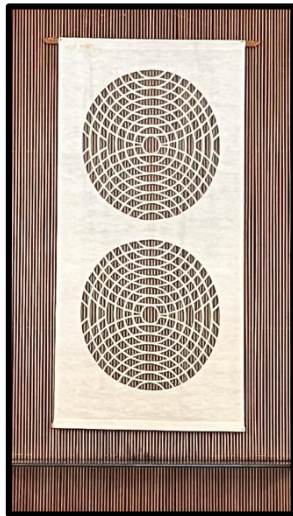
Plato saw beauty as a bridge between the material and eternal, a reflection of higher truth. Socrates saw it as a ladder, beginning with attraction to physical forms and ascending to love of wisdom and the Divine. Immanuel Kant observed that beauty is a universal language beyond words. Psychologist Abraham Maslow, in his famous *hierarchy of needs*, placed aesthetic needs near the top, just below self-actualization, implying that beauty is not a luxury but a deep human

drive. Like philosophers and sages, we at the Unitarian Society of Hartford hold beauty in high regard, surrounding ourselves with art and sacred objects.

Michael Crosbie, the Chair of the Architecture Department at the University of Hartford, has said that we Hartford UUs “worship inside a work of art.” Against the stunning architectural backdrop of our sanctuary, each week our team of chancel artists create installations that often mirror the theme of the sermon in a “universal language beyond words.”

Chancel Art, Then and Now

When our building opened in 1964, fresh flowers, usually donated in memory of a loved one, were placed on the glass table at the back of the chancel each Sunday. Although no one can



remember an exact date, the first banner to be hung as chancel art was the white wall hanging shown here. Sage Allen, one of Hartford’s old mainline department stores, had a substantial budget for lavish displays that were discarded after only a few weeks’ use. Congregant Janice Willett salvaged the banner shown here, and for several years it was the main focus above the glass table.

Sometime in the mid 2000s, our minister, Reverend Barbara Jamestone (aka Rev. BJ), gathered a group of women artists from the congregation and shocked them by suggesting they form an “old-fashioned ladies’ altar society.” What could this possibly mean to liberal UU women? In spite of this daunting assignment, creativity blossomed and soon the idea of banners and weekly displays on the glass table took hold. Rev. BJ served until 2011, her initial idea having turned into a tradition yielding dozens of banners.

Evan Williams and Sue Smolski cataloged the banners in 2022 and you can read about them on the USH website by clicking [here](#). As new banners are created, they can easily be added to the catalog.

The current Chancel Arts Committee is a group of creatives who volunteer to install Sunday displays. Kathie Ferguson, an interior designer, chaired the committee for many years. Paula Bleck, a stage set designer, now chairs the committee. Volunteers draw from a workshop of props, seasonal décor and inspirational objects in the Joseph Priestley room tucked along the ambulatory. USH is a rare church to change chancel art weekly yet there seems to be no limit to fresh ideas from our designers. If you’d like to add your talent to the Chancel Art team, contact Paula Bleck at pmbleck@outlook.com

Throughout this issue you’ll find a random selection of chancel displays, chosen mainly for the availability



Hubble image of the Karina nebula on canvas, courtesy of Ed Savage. Arrangement by Susan Hope.

of photos. Each Sunday's chancel installation is a work of art worthy of inclusion here but for lack of space and photos.

Creating a Sunday Service

USH endeavors to present uplifting, inspiring services every Sunday. Although it may appear that only three or four people are involved in the service, a minimum of twenty-two people have important roles in the creation of every service. Every Sunday is a veritable symphony with each person playing a key part.

Perhaps we could say that Sundays begin with Kevin Girouard, our sexton, who makes sure the church is warm, well-lit, and clean. Days before you arrive, Martha Bradley has filled the bollards in front of the church with beautiful plantings and seasonal décor. On any given Sunday, you'll be greeted at the door by a smiling volunteer while another, at the Welcome Table, greets newcomers, makes name tags and answers questions. Two ushers hand out printed Orders of Service that have been folded and collated by volunteers earlier in the week. The insert in the Order of Service has been edited by Sue Smolski, working with Karolina Wojtysko. It is your guide to the many activities here at USH.



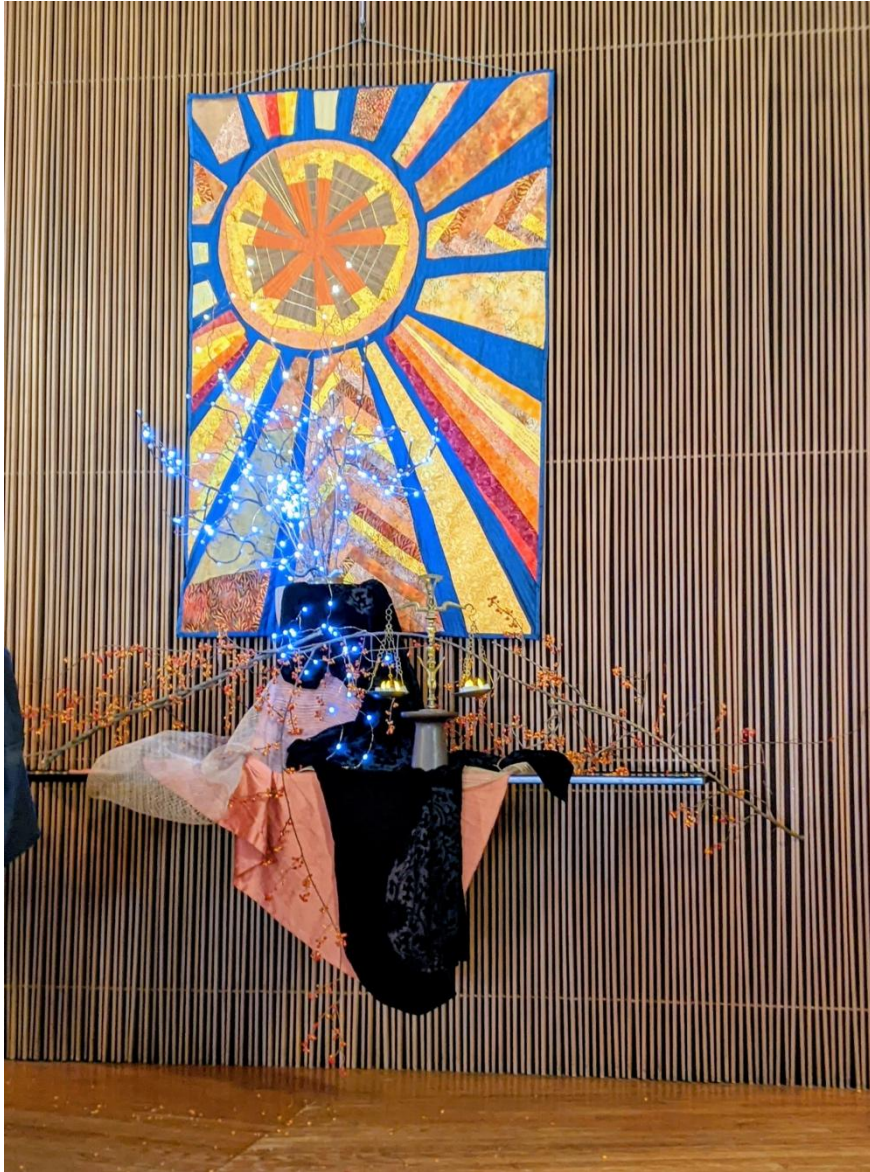
Arrangement by Paula Bleck.

As the service begins, a pianist, either Ben Mabrey or Georgi Lekov, graces the sanctuary with a musical prelude. This summer our *Mason & Hamlin* grand piano was completely refurbished and sounds wonderful. From a small table at the rear of the sanctuary, a volunteer, most often Rick Tsukada, runs an iPad that maintains the sound level and prevents feedback from microphones. Out of sight, in the office, Diana Cipriano skillfully manages the technical wizardry, juggling cameras, microphones, and the images on the chancel screens. Our Church Operations Manager, Karolina Wojtysko, is also in the office running the Zoom broadcast that allows any number of people to view the service simultaneously from home.

All of this activity started months ago at a Worship Associates' (WA) monthly meeting. Michael Michaud, an early retiree and part-time yoga instructor, is the Coordinator of the WAs. Each year, his team, in collaboration with Reverend Bob Janis, determine a theme for the church year. This year's theme is *Moving Forward*



Arrangement by Evan Williams



Kathie Ferguson remembers this banner laid out in pieces on her dining room table. Sewing by Diane Cadrain. Arrangement by Marye Gail Harrison.

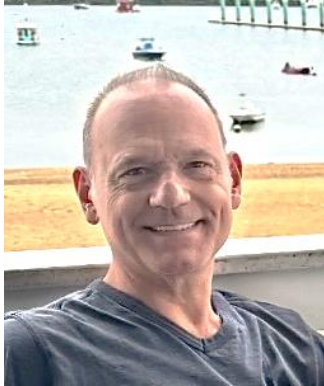
Together. With the help of the online Worship Calendar – a spreadsheet that details the various moving parts – the WA team and Rev. Bob plan the Sunday services for the year. Meredith Neumann, Director of Music, collaborates closely with the WAs to select appropriate music for each service, allowing plenty of time to rehearse either a choir or performers. Michael Michaud, the Coordinator of the Worship Associates, keeps an eye on the many moving parts, spotting gaps or potential snags. If this is a symphony, Michael is the conductor.

The creation of our Sunday services is a perfect snapshot of USH’s shared ministry in action. A variety of guest ministers and lay people fill our pulpit two Sundays a month and Rev. Bob preaches the remaining Sundays. Some musical and pulpit guests need to be booked nearly a year in advance. One Worship Associate is in the pulpit with whomever is

preaching, performing the essential tasks that ensure the worship service flows smoothly – lighting candles, doing announcements and readings, and rounding up a few volunteers to lift candle bowls during *Candles of Memory and Hope*. Worship Associates in the congregation keep a watchful eye in case anything falls through the cracks. One recent Sunday, an off-duty WA stealthily retrieved a missing hand mic; another Sunday a WA seamlessly filled in for a missing candle lifter.

As you read this in November, the Worship Calendar is already booked through next spring. That means each Sunday is sketched out months ahead. Three or four weeks’ ahead, specific details of each service are finalized either by Rev. Bob and/or one of the Worship Associates, who

coordinates with the pulpit guest and Karolina. Well ahead of time, these details are transferred to the paper Order of Service which Karolina prints on Thursdays.



Michael Michaud

Conducting a symphony requires virtuoso multi-tasking and Michael Michaud manages to make this look easy. But unlike an actual symphony conductor, Michael has a lot of help, especially from Rev. Bob and the other Worship Associates. Michael devotes hours to USH weekly, and says: “Volunteering as WA Coordinator affords me opportunities to be amazingly creative. It’s actually been profoundly rewarding and joyful. Any stress that has come with the sense of accountability has been far outweighed by the joy volunteering brings.”

A Community Committed to Helping One Another

Many volunteers would echo Michael’s sentiment. As our chancel artists attest, USH offers endless opportunities to be creative. The strong sense of community here is the alchemy that turns volunteering from a chore into fun. And the catalyst for creating community is knowing



Arrangement by Martha Bradley

each other more than superficially. UUs are curious people who value good listening; we believe everyone has a story worth telling. USH offers a number of opportunities to tell our stories or to listen to others tell their stories. Rev. Bob has begun a year-long course that emphasizes the stories that impact our lives. Gloria Mengual offers occasional story-telling sessions and our on-going *Connection Circles* (formerly Small Group Ministry) allow people to get to know each other over several facilitated sessions. *Connection Circles* are coordinated by Martha Bradley who can be reached at marthabradley49@yahoo.com

Some Thoughts from Reverend Bob

I’m not as up on my church vocabulary as I should be, so when David Newton and the Building & Grounds committee said they were updating the clerestory windows, I had to look up what the word meant (clerestory, not windows). Maybe you do, too. The clerestory windows are the upper windows of a religious building. In USH, they are the little

windows you see when you stand in the ambulatory and look up, from which you can get a peek at our spectacular roof.

In cathedrals, clerestory windows often are stained glass windows with pictures from Biblical scenes, or other religious iconography. “Clerestory” might actually derive from “clear” + “story”:

“clear” because windows are transparent, and “story” because those windows so often tell a story in stained glass from Christian history.

I suppose, in a way, *everything* tells a story, and not just pictures. A beloved ceramic cup can tell a story about precious memories, times together with friends and family. A vine, growing from a tree, tells a story of perseverance and adaptability and growth. Even a USH window – those windows tell a story, too. They speak of a people with dedication and inspiration, a “can do” people that have come together in different ways, but with the same vigor, over the generations. Those windows help tell the story of our USH community.

~ Rev. Bob



On Rosh Hashanah, the shofar calls Jews to spiritual awakening. Banner by Paula Bleck. Detail at right. Arranged by Diane Cadrain

Building Community through Storytelling

by Gloria Mengual

In the play *Hamilton*, a song entitled *Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story?* explores how history remembers people and the stories they tell, highlighting the importance of who gets to shape the narrative of a person’s life.



Beethoven display by Evan Williams

Research shows that our brains are hard-wired for stories. Listening to others share their stories releases brain chemicals that make us more open. In short, stories stick better than data because they touch upon our emotions rather than relying on dry facts and logic. When the focus shifts to people rather than process, the act of intently listening helps put a face on an issue or concern. Stories raise the stakes by appealing to our shared values.

Storytelling sessions provide an opportunity for people to share a bit about the essence of who they are and hear about others’ life journeys. Typically, participants are presented with two questions and asked to answer one: what is a historical incident that has strongly impacted your life? What is a personal experience you’ve had that has changed your life or impacted how you see and move in this world?

The purpose is not conversation, but rather giving another person the gift of your being completely present, listening to what they share. No questions or comments follow. We sit in a circle and people speak when they are moved to do so. As the song suggests, we look at who or what has shaped the narrative of our lives. It is an ideal chance for participants to connect more deeply with fellow USH congregants beyond the lighter talk of coffee hour.

Out & About

This is a good time to take a trip to **The New Britain Museum of American Art**, the oldest museum in the U.S. to house only American art. Founded in 1903 and expanded several times over the decades, it makes a delightful day trip.

The current featured exhibit is **Norman Rockwell, From Camera to Canvas**. Running until February 15, 2026, the exhibition displays 150 photographs, tear sheets, paintings and drawings. For a special treat, book a private small-group tour with USH's Carol Lacoss, a sought-after docent well-known for her lively informative talks. Email her at carolplacoss@hotmail.com with NBMAA in the subject line. Other tours are available Sundays at 11:00 or 1:00.



Carol Lacoss

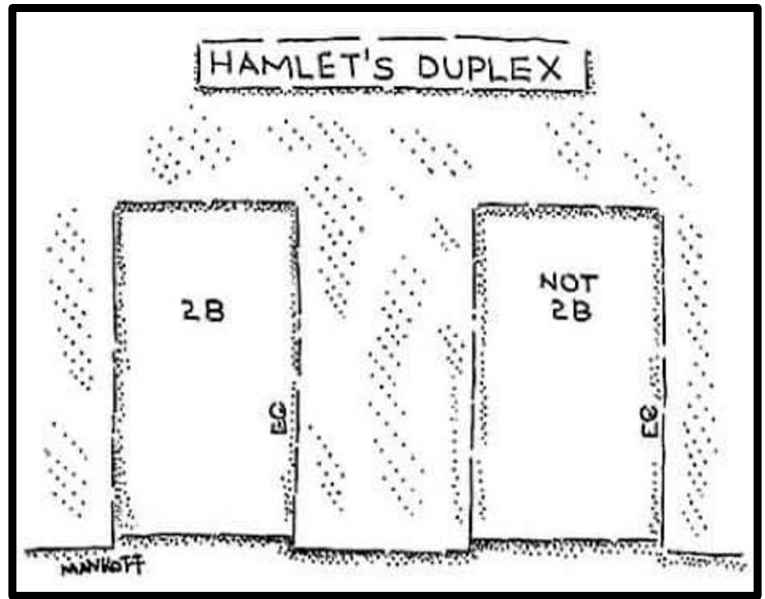
The museum is located at 56 Lexington Street, New Britain, adjacent to beautiful Walnut Hill Park, designed by Frederick Law Olmsted. See www.NBMAA.org for details on planning a visit. Remember, your public library has free passes for the museum.



Rockwell self-portrait.

Some Light Humor for Dark Times





The USHer wishes everyone a *Happy Thanksgiving*.

Thanks to all who contributed to this issue, especially Susan Hope for Chancel Art pictures, Diane Cadrain, Paula Bleck, Ann LaPorte-Bryan, Kathie Ferguson, Evan Williams, Marye Gail Harrison, Martha Bradley, Gloria Mengual, Sue Smolski, Ed Savage, Michael Michaud, Karolina Wojtysko, and Rev. Bob Janis.



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