

“The Gift of Heritage: Paying It Forward”

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As Unitarian Universalists, we often speak of the interdependent web of which we are a part. Picturing this in terms of our current moment in time, we may see ourselves on a place in a web that extends around us horizontally. But, looked at in terms of time, the web has a dimension of depth, as well. This is the dimension by which we're interdependently connected to ancestors... and to descendants— To those who come before and those who come after us.

Our worship theme for the month of October is “Heritage.” Heritage places us in time— in a lineage. As we heard in the reading from this month's small group Soul Matters packet: “[A]ncestors remind us that we are *part of something larger*. Even *obligated* to something larger...” The theme of “Heritage” evokes questions like:

- On whose shoulders do we stand?
- Who, and what, came before us, and holds us, in the great web?
- What gifts have we inherited from those who preceded us?

The Soul Matters author also proclaims: “Ancestors plop these incomplete and intimidating endeavors in our laps and say, ‘We’ve done our part and taken it as far as we can. The next step of the journey is in your hands.’” Thus, the writer enjoins us, when we think of heritage, not only to look backward with gratitude; but to “pay it forward.” Looked at from this angle, the theme of “Heritage” also raises questions such as:

- What responsibilities has our heritage placed on our shoulders?
- What do we want to provide for those who come after us?
- What do we want to pull from the past into the future?

Today, I'd like to begin grappling with some of these questions, focusing on our heritage as the current body of Channing Memorial Church, and what we have to offer the community— to more seekers now, and to generations going forward.

Channing Memorial Church was founded in 1993. Dan and I joined in 2004. I've personally benefited from the foundation laid by all those who came before us; and from the presence and efforts of everyone who's been part of Channing within the nearly twenty years of my time here. So, today, I offer some reflections on why I think it's important to ensure that this religious community that we've inherited has a solid foundation to move forward, sustainably, into the longer term future.

In your order of service, you'll find an insert with a series of unfinished statements. (The labyrinth is on the reverse side.) I'm going to read each statement, ask you to reflect on how you might fill in the blank, and let you in on how I answered that question.

Let me clarify what I mean when I say, “How I answered”: Part of what I did in compiling these thoughts, is to go through notes, available in Channing’s archives on our Google Drive, from various planning and visioning workshops we’ve held in the past. That’s a way of saying that some of these thoughts are more, and some are less, original with me. You’ll also hear wording from some of our UU principles in these statements

Here’s the first statement:

1. In a world where many feel a lack of fit in most mainstream churches, Channing provides:

I’ll give you a moment to give this some thought. What does Channing provide in a world where many feel a lack of fit in most mainstream churches? [Pause.]

Here’s what I came up with– “In a world where many feel a lack of fit in most mainstream churches, Channing provides:”

- A place for liberally religious communal worship and spiritual practice;
- A spiritual home those who may not be readily welcomed or feel a fit elsewhere, including “spiritual but not religious” folks, agnostics, atheists, and couples and families of mixed faiths;
- A spiritual home where theological diversity is not discouraged and, in fact, is considered essential to the “compost that nourishes our garden”;
- A spiritually grounded space where there’s no requirement (or even encouragement) to swallow something not in line with science or rationality.

What did I miss? [Pause briefly.]

Our second fill-in-the-blank statement is:

2. In a world experiencing a crisis in loneliness, Channing provides a place to build beloved community that:

Give this a moment’s thought. [Pause.]

Here’s how I responded– “Channing provides a place to build beloved community that:”

- Is welcoming to a diversity of people (diverse ages, abilities, gender identities and sexual orientations, racial identities, and so on);
- Is a safe and nourishing space to learn how to be in beloved community;
- Supports people through life’s challenges;
- Is committed to being a safe space to express oneself;

- Is a safe place to be vulnerable;
- Is a safe space to make mistakes;
- Provides a web of caring connection through life's ups and downs;
- Actively invites people in, actively promotes deep connection, and actively promotes compassion;
- Facilitates igniting compassion into meaningful and effective action, and provides opportunities to join together to engage in action collectively.

Again, what did I miss? Raise a hand if there's anything you'd like to add. [Pause and re-state responses.]

And, now, our third statement:

3. In a world experiencing a crisis in meaning, Channing provides:

I'll give you a moment to consider this, unbiased by me. [Pause.]

I said, "Channing provides:"

- A community that encourages each person to freely and responsibly wrestle with life's questions, layers, and meaning, and provides support for this exploration ;
- A place to experience and nurture awe and wonder, and to share those experiences;
- A religious space where a search for meaning and faith in science are not at odds.

I'll take a show of hands for additions. [Pause and re-state responses.]

We'll turn to statement #4:

4. In a society that's very divided, Channing provides a place to grow spiritually that is committed to:

Think about how you might fill in that blank. [Pause.]

I've got, "Channing provides a place to grow spiritually that is committed to:"

- Upholding the inherent worth and dignity of every person (*wording from the UU 1st Principle*);
- A set of principles in alignment with the values expressed in our country's constitution and with liberal democracy;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large (*UU 5th Principle*);

- Promoting and practicing justice, equity and compassion (*UU 2nd Principle*), and working for freedom from oppression for all people;
- Being a strong institution operating on principles of fairness and continuity, on the one hand; and upholding the values of relationships and intimacy on the other;
- Being a place where no one claims ultimate authority or a monopoly on the truth, yet truth is not treated as a replaceable commodity.

What have I missed that Channing provides in a society that's very divided?

[Pause and re-state responses.]

Statement #5:

5. At a time when our planet is facing environmental catastrophe, Channing provides:

Again, I'll give you a moment to reflect. [Pause.]

I came up with:

- A community and an institution that promotes environmental responsibility;
- A religious community committed to respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part (wording from the UU 7th Principle);
- A place to express our concerns and fears in a supportive environment;
- A place to nourish hope.

What do you have to add?

[Pause and re-state responses.]

Moving on to number 6:

6. In a world where the next generation/s may have fewer reasons for hope and more reasons for despair, Channing offers:

Okay– Full disclosure: I haven't answered this one yet. What does Channing have to offer children, youth, *and* younger adults, looking to the future? We might think about– yes– climate change– but also: Economics, addictions, global health concerns, displacement of peoples, discrimination, gun violence, over-population ... and this list could go on. We can answer this aloud, or I can leave you to think about it. Would anyone like to offer a response?

[Pause and re-state responses.]

Number 7:

7. At a time when our lives are permeated by distraction, Channing provides:

I'll give you a moment to reflect before hearing from me. [Pause.]

I have, "Channing provides:"

- A place to practice meditation and contemplation;
- Encouragement to awareness
- Encouragement to notice our inner responses and to reflect on that;
- Opportunities for contemplative conversation and reflective sharing;
- Opportunities for deep reading and sharing;
- Opportunities to practice deep listening.

Any others?

[Pause and re-state responses.]

Turning to #8:

8. In a world focussed on the material and on superficialities, Channing is committed to:

Notice what comes to mind. [Pause.]

I'll offer, "Channing is committed to:"

- Envisioning and creating a better, more beautiful world;
- Engaging with depth;
- Providing powerful, transformative worship;
- Invoking the sacred via the power of aesthetics in worship and in our space;
- Reaching people emotionally and spiritually through the power of music.

What might we add to this list?

[Pause and re-state responses.]

Our ninth, and last, fill-in-the-blank statement is:

9. In a world where most of the spaces within which we carry out our lives call forth and address only portions of our humanity, Channing:

We'll pause a moment to notice what bubbles up. [Pause.]

I wrote that Channing:

- Invites us to bring our whole selves;
- Exists to serve the whole person;
- Serves people in various life circumstances (ages, various abilities, etc.)

What did I miss? [Pause briefly.]

And I leave you with a final question for reflection, this coming week and on-going:
What's your part? What do you bring to Channing to help build on our communal heritage, that we may, collectively, give something of value to those who follow us?