

**UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH OF WAKEFIELD**  
**Rev. Maddie Sifantus**  
**“We Begin in Love”**  
**January 4, 2009**

**READING WITH MUSICAL RESPONSE**

*We Begin in Again in Love* Words, Robert Eller-Isaacs; Music, Les Kleen<sup>1</sup>

Narrator: For remaining silent when a single voice would make a difference...

Congregation and choir: We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.

Narrator: For each time our fears have made us rigid and in accessible...

Congregation and choir: We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.

Narrator: For each time we have struck out in anger without just cause...

Congregation and choir: We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.

Narrator: For each time that our greed has blinded us to the needs of others...

Congregation and choir: We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.

Narrator: For the selfishness that set us apart and alone...

Congregation and choir: We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.

Narrator: For falling short of the admonition of the spirit...

Congregation and choir: We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.

Narrator: For losing sight of our unity...

Congregation and choir: We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.

Narrator: For those and for so many acts both evident and subtle which have fueled the illusion of separateness...

Congregation and choir: We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.

**SERMON: “We Begin in Love” January 4, 2009**

So we begin, you and I. So we begin this New Year, this year that has never been before, this 2009. So we leave 2008 behind, most of us with great gladness, perhaps some with a little sadness, to venture into the new, with all our hopes, with all our dreams, and, yes, too, with our fears of what lies ahead—for our country, for our world, for our families, and for us here at the

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<sup>1</sup> UUA: *Singing the Journey*, 1037.

Unitarian Universalist Church of Wakefield. New beginnings with their excitement but scary all at the same time.

So we begin. Another beginning after another ending. Part of the arc of time, the arc of seasons, the arc of life. So we, along with everyone else, begin, many of us with lists of resolutions of how we are going to be healthier, happier and better human beings in the New Year. Yet we know that numbering our years and making a big deal of the end of one year and the start of another are ultimately artificial markers. The cosmos goes on without noting January first. But we humans like to note passages, for good reason, I think. Rituals give shape to our days and weeks and help us organize our lives and our memories. Still we sing “ring out the old, ring in the new” and pray that we will “ring out the false” and “ring in the true”.<sup>2</sup>

So what did YOU do New Year’s Eve? I’ll bet you a good number of you slept right through it and here you are in 2009, none the worse for wear. Others of you may have braved the frigid temperatures of Boston’s First Night—and the New Year came anyway, even without the fireworks at Midnight which were cancelled because of the cold. Or maybe you did like I did, gathered with a few good friends for conversation and a few laughs and counted down the lost moments of a difficult year in great hopefulness for whatever the New Year might bring. But the New Year came, no matter what way you recognized it—or not. It began.

There is a poem that May Sarton wrote on a rainy New Year’s Eve way back in 1937.

The earth feels old tonight  
And we who live and stand on the cold rim  
Face a new year.  
It is raining everywhere  
As if the rain were mercy,  
As if the rain were peace.  
Peace falling on our hair.  
Open your hearts tonight; let them burn!  
Let them light a way in the dark,  
Let them one by one affirm  
There is hope for a staff.  
I say it will flower in our hands,  
And we will go garlanded,  
There is the fine fresh stuff of faith for a coat:  
We shall go warm.  
We shall go by the light of our hearts.  
We shall burn mightily in the new year.  
We shall go together-

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<sup>2</sup> UUA: *Singing the Living Tradition*, 58.

O you who stand alone on the rim of the earth and are cold,  
I salute you here!

I think May Sarton caught something of the paradox of the New Year and I love the image of “peace falling on our hair”. Would it be so for all our earth in 2009, especially with all the alarming news footage and stories coming out of Gaza this week. Sarton is looking for hope in the New Year and finding a “fine fresh stuff of faith” for a coat.

And that brings me to us here. It seems to me that as we begin together this morning, we may all be looking for a “fine fresh stuff of faith”. We begin, you and I, on a new ministry together. “We shall go together.” We don’t know what that will look like as yet. We don’t know who each other is as yet. It is a new beginning...and just like the New Year...it is a little exciting...and a little scary. It is another change. And change is never easy for us humans. We need to put on the “fine fresh stuff of faith” and discover what we can do here in 2009—together.

For a while, it is going to be like the song, “Getting to Know You”. You remember the one from the musical “The King and I”: (sing)

Getting to know you,  
Getting to know all about you.<sup>3</sup>

So, at first, I am going to want to get to know you. How do you do things around here? What are your hopes and dreams for the Unitarian Universalist Church of Wakefield? What are your hopes and dreams for yourself and for your family, if you have one? What feeds you? What are you excited about? What upsets you? Who are you? And, to get right down to it, what are your names?

Things will probably be a little awkward for a little while as we get to know each other. Whenever a new relationship starts there is the “getting to know you, getting to know all about you” period which then often moves into the “Getting to like you, Getting to hope you like me”....period. We might circle around each other for a little bit, but I hope you stay with it as we move through the winter and spring, moving towards our ultimate goal of a stronger faith community and a vision for the future that I know you have all been struggling with.

How can we do this together? First of all, by asking lots of questions. I know I have lots for you. Some of them will be probably pretty mundane stuff like where is the thermostat, how do I get into my office and who shovels off the front walk? Oh, I discovered the answer to that

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<sup>3</sup> Oscar Hammerstein II, Richard Rogers.

one reading *The Gleam* late last night! But many of my questions will have to do with your history. Some of you have been coming here for many years? What was it like here 20, 30, 40 years ago? What changes have you seen? My questions will have to do with your priorities. What are your long-range plans? Who decides?

I am quite aware of the removal of the spire this last fall and the vote earlier in the year to stay in this historic building. That commitment tells me that the building is important to at least most of you. So a priority might be to figure what to fix to have it keeping standing and then to figure out how to obtain the funding to pay for what is needed. What do you patch and what is a necessity to address immediately? Your Board of Management struggles with these questions and need the support of all of us here as they make difficult decisions. Not to mention your generous support as your pledge drive will kick off later this winter.

This building has been standing in this community for a long time and there have been other folks sitting in these pews for generations. People have dedicated their children here, folks have gotten married here—maybe some of you—and people have had their Memorial Services here. What is our vision for this space and what is our vision for living our faith in this community and beyond? What does it mean for what we do within these four walls, and what does it mean for how we reach out to the community? Questions, questions.

And while I am asking all these questions and more, you will need to get to know me. Some of you have seen me here before—I preached here in October of this past fall and years back I was here in 1997 and 1998 when my dear friend and colleague Mary Louise Schmalz was your minister. She is very excited I am going to be with you, by the way, as is my colleague Edmund Robinson. I bring greetings from both of them this morning. You will get to know me over time but the short story is that I am a graduate of the Andover Newton Theological School, where I have been and remain the liaison from the Unitarian Universalist Association to the Unitarian Universalist seminarians. I find it fun and challenging to be with seminarians as they discern their path in ministry, what it means to be a UU minister, how they might make a living in ministry, and walking with them on their spiritual path. I am a trained supervisor of ministerial interns and keep my credentials up to date by doing continuing education at Andover Newton, this week taking a two day workshop: “Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading” with Ronald Heifetz, who is a Professor at the John F. Kennedy School of Government and wrote a book of the same name. So I guess one of my goals as your minister will be to stay alive while

we lead UU Wakefield into the future!

I am Affiliate Minister at First Parish in Wayland as a community minister. First Parish ordained me in 2002 and is the congregation out of which I was called as a minister. Most of my ministry since my ordination has been outside the walls of our congregations, bringing our UU values into the larger world. The main thing I did until the end of August was run an elder chorus, the Golden Tones, which was my full time ministry in the eyes of the UUA. In this ministry, I had the great privilege of connecting the aging communities with the faith communities and the arts communities, as well as doing intergenerational work with local schools and universities. I founded the group in 1988, and I loved the work...but it was time to move on. But I am sure I will stay connected to the work of creativity, spirituality and aging.

A few other things about me. As a community minister, I often do rites of passage for those who aren't connected to a faith community, as well as in our UU congregations when my colleagues need me to do a wedding or a Memorial Service. I also do workshops in end-of-life issues and the like. I have been a professional singer since I was in high school. Although I don't have as much time for it these days, I still perform when I can fit it in, most notably with my professional trio, TVS (The Vocal Section) which this summer celebrated 30 years of recording and performing together. Our next gig will be March 14<sup>th</sup> at the Acton Jazz Café, if you are up for a road trip. TVS often participates in worship services in our congregations so maybe one day they will come here. My interest in music carries over into the church where I believe that music plays an important part in worship and building community.

On a personal level, I am the mother of one son, Nigel. He married a wonderful woman, Samantha, several years ago, and they have two children. They live in Huntington Beach, California so it isn't likely you'll see them here soon—especially in the winter! What else about me? I love to read, I love to cook, and I love to garden.

How will we get to know each other? I live in Wayland, which is about 40 minutes here, depending, of course, on the traffic on Route 128. As the next weeks go by, I hope to set up office hours here so you can drop by to chat or make an appointment to meet with me. I would love to meet you here in Wakefield for a meal or a cup of coffee and tea. I will pay my own way. I would enjoy visiting you in your home, if that is of interest, or meeting you at your place of employment. I am reachable by leaving a message on the telephone here or by calling my home office telephone or my cell phone and by email. I will post from time to time on the church's

yahoo group. We will make sure that my contact information is in the next Gleam. For now, I will leave a pile of my cards at the back of the sanctuary.

The next time I will be in the pulpit will be January 18 during the Martin Luther King Jr. weekend. What a time to consider King's legacy, just before the inauguration of Barack Obama! After that I will be here on February 8 when I intend to explore the theme of "Why Church?" Why do we come here? What do we expect to find? I would love to hear some of your thoughts ahead of time.

So we begin, together. Let us get to know one another. Rest assured that I will not come in here and change everything. But I will ask a lot of questions and ask you what it is that is valuable to you...and perhaps what is expendable. As we will sing in our final hymn in a moment, "we'll view the past with no regret, nor future with dismay."<sup>4</sup> We begin together and ask how this can be a vibrant place with enough hands for all the tasks and resources to do what needs to be done and energy so that folks want to come in the door. We will find the "fine fresh stuff of faith" for the Unitarian Universalist Church of Wakefield. Ending with May Sarton's words:

There is the fine fresh stuff of faith for a coat:  
We shall go warm.  
We shall go by the light of our hearts.  
We shall burn mightily in the New Year.  
We shall go together-  
O you who stand alone on the rim of the earth and are cold,  
I salute you here!

So, let us begin. Let us begin in love.  
Blessed be, Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> SLT 350, *The Ceaseless Flow of Endless Time*.