

Rev. Linda Simmons  
Good Things Happen Here  
January 26, 2014

Why do we come to the Meeting House each Sunday? Why do we give up our Sunday mornings week after week to meet here together? What keeps us coming? Is it a promise of hearing something that shows us the way to a better life, the joy of seeing each other, the peace of listening to beautiful music?

There is a story about a little boy who was waiting for his mother to come out of the grocery store.

As he waited, he was approached by a man who asked, "Son, can you tell me where the post office is?"

The little boy replied, "Sure, just go straight down the street a couple of blocks and turn to your right."

The man thanked the boy kindly and said, "I'm the new pastor in town, and I'd like for you to come to church on Sunday. I'll show you how to get to Heaven."

The little boy replied with a chuckle, "Awww, come on; you don't even know the way to the post office!"

So what brings you here?

I left jars out with the words *Good Things Happen Here* and invited you to fill out little slips of paper telling us of what happens here that is different, special, important.

Many responses were collected. I will sprinkle them throughout the sermon. Here are the first ones:

1. I have made some new friends
2. I met some really lovely people working in the RE program
3. I was held in the hearts of everyone during my time of tribulation
4. Friendship grows at the Meeting House. Coffee Hour is such a friendly time of greeting and catching up.
5. Whenever my brother with down syndrome visits me, he loves to come to this place because everyone is so welcoming it makes him feel so special.
6. Meeting and getting to know interesting new people, welcoming me as part of their lives, giving to people in spirit and joy

7. I received a great deal of love and support around my father's sickness and death
8. Friendship
9. Inspiration
10. I like coming here, writes one of our children.
11. Hearing about other people's spiritual journeys and beliefs
12. Meeting Gwen who has been such a good and helpful friend
13. I love the sense of community here
14. Written by another child, The spaghetti dinner and seeing all the great friends I have made here

A big part of why we come here is because we feel held by each other.

And for me this matters not only because we need this in life, we need compassionate witnesses but because when we are held, we can take the risks that change asks of us. Although we can be so certain about our positions and ways of being and seeing, I believe we all have a hidden desire to be shaken from what we are sure of and allowed a glimpse of what we cannot yet know.

We come here to be loved so well we can risk being changed by each other.

David Foster Wallace was an award-winning American novelist, short story writer, essayist, professor of English at Illinois State University, and professor of creative writing at Pomona College.

In his commencement address to the graduates of Kenyon College in 2005 called *This is Water, Some Significant Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life*, he writes of an atheist, one who is sure there is no god and a theist, or one who is sure there is a God, having an argument in a bar in a remote Alaskan wilderness. The atheist is adamant about his belief that there is no god and he tells the story of how he got caught away from camp in a terrible blizzard and he couldn't see a thing and he was totally lost and it was 50 below. He decided to try prayer and got on his knees and prayed, "God, if there is a god, I'm lost in this blizzard and I'm gonna die if you don't help me."

The religious guy takes heart when he hears this and says, Well, now you must believe. After all you are here and alive!

The atheist rolls his eyes and says, "No man, all that happened was that a couple of other hikers wandered by and showed me the way back to camp."

We know as UUs that grace shows up in many faces and is least likely a beam of white light and an ethereal voice. We know that we are the arms and hands of mercy, of hope, of salvation on this earth, right here and now.

There is a wilderness in all of our lives that we hike alone and we are often lost though we have lots of signposts that make us feel found: houses, relationships, jobs, children, friends, towns we live in, food we eat, philosophies we espouse, we still often feel lost.

This Meeting House is a full of fellow hikers who sometimes know the way and sometimes need the way. And we come here to be found, ultimately, to be found. It is your own words that told me this.

More words from all of you:

1. The place to come to be myself
2. Spiritual fulfillment
3. Time to reflect, peaceful
4. Opportunities to learn and grow
5. Rev. Linda's warmth, welcome and inclusiveness
6. I always feel so special and welcome here
7. The joys and concerns are such a connecting way to understand and get to know each other
8. This is a place to slow down and remember what is important and to look around and to see the community we are part of.
9. Diane Lehman and the choir and their beautiful music that always brings me to another place
10. A place to be vulnerable and safe at the same time

I have a German friend, Hans, who lives in Amsterdam, where I lived for a few years. He is a jeweler and when I was 24 I was his apprentice in his jewelry shop. Hans is a deep thinker. He texted me the other day and wrote, Life is incomprehensible. What do you think?

I had to avoid that message for several days if only because the idea of answering it with a text felt impossible and exhausting. And then this morning I typed, I cannot possibly answer this well in a text. Yes, life is incomprehensible. It is how we live into that incomprehensibility that matters.

He wrote back, you answered that pretty well for a text message!

When I wrote it, I was just trying to get it off my list of things to do, but when Hans responded, I thought more about it. It is how we live into the incomprehensibility that matters. And that what's we do for each other here.

We look out at it all without dogma or sacred text to shield us from our doubts and fears and we know it is scary and beautiful and we stitch it together with the fabric of each of our lives and it becomes more beautiful and less scary because we are shoulder to shoulder.

David Foster Wallace tells another story about fish. There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says "Morning, boys. How's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes "What the hell is water?"

How can we know what water is if water is all we know? How can we come to develop the consciousness to know in what we swim when we are built to be oriented toward ourselves day and night, when we are built to perceive the world through our own eyes and lives?

How do we learn where we are if we are always where we are, if the center is always us?

We can shake our foundations, as Paul Tillich, a German-American Christian existentialist philosopher and theologian. Tillich is widely regarded as one of the most influential theologians of the 20th century, writes in his book, *Shaking the Foundations*.

*Suddenly, within the hardest struggle, something shifts, not attained by ourselves, but present beyond expectation and struggle. Suddenly we are grasped by a peace which is above reason. We know that now, in this moment, we are in the truth, in spite of all our ignorance about ourselves and our world. We have not become wiser and more understanding in any ordinary sense; we are still children in knowledge. But the truth of life is in us, with an illuminating certainty, uniting us with ourselves, giving us great and restful happiness.*

*We know that now, in this moment, we are in the good, in spite of all our weakness, in spite of the fragmentary and distorted character of our Self and the world. We have not become more moral or more saintly; we still belong to a world which is subject to self-destruction. But the good of life is in us, uniting us with the good of everything, giving us the blessed experience of universal love.*

*Where can we feel this new reality? We cannot find it; but it can find us. It tries to find us during our whole life. It is in the world; it carries the world; and it is the cause of the fact that our Self and our world are not yet thrown into utter self-destruction.*

I think that is what this Meeting House does for us. It reminds us that we are not all there is. It reminds us that we are one among many and that as painful as that is when we want what we want and we want it now, the exercise of being with each other and not getting our way all the time, is an exercise that illuminates the water, that opens us beyond our egos and minds and lets what tries to find us our whole lives creep into the window of our souls.

This is where we find the courage to risk opening. Right here! And please know that because I am a minister does not mean I have succeeded in this. A ministerial colleague of mine says that ministers are so screwed up we have to be paid to come to church!

More of your words:

1. Love the readings and reactions to the children's stories
2. Ringing the bells for the New Year
3. Sunday School, wrote a child
4. Blessing of the Animals, wrote another
5. Spaghetti dinners
6. Finally got to see the church bell
7. Love and light to all people in the world and especially to those in this very accepting community
8. Receiving a beautiful Christmas tree because we were part of this church
9. Love the after service snacks
10. Circle Dinners and getting to know each other better

What we love about being here is being here together, exploring, swimming in the water and now and then risking the possibility of seeing the water itself which takes no small act of courage. But when we are willing to risk seeing each other as sacred messengers of a truth we cannot see because we are too close to see it, as hikers come out to the wood to bring us home, when home is a place we barely know, when we risk showing up in all our beauty and pain and perfection and weakness, then who we are fully has a chance to find us.

As Paul Tillich wrote *We cannot find it; but it can find us. It tries to find us during our whole life. It is in the world; it carries the world; and it is the cause of the fact that our Self and our world are not yet thrown into utter self-destruction.*

When we come here, we can be found by that which seeks us all our lives.

This brings to mind the anonymous wisdom story titled "The Rabbi's Gift" that has been told in many variations.

*Once a synagogue had fallen on hard times. Only five members were left: all over 70 years old. In the mountains near the shul there lived a retired rabbi. It occurred to the five to ask the rabbi if he could offer any advice that might save the shul.*

*One of the members and the rabbi spoke at length but when asked for advice, the rabbi simply responded by saying, "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is, the messiah is one of you." This member, returning to the shul, told the four members what the rabbi had said.*

*In the months that followed, the old shul members pondered the words of the rabbi. "The Messiah is one of us?" they each asked themselves. As they thought about this possibility, they all began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off-chance that, one among them might be the Messiah ... and on the off-chance that each member himself might be the Messiah, they also began to treat themselves with extraordinary care.*

*As time went by, people visiting the shul noticed the aura of respect and gentle kindness that surrounded the five old members of the small shul. Hardly knowing why, more people began to come back to worship at the old synagogue. They began to bring their friends, and their friends brought more friends.*

*Within a few years, the small shul had once again become a thriving congregation, thanks to the rabbi's gift!*

Messiah means in greek, the anointed one. The anointed one is the one we decide can save us, bring us peace, hope, love, an understanding of water that is our home. This meeting house anoints us all to be messengers of this love, this understanding, this peace.

We, in all our aggravating and glorious difference, are anointed by this our covenanted community, to remain open until we can see each other and ourselves with love. This is the meaning of salvation.

The messiah is among us.

How blessed are we to be in each other's company!

Amen.