

**We're Still Us, Just Bigger**

by Lorraine Dennis, President of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Reading, MA

These are Lorraine's remarks at the rededication of the newly completed addition and renovation to the church in October, 2007.

This place is precious to me. You are all in my heart. I can almost feel all our hearts beating on this special day. It's a little like what I felt when I found this congregation in 1985. I know I felt something unexpected that first Sunday when I came to a service. I didn't expect to feel so comfortable with the people and with the theology. I loved that we could all find our own way, and that we would search together. I loved the warmth, and the thoughtful, funny, challenging sermons by our minister, Jane Rzepka. We got involved, and quickly.

Matt started Sunday School the next year. I joined the choir. We shared our happy news of adopting our daughter Meggie. Steve started working on the canvass. Apple-picking. Committees. Ferry Beach weekends in Maine with most of the congregation. Friendships for us, and for the kids. My Dad died, and this congregation picked us up and carried us all, through the whole ordeal. I fell completely, *completely* in love with this congregation.

Then, maybe 10 years ago, there started to be a lot of talk about growing. I was not in favor. I was terrified. Heck, I was in love and nobody better rock the boat. If there were more people, then the way I experienced church would change. I knew most everybody now. I was comfortable. My kids were happy. Steve and I were happy. They were threatening to take away my congregation. I didn't say much, but it was hard.

We were invited to do some work on the mission statement, and I joined the Comprehensive Planning Committee. We tried to get everyone in the congregation involved in thinking about what our needs were. I realized that the Sunday School was crowded and sometimes people didn't stick around because

of that. We started having two services on busy Sundays when we wanted to have the children with us. We worried that new people didn't feel welcome because it was so crowded. We created a comprehensive plan to include building more Religious Education space, expanding the sanctuary, and constructing more and better social space. And we thought about the programming we could do and the new staff we would need to help us. I started to get excited about the space and the possibilities for our growth. I started to feel better about sharing this special place with others.

Then I joined the Governing Board. Imagine. I had successfully avoided it for 15 years! It was alternately intimidating and exciting to be involved in the running of the congregation. It's not like it was in the church of my childhood. In this congregation, we really **do** run things. No bossing or bailouts from the diocese for UU congregations. It's a big responsibility, but I liked that we were in charge of our own destiny.

With the sense of ownership that comes with serving on the Board, I began to realize just how important this place is to me. It took me a while to process, but when I wrapped my head around it, I realized that this congregation had changed my life, and the lives of the people I love, in a significant way.

Wow. Suddenly, I understood that being in this community makes that kind of a difference for others, too. And that it could make a big difference in the lives of people outside our little church community. The world gets more and more difficult and complex every day. I began to realize that the world needs us, and we just **have to** open our arms and hearts and welcome people in.

And, here's the good news for me and maybe for some of you, too. It turns out that the congregation I was so afraid of 10 years ago is the very congregation that you have come to love. It's right here. You're right here. I see and feel in this present moment all the important things that I worried I would lose.

So. Here I am, the President of this congregation. And here we are, celebrating our wonderful new space. We're growing. We're still here and these hearts will be beating for a long time to come. I get it now. I hope you do, too.

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