

## ***On the Verge: Our Opening Farewell*** — March 30, 2008

*Barbara & Jaco ten Hove, Paint Branch UU Church*

### **CALL TO WORSHIP:**

Some evocative words by our UU colleague Kathleen McTigue have stirred me this week as we prepared this worship service. She begins by saying:

*We come together this morning to remind one another to rest for a moment on the forming edge of our lives.*

I love that image—the “forming edge of our lives.” It reminds me that at all moments we are literally on the verge of the next one. We can’t know what each moment will bring but we can bring intention and commitment to living this one well. She goes on:

*To resist the headlong tumble into the next moment, until we claim for ourselves awareness and gratitude.*

Resisting that headlong tumble is hard. I’m one of those people who loves to plan, dream and imagine. I often feel as if I live more in the future than in the now. But Kathleen suggests that we resist this tumble into the next moment until we claim both awareness and gratitude. At this moment I am aware of and grateful for the beauty of this space, the expectation in your faces, the many mixed feelings I carry knowing that today begins a process of saying good-bye. Kathleen’s words again are helpful. She invites us to

*Take the time to look into one another’s faces and see there communion: the reflection of our own eyes.*

For nearly nine years we have looked into each other’s eyes and seen our own lives reflected. This time among you has taught us so much about who *we* are as we grew to understand and appreciate who *you* are. We are indeed powerfully grateful for your presence in our lives; we are certain we’ll never forget you or the work we did together.

Kathleen ends her beautiful statement this way:

*This house of laughter and silence, memory and hope, is hallowed by our presence together.*

It is indeed. Together, we create sacred ground as we gather in worship. Let our worship today, as we stand on the verge of good-bye, be a time of gratitude, awareness and powerful communion. And let us never forget, in the midst of change, to say yes to life and all it offers. Our hymn, #6, *Just as Long as I Have Breath*, helps us to do that...

**FLAMING CHALICE DEDICATION** by Pat Tompkins, *worship associate*

As Unitarian Universalists we are part of a living tradition; a tradition which values and honors teachings from many religious perspectives, old and new; a tradition which is open and receptive to the world around us. In the hymn we use to close each of our services—*Spirit of Life*—Carolyn McDade has given us wonderful images of the roots that hold us close—giving us a firm base to stand and grow on— and wings that set us free—free to soar and to seek.

As participants in a living tradition we are nurtured—and challenged to grow, to thrive, to become. We know that you cannot grow without changing. Change can be exhilarating; change can be scary and unsettling. Change means things will not be exactly as they were before. And, right now, we find ourselves faced with the prospect of a big change as Barbara and Jaco move from us to their new home and new church community.

I have been a part of the Paint Branch community since 1965. Over the course of those 43 years I have had to say good-bye to several ministers. To be sure, each parting had its own sadness and sense of loss. And each new beginning brought its own set of challenges. But, most wonderfully, each portion of the journey I have been privileged to share with them has been a gift to me. As the ministers have shared themselves, their perspectives their inspiration, I—we have been the beneficiaries of a great legacy.

A church community is a living organism. It evolves; it responds; it grows; it sometimes struggles. It lives and breathes with our thoughts, our energy and our dedication. We often talk of Paint Branch as our church family. Together over the years we have stood with each other—in celebration and in sorrow. We have worked to solve problems; we have worked to assure that this place of gathering remains strong and that it will be here for generations to come.

I believe the relationship between a church community and their ministers is very much like that which we experience in our own families. We each have a part to play in

encouraging growth in the journey toward fulfillment. We gently prod and support; we suggest and plead; we set examples; sometimes we even argue. Ultimately, we know, that we must be willing to let go so that the full potential of human growth can be realized.

When ministers let go, a church community has an opportunity to work together to assess, to reflect and to plan. As we prepare to experience yet another transition in the life of our church community, we know that it is going to give us a chance to engage in many lively discussions in which we will share what is meaningful to us—what we would like to have continue or even what new paths we may wish to explore. We will be deciding together how to move forward.

When churches let go, ministers have an opportunity to continue their spiritual journey and to fulfill the pledge of commitment they have made to their calling. The time they have shared with us—the spiritual journey we have taken together—will go with them as they use their talents and gifts to lead and learn and grow. And so in this living tradition, in this living organism the cycle of life continues.

Last week we dedicated two of the smallest and newest members of our church family. This week, we joyously welcome our newest adult members. In a few weeks we will say good-bye to Barbara and Jaco. It will be a time of laughter and of tears, remembering what has been and looking ahead to what is yet to come.

When we say goodbye we will do so knowing that we are all part of the Paint Branch family no matter where we are. And so I light our chalice this morning. May its dancing flame, firmly based in the bowl which represents our community, remind us of the living, breathing tradition which holds us close even as it allows us to soar.

**...SONG #295:** *Sing Out Praises for the Journey*

## JOINT SERMON: *On the Verge: Our Opening Farewell*

*By Barbara & Jaco ten Hove*

**BARBARA:** It was a journey that brought us to Paint Branch nearly nine years ago. Jaco and I both became ministers in the mid-80's and were serving separate churches in the Seattle area when we met and married in 1990. For eight years after our wedding, we both worked full time in different congregations. In 1998, we determined it was time to team up and began our co-ministry as interim senior co-ministers at the Jefferson Unitarian Church in Golden, CO. I first became aware of Paint Branch when I received a phone call on a December evening in 1998, while living in Golden. Jaco and I were seriously in search of a settled co-ministry position, and one of our dreams was to get closer to my family, who mostly lived near where I grew up in the DC Metro area.

The phone rang and when I answered it I heard the dulcet tones of none other than Paint Brancher Jennifer Grant. She told me she had heard about us in a particular and somewhat unusual way. It seems we were not on The List of recommended ministers that the UUA Settlement Office had given them to choose from.

**JACO:** When we lived in Seattle, I was a part of a men's group that met weekly in each other's homes. One of the newer guys in the group was named Jonathan. A bit younger than me, we knew each other only a little but enjoyed the relationship. When I left Seattle to go to Golden for that interim year, everyone knew Barbara and I were looking to settle back east. Unbeknownst to me, one of Jonathan's best college buddies was Chris Duggan, at the time an active Paint Brancher—and good friend of Jennifer Grant.

Jonathan from my former Seattle men's group must have said enough about us to get Chris's and Jennifer's attention. Before too long, the wheels turned and Jennifer made that call to us in Golden. Only a few short months later, we came here to be your candidates, and despite what proved to be a rather challenging week of getting to know each other better, when the church voted overwhelmingly to call us to serve as your co-ministers, we said yes.

**BARBARA:** That was a beautiful morning in early May, just one day after my 39<sup>th</sup> birthday. I remember feeling so grateful to your interim minister, John Burciaga, who sat with us while we awaited the news of the vote. We knew it wasn't a slam dunk and we were quite aware that a lot of hard work awaited us if we accepted this call. But accept it we did. And despite the challenges that are a part of any meaningful ministry, we have never regretted our decision. These nine years that we have lived among you, serving as your co-ministers, have been years of deep and powerful spiritual growth for us, and we hope for you as well. Today we take the time to claim for ourselves, as our call to worship suggested, "awareness and gratitude," two powerfully important spiritual acts.

**JACO:** We honor the awareness and gratitude that has grown between us and you of this congregation, even as we accept the reality that, in another few short months, we will leave you to take up the call to serve another congregation. Next month, we will spend over a week getting to know the Cedars UU Church on Bainbridge Island, WA; and they will get to know us. After that week together, they will do what Paint Branch did nine years ago. They will vote on whether to ask us to serve as their co-ministers. We fully expect the call to be a strong one and sometime this summer we will complete the process of taking steps away from you and toward them.

Yes, we will be excited to serve a church on this powerfully progressive island just 35 short minutes by ferry from the city we grew to love during our many years in and around Seattle. But we are not there yet. Today marks what we are calling our "opening farewell." Beginning today, and continuing on May 4 and June 1, we will use these times of worship to say our good-byes in as meaningful and thorough a fashion as we can. During all of May, we will also be around at most services and will be here during the week to meet and talk with you. On June 1, we will lead our final service here and on Friday, June 6, will celebrate this change at what we imagine will be a great party. But, today it is still March and we are still your ministers. Let us not rush headlong into the next moment. The last good-bye will come soon enough.

*BARBARA:* We've been thinking a lot during these past couple of weeks about what this church has meant to us and what we will take with us when we leave you. We keep remembering stories, and it is stories that we hope will carry us through this significant period of leave-taking. Nine years is a long time and there is no way we can adequately tell all the tales that could be told. But a few are worth noting because they speak to us deeply of who you are in our lives and what we have learned from being with you.

*JACO:* One such story begins with the arrival in just our second year of the lively and intellectually curious Jennifer Brooks, our one and only ministerial intern. Jennifer invited herself into our lives and yours for lots of practical reasons, including the need to find an internship site near where she lived in Bethesda with her two kids. But she connected with us and with you from the start.

*BARBARA:* Near the end of her first year here (she was on a two-year, half-time track), Jennifer, our former music director Daniel Abraham and I were having a staff meeting. We were frustrated by the continuing small turn-out at the second of the two Sunday morning services we had in those days and wondered if there was any way to change a decades-long tradition of double services (and the considerable additional work that regime required).

I don't know exactly whose idea it was, but in the wonderful way that creative energy emerges from people who work well together, at that staff meeting we imagined what would become Enrichment Hour, now a regular feature of our Sunday morning life. Somehow we got lots of folks excited by the idea of returning to one worship service followed by classes and groups. With a lot of work, we prepared for this program to start in September of 2001. September – of 2001.

*JACO:* Yes, this new model began the same week that our nation was struck by terrorist attacks on what we now call 9/11. We could not know it at the time but this decision to move to one service followed by Enrichment Hour made a huge difference in how we, as

a religious community, handled that tragedy. We were here, all together, in worship and community each week seeking to console & support each other through that terrible fall.

We learned some powerful things about loss and love that church year. It was also the year that a lot of beloved members died. In the midst of great sadness, we built and deepened relationships that allowed for some meaningful spiritual growth to occur. We could not know at the time how a relatively small decision like moving to one service with Enrichment Hour would make such a big difference, but it did. And we're grateful for the creative energy that Jennifer Brooks and all the staff we have worked with over our years here, have brought to this church. (Almost exactly four years ago, I helped lead Jennifer's ordination and installation as the UU minister on Nantucket Island, where she still serves with distinction.)

**BARBARA:** Another one of those cherished Paint Branch staff members is here today. When I first met David Chapman I somehow knew that he was going to make a big impact if he ever chose to become a part of this religious community. Not long after the events mentioned earlier, both our former professional musicians made decisions to move on. Paint Branch has always had a deep and abiding commitment to music and it was hard to imagine it without talented musicians like director Dan Abraham and pianist Tom Pandolfi. During that time of transition we learned some things about this church. We learned that we can navigate changes in staff (something we've had to do in the Religious Exploration and Administrative realms as well as in music) and we learned that as hard as such losses can be, they are sometimes as much of a beginning as an end.

**JACO:** Barbara saw something in David when he substituted here as pianist, and she had the foresight to ask him to apply for the music director position. Today, after nearly six years in that role, our music program has grown in so many ways. Numbers are a piece of it, yes. We now routinely have around 30 voices in our choir—more than 10% of the congregation's membership! But we have also become a church known around the Beltway for its creative arts—music, certainly, as well as dance and visual arts.

But music undergirds almost all we do here in worship, and Barbara and I are so grateful that David understands—as do we and the members of this congregation—that music isn't just something nice to listen to on a Sunday morning. It is one of the most powerful tools we have to touch hearts, souls and minds.

**BARBARA:** As most of you know, I often sing with our choir and I can attest to its depth and breadth as a music-making team. But more, the choir has been and continues to be a community where people care for each other in wonderful ways. It's a rare church where the choir wants to sing at weddings and memorial services. Well, Paint Branch is a rare church. We became aware of this creative and artistic spirit when we first set foot in the doors of this beautiful sanctuary called the Meeting House. That spirit has, in the nine years we have lived among you, grown and blossomed into something truly, astonishingly beautiful. Thank you for letting us be a part of your creative life. The next time we are in this pulpit we will lead a music service on May 4. We are so happy that over these many years you have allowed us to share our music with you, just as you have shared yours with us.

**JACO:** As ministers, we have shared so many significant events in the life of this church. But who can forget the most dramatic? On a cold Tuesday morning in early December, 2003, we were awakened at 6 am by a rather frantic call from a local friend. Her son, a DC police officer, who had been here for a pre-wedding interview with Barbara, had heard on his radio that a church on Powder Mill Road was on fire. Without much thought, I jumped into the car and drove here, to find out that it was, indeed, our facility that had been burning. I watched as the last of 75 firefighters from four companies worked to quell the smoldering ruins of the far end of the RE Building.

**BARBARA:** Meanwhile, I stayed home and made phone call after phone call to church leadership, giving them the news. Late in the day I was able to make it over here and together Jaco and I walked through the charred rooms that once rang loud with children's voices. We were filled with gratitude that none of those children had been there when the fire raged; and that the firefighters had contained it in the far end of the building. But

looking at the soggy, trampled, smoke-infested mess we faced just two weeks before Christmas sapped our spirits. What in the world would we do!?

*JACO:* We learned that season, as we have learned again and again in this community, how much love there is here and how much energy can be unleashed when the need is greatest. That was the year of the stars. You may remember that as a part of Barbara's school work for her doctorate in worship, she invited Paint Branchers to help her turn this Meeting House into a starry firmament for the holidays. Those cheerful stars, dozens of them hanging and flickering in the side balconies, had gone up just a few nights before the fire. In the days that followed, those stars became something of a beacon to all of us as we reflected on what we'd been through and how we would survive it all. There was quite a bit of sadness when time came to take them down, probably because they were such a shining symbol of hope during that challenging season.

*BARBARA:* But the shining star that was Paint Branch never dimmed. Throughout that cold winter, we worked together to make sure our worship, our Religious Exploration classes, our programs, and our longtime renters, the Paint Branch Montessori School, still functioned. Leaders rose to the occasion to handle all the details of insurance and begin the process of re-building. Despite some concerns that the timing wasn't good, we were encouraged to still take our planned three-month sabbatical that spring. It turned out to be a great time for us to be away as the leadership of the church pulled together to help you raise enough money to do some much needed upgrades to the soon to be re-modeled RE building. From our sabbatical perch in Chicago, we watched in loving respect how well you handled this difficult process. We were so very proud!

*JACO:* When we returned it was to move quickly into the uplifting 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary activities held together that fall. Despite our inability to use the RE Building at all, we still had four wonderful weekends of storytelling, dancing, singing, worshipping, remembering and celebrating the five decades of this congregation's history. UUA President Bill Sinkford spoke here at the culmination of the festivities and many long time Paint Branchers returned from afar to join in the fun. Paint Branch showed the

world, and each other, that adversity couldn't keep us down. When Barbara was asked to lead worship a year later for the thousands of people who attend the Sunday service at our annual national UU gathering, General Assembly, she chose to speak of her experience here as a part of her Flaming Chalice dedication. Here are the words she wrote:

**BARBARA** (quoting herself):

“The chalice with a flame at its heart is the symbol of our faith. While both the chalice and the flame have many and varied meanings, we know that the chalice is an ancient symbol of trust and community and that fire is a symbol of spirit and transformation. When we combine these two potent images, the chalice with a flame, something powerful emerges. Our covenantal “living tradition” teaches us that when *transformation* occurs *within community*, even deeper spiritual growth arises.

I know of this first hand. In early December (of 2003) the church I serve suffered a devastating fire. As I surveyed the damage that miserable morning, for a moment I felt helpless, even hopeless. But not for long. Over the course of the next few months, a different kind of inner flame inspired our congregation, which met the challenges to recover and renew.

Because we are a community—held not only in each other's arms but in the generous embrace of Unitarian Universalist congregations across the land—this experience was transformative. Now, less than two years later, our building renovation is complete, our congregation stronger than ever, and our commitment to each other and our faith even deeper.

Fire transformed us. But transformation mercifully, does not require a literal fire. Within each of us lies a spark of the divine, and when our many individual sparks are held in covenantal community, the potential for transformation is tremendous.

How we change and grow is often a mystery. *That we will* change and grow is a given. As Unitarian Universalists, we are blessed to be a part of a living tradition that grows and changes with us, as we discover the ability to transform our lives—alone and together—again, and again, and again.”

**JACO:** These words speak powerfully to what we believe about you and about ourselves during yet another challenging time of transition and change that is upon us now. Yes, it's hard to say goodbye. Yes, we have learned so much from each other; and yes, love, commitment and faith have blossomed during our shared ministry. All this is true.

**BARBARA:** But what is also true is that change is transformative. If we stop changing, we stop growing. As we make this move toward a new church and as you start your journey toward a new ministry, we can't help but feel proud and yes, happy, that this time of

transformation is at hand. Throughout our nine years among you we have grown and changed mightily. So have you. That's fabulous. Has it been easy? Of course not. Will this new change bring with it transformation? Indeed it will. Will we all discover new and important things about ourselves and our faith? Yes and yes.

**JACO:** Almost exactly nine years ago we took a leap of faith to enter into the life of this congregation. We didn't know then exactly what we'd learn or how we'd change. But we had faith—faith in our religious tradition, faith in congregations, faith in ourselves, and faith in you. Thank you so much for inviting us to share the ministry of this church with you.

**BARBARA:** Our life here has been rich and meaningful. And we will have more to express to you individually and in our services on May 4 and June 1. But for now, let us celebrate that richness by singing together one of my all time favorite hymns, #128 *For All That Is Our Life*.

## **CLOSING WORDS**

**Jaco:** Today we give thanks and praise for the many ways we have been blessed by the great gift of religious community.

**Barbara:** Let us continue to say yes to life and love and community even as we move ever forward toward change and growth.

**Jaco:** Let us never forget to be aware and grateful for the many gifts given and received in this “*house of laughter and silence, memory and hope.*”

**Barbara:** And may the Spirit of Life bless us as we journey both together and apart. Amen.

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