



Longing

The life of a congregation is a rich community tapestry of people, programs, ministries and worship. We lift up the patterns of this tapestry at Unity Church with the threads of monthly themes woven through our worship and programming. These themes deepen our understanding of our own faith and strengthen our bonds with one another in religious community.

We are all longing to go home to some place we have never been — a place, half remembered and half envisioned we can only catch glimpses of from time to time.

Community. — Starhawk

What does it mean “to long?” Is it to “dwell in thought” as the dictionary suggests? How is it different than to yearn — to crave — wish for or to desire? or is it “a strong desire, ache, churning, hunger, thirst or a hankering?” As we explore the theme for October of longing, we may discover that far from being simply “wishful thinking,” longing is intimately connected to a religious and spiritual impulse for more depth, meaning, and purpose. Former Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor claims that when people talk about being “spiritual but not religious,” what spiritual often means is “the name for a longing — for more meaning, more feeling, more connection, more life.”

Taylor notes that even people who rest comfortably inside the institutional church and consider themselves religious feel this longing and “harbor the sense that there is more to life than they are being shown.” When UUs sing about there being “more love somewhere,” this may be the feeling we are trying to express. We know there is more, and we are going to “keep on ‘til we find it.”

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar asked “what is the difference between desire and longing? Desire is a fever of the head, longing is the cry of the heart.” If that is true, then how do we listen to the “cry of the heart?” One of the ways is certainly through music.

While reflecting on this theme, Ahmed Anzaldúa, Unity’s Director

of Music Ministries, remembered a choral concert he conducted, of which the central theme was four different expressions of longing: *Sehnsucht* (German); *saudade*, (Portuguese/Brazilian), *sevđalinka* (Arab/Turkish) and the *Blues* (African American). German’s *Sehnsucht* attempts to express the longing for a deeper relationship to life itself, often understood as German romanticism; *saudade* (Portuguese/Brazilian) is a feeling of melancholy which colors the Portuguese and Brazilian temperament. *Sevđalinka*, often heard in Bosnia and Herzegovina, is music which reveals love, grief, enthusiasm and joy all at the same time. The *Blues* is a genre of music many of us are familiar with and expresses the struggle of being black in America; the haunting tension of suffering and surviving the brutality of racism. These musical styles express different aspects of the human emotion of longing.

For some, longing is an uncomfortable and awkward word. It reminds us of craving for that which we no longer or can’t have. Longing can be a kind of nostalgia which isolates a person from being fully present to the here and now. As Fernando Pessoa wrote:

The feelings that hurt the most, the emotions that sting the most, are those that are absurd — the longing for impossible things precisely because they are impossible; nostalgia for what never was, the desire for what could have been; regret over not being someone else; dissatisfaction with the world’s existence. All these half-tones of the soul’s consciousness create in us a painful landscape, an eternal sunset of what we are.

Longing then can be a form of nostalgia or, it can easily be misinterpreted as “constant craving.” In the late capitalist society in which we live, we are constantly being sold the lie that material goods will satisfy our longings and provide fulfillment. Bombarded by messages linking happiness with consumption, we get lost amidst the promise of easy solutions to our longing for more. Our yearning for connection and depth get repackaged and expressed as a craving for stuff.

But what if we considered longing not as a verb, but as a noun? Nouns simply identify a class of people, places or things and in so doing, describe an inherent part of the human condition. It is an attempt to express the inexpressible; that feeling within the human heart — longing for what has been and the not yet; for the invisible to be made visible, whether in art, music, or in the return of a beloved person from our past; to an inchoate sense of incompleteness. Jeremiah Abrams wrote:

We all carry a holy longing, a yearning to know the meaning of our lives, to have a connection with the transpersonal, to experience the spiritual dimension of human life, to return to our souls’ divine origins. Spirituality is the art of creating union with something greater than ourselves, with a Higher Power.

The Irish priest and poet John O’Donohue asks that each of us “come to accept your longing as divine urgency” and to bless “the longing that brought you here and quickens your soul with wonder.” Similarly, every Sunday at Unity Church our common

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INTERIM REFLECTIONS



What do you — as members of Unity Church — long for? I've been talking with many members of the congregation and have been listening carefully to the hopes and dreams, concerns and fears about the future. There is no one single story or vision that has emerged yet, but at least one consistent theme *has* emerged: "we want to understand the interim process better — and engage with it in a way we couldn't last year." So, in addition to working on your Ends Statements as identified by the Executive Team, this is a brief outline of the tasks that I will be paying attention to this year:

Exploring Your History – A review of the church's life story, where it has been, what it has accomplished, the regrets present for what has not been accomplished, a celebration of gifts, some healing of wounds. This is your 150th anniversary year! A perfect time to dig deep into your past.

Articulating Your Identity – Consider what aspects of Unity's identity could use some strengthening, what needs to be brought to the fore so that the church will be living its identity more fully.

Reviewing Your Leadership – People who had found service with the previous ministry meaningful but are ready to change roles and step down when ministry changes, and people who had not yet found a place in leadership discover openings that call to them.

Strengthening Denominational Connections – Review relationships with other UU congregations in the area, and with the larger UUA, to determine how those relationships might work more effectively for everyone.

Preparing for the Future – After exploring its history, gaining clarity on its identity, the congregation considers what qualities of ministerial leadership are needed in order to be most effective in the life of the congregation and the world.

Woven in and amongst these developmental tasks are three overarching themes that will also impact the interim time. We'll reflect on:

Gathering – What does it mean to gather and re-gather fully, mindful that Covid still exists among us? How do we continue to serve those who wish to join us only online?

Grieving – How will Unity Church find ways to constructively grieve the multiple losses experienced in the last couple of years, namely: the death and illness of your former ministers; and the search process which did not result in a call for a new senior minister?

Growing – How will the congregation grow in their capacity to handle the complexities of gathering, grieving, and our on-going commitments to the work of undermining white supremacy culture?

Friends, we have much to do but the good news is — we are doing this together. I am discovering a resilient and generous congregation that is well prepared to undertake these challenges. I'm grateful for the opportunity to do it with you!

Rev. Kathleen Rolenz, Interim Senior Minister

Longing {continued from front cover} prayer calls us to "live into our longing to embody and help to build the Beloved Community." The plea that we might "live into our longing" is a countercultural understanding of longing.

This is not longing as acquisition, as unfulfilled sexual desire, as yearning for lost youth. Instead, our weekly prayer calls us to stay awake to new possibilities and keep moving toward our better selves. Living into longing creates a divine urgency that pulls us toward the holy and helps us move from isolation into community. But for all the theological implications of longing leading us toward wholeness, it is a bittersweet feeling

Longing then, may be better suited as a noun, which means we simply accept it as a state of being, and therefore, we must also accept that as such, life is imperfect and impermanent. If we treat longing as a noun instead of as a verb — as a state of being to be desired to be honored; this is what is intrinsic to what it means to be fully human; is to be in this unresolved state of being. It is beautiful because it's incomplete.

By Rev. Kathleen Rolenz and this month's theme team: KP Hong, Andrea Anastos, Tom Duke, Ahmed Anzaldúa, Karen Gustafson

Longing Theme Resources

For further reflection on this theme please see this month's Spiritual Practice Packet available online at <https://bit.ly/longingpractice>.

Interim Ministry: For the Times In-Between

Wednesday, October 5 • 7:00 p.m. • In-person

Saturday, October 15 • 9:30 a.m. • Online via Zoom: <https://bit.ly/InterimOct>

How does interim ministry differ from settled ministry? What are the tasks and expectations of an interim minister? How might Unity Church use their interim ministers to their best advantage both here and now and for its future success? Join Rev. Kathleen Rolenz for a conversation about the spiritual practice of stewarding personal and institutional change.