

3 5 23—Vulnerability and Change **UUFM—Rev. Rita Capezzi**

The old saying goes: March comes in like a lion and goes out like a lamb. I wouldn't call the weather exactly "lion-ish" this week, but my feelings have certainly been turbulent. Turbulent, anxious even, as when I arrived here in August 2018 and learned from Linda Ganske what those first-Wednesday-of-the-month tornado warning sirens were. Wait. Nobody told me there are tornadoes in Minnesota! Lion-like, feelings turbulent, anxious even, as when I experienced my first Minnesota thunderstorm, which sounded to me like it is taking place inside of a steel drum. I mean, I like steel drums, but still, that is one unnerving sound. Lion-like, feelings turbulent, anxious even, as when I experienced my first encounter with possible frostbite, digging bare fingers into the snow and ice on the sign down at Reconciliation Park so I could see the bottom of the prayer printed there. My fingers are burning. That can't be good. I better get inside.

Lion-like, turbulent, even anxious feelings. These go well with our Soul Matters theme for the month: Vulnerability. We often feel vulnerable, even exposed and betrayed, when major change occurs. Change makes us vulnerable. I know this well, as I announce, with feelings bittersweet, that I will resign as your minister at the end of this program year, June 30, 2023. Family circumstances call me back East. Jeff and I will return to Buffalo, NY, where we will be close to our daughter. Living back east will make it easier to help my mother and support my sister in Pittsburgh, PA, both of whom have become widows since 2020. I simply have not been able to make care for my mother work at such a long distance. My decision has been difficult, and I reached it through much personal discernment and long conversations with colleagues and friends. I feel some easing of my burden, in finally letting you all know, and I know it is not a burden you necessarily wish to carry. But now we do it together.

I am here, and I am here to encourage you to embrace the feelings of vulnerability that come with my announcement. In the words of the Rev. Megan Foley, "I'm beginning to realize that all of my big 'negative' emotions - anger, intolerance, crankiness... the list goes on - have their root in my feeling vulnerable. So, I've been practicing feeling the vulnerability rather than the secondary feeling... If I'm able to say, 'I'm feeling vulnerable,' rather than, say, 'YOU'RE MAKING ME MAD,' then there is much more room for connection and healing." I hope we can embrace this as a truth and learn our way through it. I believe we can, because we have done it before.

We all remember then the pandemic upended our lives and comfortable routines. Some of us here remember those moments when we had to stop in-person gatherings and grow accustomed to Zoom for all meetings and worship. I remember thinking that I would never be able to minister to nothing but the little white dot of a camera through which to connect. As a super-extrovert, I felt deeply vulnerable about being so alone, without the physical company of the congregation. And yet life is like this sometimes. "Everything that seems permanent is impermanent and will be smashed. Experience will gradually, or not so gradually, strip away everything that it can strip away." And when change does occur, as it nearly always does, leaning into vulnerability can enable a new path to break through, so that new learning can emerge, and so that the foundations we already have can once more be revealed.

Shortly after we shut down here at UUFM, I recorded a song for you. I recorded it because I am not a singer and I literally choke up when I have to sing in public. And I remember that we could not get the recording to work and I had to sing it live any way. Today, I give you that recording. [. . .] I still sound vulnerable. All that head tone. I felt vulnerable, and yet I knew that I had to forge ahead, we had to forge ahead. This is all still true. We will forge ahead, with a process that your Board of Directors will define. You will all be included in that process as it unfolds. Life is like this sometimes. “The question is not whether we will get lost in life, but rather how we will move through it in faith. Will we dwell on everything that we have lost? Or will we focus instead on everything that we have yet to find?”

Though my decision to resign is necessary, it has not been an easy one. I am so proud of what we have achieved together. Before the pandemic, we defined core justice commitments. We committed to responding as a congregation with written statements and public witness to injustice in the Greater Mankato community. We educated ourselves to understanding and celebration of trans lives and to growing more radically welcoming. Since the pandemic, we found many ways of continuing as an energetic and fully present religious community. We learned that Zoom could be a means to keep relationship and worship alive. We trained and hired new staff and created new staff positions. We continued to meet our financial and program commitments as a UUA member congregation. We sustained justice action. We maintained robust engagement as a caring community. We did all this together, minister and congregation, as we learned the value and the magnitude of possibility through our shared ministry.

And this is not the end of what you will do as a congregation, what we may yet do together. “As it happens, there is much that awaits us in our [momentary] lostness. Much to be excavated examined, even exalted. In not yet knowing what will be, we are afforded the opportunity to appreciate what already is.” Yes, we will celebrate all that makes this Fellowship vital and attractive, open-hearted, open-minded, and open to the new. Yes, we will acknowledge the loss we feel. We know what we have done together, and still there remains more to learn about and from each other. The contributions of each of you will matter more than ever, for building up the church, for being the Fellowship at its very best, life-giving and life-sustaining. This process, it will take patience with each other, because you are each feeling the change differently. It will take deep and expansive understanding that you are the Fellowship, and the Fellowship is not the same thing to each of you.

Some of you have seen ministers come and go. Some of you have never been part of a church without a minister. Some of you have only known this fellowship with me as your minister. You are all in different places with this change, and now is the time to share those stories deliberately and whole-heartedly, to listen and respect the differences. To use the differences as a way forward. You will all be required to share openly, to listen deeply, to acknowledge difference gracefully, to respect those differences gratefully. It is from that range of understanding and experience that this congregation will grow stronger still. Remember, “When lost, perhaps the greatest question our faith asks of us is this: How will we be found? Once the time is ripe, the stars align, and the way begins to open, will we be ready to embrace the mystery anew? Will we choose to trust anew, to risk anew, to hope anew? Will we allow

ourselves to yet again be drawn in, swept up, taken over by that magic that makes life worth living?" I have faith that you will answer "yes!"

Ministering with you in this Fellowship has made me the minister I am today. You installed me, making a profound commitment to shared ministry with your first full-time called minister. Your vitality and support helped me to practice my skills and learn new ones so that I could move from Preliminary to Full Fellowship within the Unitarian Universalist Association. I do not know exactly what ministry may unfold for me—whether in a community setting, a church setting, or a chaplaincy—but I have faith that my ministry, as you have helped me grow it, has a future. In faith, I await its emergence.

UUFM will have the full support of the Transitions Office of the UUA to find the best path forward. The process involves congregational self-awareness of the blessing that you are. It has been a joy to serve the Fellowship. This is a religious community that spreads generosity in the greater Mankato community. This is a religious community that engages in expanding your spirits through deeper spiritual awareness and learning. This is a religious community who treated your staff kindly and respectfully, and compensates equitably. You can be sure that I will spread the good news of UUFM far and wide, among ministers and within the denomination.

I am so grateful that I served you as you celebrated the milestone of 70 years as a Fellowship, ready to meet the challenges of this moment and able to imagine a future of 70+ years more. "Right now, we stand on sacred and holy ground, for that which will be lost has not yet been lost, and realizing this is the key to unspeakable joy." Though I will depart at the end of June, I am your minister until then. I am here to meet with you about my decision and to accompany you through the personal trials and joys of your lives. I am grateful for, and you can be too, a strong Board of Directors, confident that together we will determine the best way I can serve you and the Fellowship in the coming months. Though our relationship is headed for a change, I remain faithful to you until it is time for me to depart.

Our first hymn this morning is actually a prayer, and I pray that now for myself. I pray it for all of you. I pray it for us, as we live out our remaining days together. Blessed Spirit of our lives, give us strength through stress and strife; help us live with dignity; let us know serenity. Fill us with vision, clear our minds of fear and confusion. When our thoughts flow restlessly, let peace find a home in us. Spirit of great mystery, hear the still, small voice in all of us. Help us live our wordless creed as we comfort those in need. Fill us with compassion, be the source of intuition. Then, when life is done, let love be our legacy.

"Impermanence has already rendered everything and everyone around you so deeply holy and significant and worthy of your heartbreaking gratitude. Loss has already transfigured your life into an altar." Morning is always breaking, re-creation always breaking through, especially when we find ourselves slipping into a sense of contentment or acceptance. In this time of change, change that we can't ignore or push aside, I wish upon you the peace, grace, and truth I know resides in all of you. I wish upon you a firm knowledge of your brave hearts. I wish you ears that are quick to listen, and a tongue slow to use. I hope you continue to know both joy and pain, how closely they are woven. But, most of

all, I wish upon you love. Love that invites and includes. Love that enables vulnerability to break through to something new, a good path. Love that holds you, that holds you accountable to high aspirations for justice, a love generative and creative that nurtures and nourishes you in all the days of your living. May you remember all of this, today and every day, as you remember also, that you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed. May you feel it so, may it be so, and may we say together, "Amen."