

## **A Spirituality of Stability**

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Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Frederick, Maryland

[frederickuu.org](http://frederickuu.org)

This congregation was formed 52 years ago in 1961, the same year that the Unitarians and the Universalists consolidated into the Unitarian Universalist Association. We first met on the 2nd floor over the Colonial Music Shop on E. Patrick St. Over the years, other locations included the South End Civic Association and the YMCA. As early as 1968, the then UUFF (“UU *Fellowship* of Frederick”) bought 6 acres on Butterfly Lane for a future building, but that property was later sold in favor of searching for an existing building. Then in 1989, this congregation bought the house at 1301 Motter Avenue. As the congregation grew beyond the 70 seat capacity of Motter House, we moved to two Sunday services, then to Rosenstock Hall at Hood College. Finally, ten years ago we dedicated this building.

For much of this congregation’s history, we’ve been a semi-nomadic people without a permanent home, and the past ten years in this building have not always been easy. So when the question arose of whether to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the building dedication, the answer was a hearty “Yes!” **It wasn’t always clear that we would make it this far. But we’re here, as strong and stable as we have ever been. As the choir sang earlier, “Hallelujah!”**

And on the occasion of this building’s tenth anniversary, I would like to invite us to reflect on what it can mean to practice an intentional spirituality of stability — here at UUCF, at home, at work. Speaking personally, the group that has taught me the most about a spirituality of stability are Benedictine monks. **During the same years that this congregation was searching for this property, constructing this building, and moving in, I was spending a few weeks each summer visiting various intentional communities**, including the Abbey of Gethsemane in Kentucky (where Thomas Merton was just another monk known as Father Louie), Koinonia Farms in Georgia, and the Monastery of Christ in the Desert in New Mexico. Part of why I was drawn to visit that New Mexico monastery, in particular, is its remoteness. It is located at the end of Forest Service Road 151, which the monks affectionately call their “13-mile driveway,” a winding, steep, narrow dirt road.

When many people think of monks, they often think of vows of poverty and chastity. And those vows are no small matters. But **what I learned from spending time among these monks was less about poverty and chastity and more about the less famous Benedictine vow of *stability* — of committing oneself to a lifetime at one monastery, on one particular piece of land, and with one particular community of monks.**

Relatedly, many people associate monasticism with an *escape* from the world. But every monk I've ever talked to will tell you that monks are human beings, just like the rest of us. And all the petty annoyances, frailties, and foibles of our fellow human beings are present in monasteries, just like everywhere else. The difference, however, is that the monastic ideal, at its best, includes a commitment to stability: to working out a life of mercy, forgiveness, and compassion not in the abstract but with a particular group of brothers or sisters, in one place, for the long haul.

I remember after I finished graduate school, got my first full-time job, and discovered unexpectedly after about a year or so that I had saved enough money for a downpayment on a house. (Keep in mind that housing prices are significantly lower in northeast Louisiana than in D.C. Metro!) Owning a home was wonderful in many ways, but I was also shocked by the amount of work it took to keep the house and lawn in order, as well as the amount of money and time required for maintenance. At the same time, **there is an intimacy that develops from caring for a piece of land over time that I never felt toward my apartment**, which not only I did not own, but also had to expend almost no energy to maintain. (Any problem was usually solved with a quick call to the apartment manager.) I could make similar analogies to marriage. Dating vs. marriage, renting an apartment vs. buying a house can be all the difference in the world: *in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow*.

And, yes, I will grant that there are strong arguments for renting in some circumstances, just as there are times when divorce is the best option. But on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the UUCF building dedication, I would like to invite us to reflect on the transformation that can come from spending a long time in one good place.

One minister tells a story of a family joining a congregation that was known to emphasize being a supportive, caring community. This family had relocated specifically to be near this

congregation about which they had heard such wonderful reports. But after a year — despite having many significant, good, and welcoming experiences — the father of the family confessed to one of the ministers that, “he wasn’t sure that he was experiencing the community his family had expected. Frankly, [they] had hoped for more.” The minister listened to this man’s story, then asked a simple question, “Remind me how long you have been members of this congregation?” The man answered, “About a year.” The minister replied, “Then I guess you’ve got about a year’s worth of community. Stay another year and you’ll have two years worth. **Stay thirty and you might find some of what you’re looking for.**”<sup>1</sup>

I was reminded of that story this past week when I was at the monthly gathering of all the ministers in the D.C. Metro area. As introductions were being made among the almost 70 ministers in the room, Rev. Fred Muir named that in a few months he will celebrate his *thirtieth* year as minister of the UU Congregation of Annapolis. Fred is a well known and respected minister in Unitarian Universalism on the continental level, and surely he could’ve easily moved to an allegedly “bigger and better” congregation at some point — likely at multiple points — during the past thirty years. But for whatever confluence of reasons he stayed. And the stability of Fred’s presence has allowed that congregation to grow and take risks for social justice (particularly regarding antiracism and multiculturalism) that might not otherwise have been possible without his long tenure.

(I invite you to **consider parallels in your own life: to people, places, and groups you have committed to over a long time. What has or might become possible as trust grows and intimacy deepens?**)

Reflecting on Fred’s ministry in Annapolis reminded me of two similar, connected stories. The first is from the author Wendell Berry, who as he became more famous, could’ve moved almost anywhere in the world, but he has chosen a life of stability, farming one particular plot of land in Kentucky. He writes:

During the last 17 years . . . I have been working at the restoration of a once exhausted hillside. Its scars are now healed over, though still visible, and this year

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<sup>1</sup> “*Stay thirty and you might find some of what you’re looking for*” — Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, [\*The Wisdom of Stability: Rooting Faith in a Mobile Culture\*](#), 19.

it has provided abundant pasture, more than in any year since we have owned it. But to make it as good as it is now has taken 17 years. **If I had been a millionaire or if my family had been starving, it would still have taken 17 years. It can be better than it is now, but that will take longer.** For it to live fully in its own responsibility, as it did before bad use ran it down, may take hundreds of years.

The parallel story is from my friend Kyle Childress, who (like Fred Muir in Annapolis) has committed to a longterm pastorate to a relatively small congregation in Nacogdoches, Texas. Reflected on the meaning of Wendell Berry's words for him and his congregation, Kyle writes:

We all have [members of our congregations] whose lives are deeply scarred by bitterness, anger, hurt, abuse, disease and death. Add to that the deep scarring caused by war, consumer capitalism, nationalism and racism.... For [love, mercy, and compassion] to grow and heal such worn-out, eroded lives takes patient, long-suffering, detailed work. **It takes time to cultivate the traits of peacemaking, forgiveness, reconciliation, and love where previously violence, mistrust and fear were the norms.**<sup>2</sup>

And I invite you to consider what in your life might be possible through an intentional practice of stability: from a commitment over many decades to a particular group of people, to a particular place? On this 10th anniversary of our building dedication, what community might we be able to build among ourselves and what difference might this congregation be able to make in the surrounding community over the next 10, 20, or 30 years as this congregation comes to the 20th, 30th, and 40th (and beyond) anniversary of the UUCF Building Dedication?

Our days of renting at the YMCA or at Hood College are behind us. The Motter House days of living in a space someone else built are behind us. Those memories and that history still shape us. But **we are now a full decade into a commitment to this land, this building, the surrounding community, and to one another in this place.** Talk to any member of our Facilities Management Council, and you'll quickly learn that from spending the last decade here,

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<sup>2</sup> Wendell Berry and Kyle Childress, "Good Work: Learning About Ministry from Wendell Berry," *Christian Century* (March 8, 2005), 29.

we know more about this land and this building than we ever expected to know. And many of us know more about one another than perhaps we every wanted to know — just like those Benedictine monks.

That being said, there are new potentialities that open up from spending a long time in one good place — as trust grows and intimacy deepens — that aren't possible at first. Consider for example this wisdom from some of the desert mothers and fathers, who helped inspire St. Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-543), the founder of the Benedictine Order: **“In whatever place you find yourself, do not easily leave it.”** And “If a trail comes upon you in the place where you live, do not leave that place when the trail comes. **Wherever you go, you will find that what you are running from is ahead of you.**”<sup>3</sup> Turning to our own day, Jon Kabat-Zinn, who teaches Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, says it this way in the title of one of his books: *[Wherever You Go, There You Are](#)*.

**Wherever we go, we bring along our issues, our baggage, our neuroses. In contrast, a spirituality of stability invites us to stay for a long time in one good place, to work out our issues in the company of a supportive network that can only be built over time.** And although I will be the first to admit that some people, communities, and places are more toxic than helpful, there are many good people and places out there. And in our transient, globalized, instant-satisfaction age of designed obsolescence, there is a transformative power of committing to a long time in one good place, among good people — allowing yourself to know and be known. And ten years into our life together in this building is an opportunity to reflect and recommit to an intentional spirituality of stability and all that it makes possible.

And the fruit that can be borne out of a spirituality of stability is why I told the search committee that helped bring me here more than a year ago that I have all intentions of staying here at UUCF at least 7-10 years. I'm open to staying longer, but I can't even begin to see more than a decade into the future.

But I can already say that a little more than a year in, this congregation feels more stable to me than when I arrived. And as we become even more centered and stable as a congregation,

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<sup>3</sup> The quotes from the Desert *Ammas* and *Abbas* (“mothers and fathers”) is from Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *[The Wisdom of Stability: Rooting Faith in a Mobile Culture](#)*, 35

my hope is that we will be able to reach out to the community more fully and robustly from a place of confident stability and steady generosity that will allow us to take informed risks for love, inclusivity, and justice.

I should add at this point that I can't think of a more appropriate symbol to have emblazoned on the lawn between this sanctuary and our chapel across the courtyard than the labyrinth. Contemplative labyrinths like ours don't have a minotaur at the center, and are not a maze. They have a "unicursal" design of one-way in and one-way out. **That design in which there is no way to get lost is a beautiful symbol for a spirituality of stability. Walking the labyrinth is an invitation to recommit to living more deeply and fully in *the life that you already have*** — just as we are invited to commit evermore fully to our live together in this place.

And in that vein, allow me to offer a few more brief reflections on what a spirituality of stability might look like for us. The first is to **beware the "grass is greener" syndrome**. I periodically hear someone lament that our building is not closer to downtown Frederick. I can see the legitimacy of that point. But from the perspective of a spirituality of stability, I invite you to consider that it may not be helpful to rehearse that story. You are, of course, free to express whatever opinions you feel are right, but when I talk to the ministers of congregations in downtown Frederick, they have their own set of problems related to traffic, crime, parking, and old buildings needing an incredible amount of repair and not being easily adapted to 21st-century technologies. And from a literal perspective, I can guarantee that the downtown grass isn't greener, and that, for better or worse, we've got way more grass than most of the downtown congregations put together. We also have a more pastoral, retreat-like setting not possible in a crowded downtown that provides a much-needed change of pace for many members and friends of this congregation.

And historically speaking, as many of you likely read in the [special edition of the newsletter](#) that was emailed last week, ten years ago:

101 properties were investigated before building seemed the best option. Finally, a breakthrough! UUCF found a six-acre vacant parcel near Rt. 340. The land had earlier been approved for a church that was never constructed. It was for sale!

What a promising location for a new building — two turns from an exit on a major highway fit the suggested location requirements from UUA.

After an exhaustive search, this congregation bought this property, which clearly seemed the best at the time. And a spirituality of stability invites us to let go of a “grass is greener” approach, and commit to a robust life together in this place we chose for ourselves. Maybe some distant day, this congregation will relocate again, but my suspicion is that for the foreseeable future we’re far from done with this land and this building. And it’s not done with us yet!

Second, celebrating this 10th anniversary of the building dedication makes me profoundly grateful to everyone who contributed time, donations, and energy to get us this far. During the reception after the service, I invite you to notice the plaques in the atrium that honor everyone who made contributions to the capital campaign and mortgage reduction campaign. And as you walk out the front door later, look down and to the left, and notice our cornerstone, which recognizes some of the donors, who made a large initial contribution to help make this building a reality.

At the same time, the invitation of this 10th Anniversary of the building dedication is at least as much about the *future* as the past. **We are here not only to honor the generosity and commitment of the past, but to reaffirm our collective commitment for the present and future.** Ten years later, we still owe a little more than a million dollars on this building, and our mortgage is a significant percentage of our annual budget. We are already doing a lot here at UUCF to promote liberal religious values in this area, but there is so much more than will become possible when this building is paid off.

In the nearer future, we have a bridge to build between our operating budget and the special pledge drive that helped bring me here and return this congregation from having a half-time to full-time minister. We’re now early in the second year of the three-year period that pledge drive funded. I’m incredibly grateful to those of you who made pledges for this three-year period, and in the next few months the Stewardship Committee will be contacting all our second- and third-year pledgers to see how many of us will be able to continue giving at or near that level after the end of the third-year, which will indicate the new regular revenue we will need to generate starting in mid-2015.

The good news is that this congregation has a history of being generous in special giving: to construct this building, to bring me here as a full-time minister. But from the perspective of a spirituality of stability, I invite you to consider that **a growing edge for this congregation is more robust regular giving base.** And this growth area is a challenge not only for us, but also for far too many UU congregations across the country. Indeed, in a sermon delivered to the delegates at this past year's UUA General Assembly, Rev. Vanessa Southern proclaimed rightly that

Big missions do not happen on starvation budgets. And on average, last I checked, we give 1.5% of income to our congregations. Really? That is just not worthy of us. So **we need to stop pretending that we are just people who are really careful with our money, and we need to get crazy generous.**

As some of you have heard me joke before, I'm not saying you need to tithe ten percent of your income to this congregation. I'm not tied to the biblical 10%. Give 11%. Give 9%. I'm flexible.

In all seriousness, we absolutely value your time, energy, and presence as much as financial donations. But I invite you to **consider the value you receive from this place.** I believe in liberal religious values: freedom, reason, diversity, social and environmental justice. I believe that UUCF amplifies, embodies, and enacts these values in a way far beyond what is possible for any one of us acting alone. If you perceive value in this place and have the means, I invite you to consider talking to me or our treasurer about making a recurring financial pledge to this congregation. Or if you are a regular donor and have the means, consider doubling what you give to this congregation. (Yes, you heard me correctly, I said consider *doubling* what you give.) I ask only because I know that this building is here, that I am here, only because members and friends of this congregation in the past have been crazy generous. Now it is our turn.

As I once heard a speaker say, progressive religious communities make a mistake in calling themselves *non*-profits. **We need to start seeing ourselves as a social profit organization. We invite you to invest your money, time, and energy in this place because we bring social profit to this community for building a better world based on connection,**

**compassion, diversity, and justice.** And we have the potential to do so much more than the significant work that we are already doing.<sup>4</sup>

And in the spirit of how much is possible by committing to a long time to this good place, I'll conclude with this pledge that is adapted from one a congregation in Ohio uses to help describe how each one of us contributes to what this place is and can become:

My [congregation] is composed of people like me. I help make it what it is. It will be friendly, if I am. It will be [kind, forgiving, and welcoming], if I am. Its [seats] will be filled if I help fill them. It will do great work, if I work. It will make generous gifts to many causes, if I am a generous giver. It will bring others into its worship, if I invite them and bring them. It will be a [congregation] of loyalty and love, of fearlessness and faith, of compassion, charity and mercy, if I who make it what it is, am filled with these things. Therefore, **I dedicate myself to the task of being all things that I want my [spiritual home] to be.**<sup>5</sup>

I look forward to the 20th anniversary of our building dedication, and all that will come between now and then. From the view of that distant future, I hope we can look back at the year 2013 and say, “That’s when this congregation got crazy generous” — generous of heart, generous of wealth, generous of spirit. May it be so. And blessed be.

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<sup>4</sup> I heard the term “Social Profit” at the New Church Leadership Institute (August 10 - 14, 2010) in Decatur, Georgia. My notes seem to indicate that the speaker was from Cone Communications (<http://www.conecomm.com/>).

<sup>5</sup> The adapted pledge is from St. Mary Magdalene Catholic Church in Willowick, Ohio, available at [http://www.dioceseofcleveland.org/stewardship/stewardship\\_docs/SMM\\_FebruaryStewardshipNewsletter2010.pdf](http://www.dioceseofcleveland.org/stewardship/stewardship_docs/SMM_FebruaryStewardshipNewsletter2010.pdf).