

## **Sermon: “A Place to Belong” (service leader)**

At the UU congregation in Duxbury, MA there is a room below the sanctuary where the teenagers can paint the walls. And there is a deeply ugly couch that is so old and so soft that it swallows you like a cocoon.

I’m visiting this church for the first time for a “con” a youth group weekend retreat where teenagers from other UU congregations gather for activities and worship and that most elusive sense of belonging.

My church doesn’t own a building yet, so we’re renting the local American Legion hall - a drab rectangular cinder block building with wood paneling and an old bar downstairs where youth group meets. On Sundays we put out folding chairs and hang a banner my mom painted over the bingo board upstairs. We put up partitions in the basement that are covered in colorful pictures to create a nursery space while the older kids sit on barstools.

The idea that a church has a space for me, one that exists solely for me and my peers to have a place to belong and to be - it’s a thing I can still feel these twenty years later.

Belonging is often an experience that is deeply rooted in place, in physical spaces that have offered us welcome or care. As a congregation, we are the shepherds of our church building, the people tasked with making sure it is a place of belonging.

We are also Universalists and remember that some 252 years ago, on the 30th of September, John Murray preached the first Universalist sermon in what would become the United States. He believed, as did Thomas Potter and his community, that everyone is beloved and sacred. But that sermon only happened because there was a place for John Murray, one that asked him to show up in his fullness.

May we all have the bold faith of Thomas Potter as he built that little church, making room for Murray long before he arrived..

What does it mean to have the place ready for whoever will come? To be so convicted about universal love that we build a space for everyone to belong?

The task, as people of a covenant, people committed to how we live, is to realize this idea - to make this idea of universal love manifest in our physical world.

Last year, our board met for a fall retreat to do some big picture thinking. We worked with Rev. Erica Baron, who works for the New England region of the Unitarian Universalist Association. She helped us hone in on two major guiding questions - things that would inform the work of this congregation those who lead it.

The two building questions were:

- How we create boundaries that foster a sense of belonging, which is a question about how we treat each other and how to make space interpersonally
- And how people can be involved in ways that are life-giving and not based on obligation

Then, within this frame, we came up with three major priorities.

- One is lifespan faith formation, so everything from Sunday school to adult education.
- Two was overhauling our policies and getting congregational buy in - spoiler: this is the primary task for this year and will be the subject of our board retreat next month.
- Third was reimagining and reconfiguring physical space.

Now, rearranging the furniture was one of my favorite games as a child.

Sometimes, my sister and I would make scale drawings and figure out what could fit where - our dad is an architect. And other times we would just drag the furniture around until we liked the outcome. We still do this.

It's also better to move the furniture when there's not a lot going on, so this question of space became one of my big questions over the summer. It was also

deeply tied to conversations with Cynthia, our DRE, about how to make sure we have space for parents with babies, for little kids, and for older youth who've outgrown the preschool chairs.

One of our primary tasks was resurrecting what I've been calling the "donut hole room" - it's directly below the sanctuary, flanked by a hallway on either side and a room on either end. It hadn't been used for a couple years because of Covid and had become an odd no-man's-land of bulky old office chairs and who knows what.

So we rolled up our sleeves and cleaned it out - we found everything from vintage scented candles, which had not aged well, to an overhead projector. Bruce and Kim and Vince came and helped haul away all the extra office chairs to make space. We went to Habitat for Humanity and donated everything that we could and I spent a whole \$90 on a used couch and coffee table, which we brought back with us.

I don't know how the space will be used - that is up to all of us together, but the point is that it's there, like that little Universalist church waiting for a minister - there is room for you here.

Similarly, our garden team has been busy making plans over the summer for our outdoor space, for replanting the gardens once the new windows have been installed in the steeple.

When we started the Saturday Sings over the summer, Kala set up on the steps to lead us in singing, and we realized there's not actually anywhere to sit outside. So we've been having conversations about how to add outdoor seating when we re-plant the garden. The dance we're having in October is a fundraiser to help cover the cost of revamping our outdoor space.

Two weeks ago, at the Westborough Connects fair, I was shocked by the number of townspeople who came up to me and announced that they thought our church was closed. I assured them that we were very much alive, but it left me wondering how many people don't know that there is a place here where they could belong.

My hope is that doing the Saturday sing - the next one is this coming Saturday -

simply doing what we do outside the building, singing to our neighbors, will help communicate to anyone who needs a place, that we are here and our doors are open.

In the spirit of transformation, Vince tracked down the right kind of letters and updated the sign on our building so it's clear and legible.

Being welcoming requires making ourselves known. It requires opening our doors and our ways of being so that more is possible.

I think the way that we have created digital space is a really good example of this. When I arrived four years ago, this setup that we have for live-streaming services wasn't even a dream. And now look at us. We created an entirely new kind of space so that we could connect across distances. It has meant this community became accessible to people no matter where they were.

This question about fostering belonging and reconfiguring space has been top of my mind for the last year as we transitioned from being fully online to being back in this building. But a minister does not make a congregation, so I want to offer this question to our collective:

How would our physical space change if we wanted to encourage belonging, not only for those already here, but for those who have not yet arrived?

What would change? How would we make space?

How does Universalism, this idea that no one is outside the circle of love and humanity, how does it compel us to make room?

It might seem insignificant for those of us who already know we have a place here, who are comfortable and know we are welcome.

But I can tell you that it makes a difference when you discover there is a place for you, when there is a soft place to land and people who are glad to meet you. And I think we are compelled to keep making space, to keep offering welcome, to make

sure our neighbors know our doors are open, because there is too much loneliness and division in this world. And we all need a place to belong.

Two weeks ago we all collectively did a blessing of the backpacks, because the task of blessing belongs to all of us, not just the priests and ministers. So I want to invite you all to participate in blessing this building with me, that it may offer a place to belong. Evan is going to put the words up on our screen. This is by Jennifer Stokes.

**(Tech Host: share screen, “Building Blessing” slide)**

Building Blessing by Jennifer Stokes

We ask blessings on this, our church home.

May this building be a tool to continue the good work of our helping hands, our loving hearts, and open minds.

May this home be safe harbor for all who sail upon the sea of Life, and a beacon of hope to those on rough waters.

May this building be a garden, rooted with truth, compassion, and love, and blossoming into peace, liberty and justice.

We give thanks for the generous people who made this possible.

We are grateful for the continued benevolence of the universe.

Let us not forget those outside our walls who still struggle with their own needs for shelter and nourishment, of the body and of the soul.

We ask blessing on this, our church home.

Amen and blessed be