

“Until We Meet Again”

*Sermon delivered by Rev. Matthew McHale
on December 19, 2021, the last Sunday before his sabbatical.*

I love this time of year. I like being with friends and family, the holiday traditions, singing “Silent Night” at the candlelight Christmas Eve service, my daughter’s excitement opening presents on Christmas morning, getting cozy with a warm cup of tea, and how much easier the garden is to maintain. And one of my favorite things about this time of year is all the year-end top 10 lists. Best albums of the year, the best movies, books, TV shows. The year-end lists let me know what I missed, and what I’d like to check out.

So I thought it would be fun to share three Top Five Lists about my sabbatical. First, the top 5 reasons sabbaticals are important. Second, the top five things I am planning for my sabbatical, and Last, the top 5 things I hope for you all during this time.

But before I get into my first list. I want to state the obvious, as my colleague, Sharon Wylie, wrote in her pre-sabbatical sermon, “I didn’t become a minister in order to leave the congregation, and to be apart from you for months at a time. Don’t get me wrong, I am grateful to be going on sabbatical and am looking forward to it.” But I believe taking sabbaticals is an incredibly important practice for ministers, and here are the top 5 reasons why:

1. We need it for our wellbeing. In 2010, the New York Times reported that “Members of the clergy...suffer from obesity, hypertension and depression at rates higher than most Americans. [From 2000 to 2010], their use of antidepressants [had] risen, while their life expectancy [had] fallen.” There is no simple explanation, as there are likely multiple intersecting causes, but one of the best remedies, the article goes on to say, is taking more time off. As much as I may love and care deeply about ministry, it is not worth sacrificing my health for it. Nor should it be for any job, as many people have come to realize over the course of this pandemic.
2. It makes for longer and more successful ministries. Over the past few decades the vast majority of our UU churches have begun offering their ministers the opportunity to take sabbatical after 4 to 7 years—with one month for every year of service—as a time to learn, replenish and renew, and return with fresh ideas and spirit for our shared ministries. When I’m rested and recharged, I can show up more fully, better resourced and be a better minister. The word sabbatical comes from the same root as Shabbat or Sabbath, the day of rest. And a sabbatical, in the Hebrew bible referred to the agriculture practice of letting the land fallow, letting it rest every seven years, so that

the soil health would improve, regenerate, and be more fertile the following year. Similarly, a sabbatical can improve the quality of ministry. And ministers who take sabbaticals also have longer ministries both in terms of how long they serve their churches and the length of their career. I want to be able to be in this challenging and beautiful thing that is ministry for the long haul. And that means it's got to be sustainable.

3. Because we all need a break, and parish ministers don't get much of one. And that's not just because I typically work 6 days a week, but also because I can't turn off being a minister like flipping a light switch. I've had those jobs, and ministry isn't one of them. I think about this church, and I think about you... all the time. I worry about you. To quote Sharon Wylie again "You may think, '[he] doesn't mean me,' but I assure you, I do. If you are a first time visitor, I worry about what hurt or yearning brought you here, and I worry you will give up too soon, that if you don't make friends right away, you'll retreat, and you'll miss out. I could make a list for you of people who've come here once or twice, or even regularly for a while, and then drifted away, and I worry about all those people." All of that is true for me too and now I worry about how we will connect with people who are attending via zoom. I worry about you when I'm getting ready in the kitchen fixing breakfast, I worry about you when I'm in the garden on my day off, I worry about you when I'm on a hike, I worry about you when I wake up at 3:00 o'clock in the morning with my mind racing.

Sharon continues, "If I know anything about your life, I worry about you. ... I want what's best for you. I worry about your children and your parents, your relationship with your partners, your friendships with each other. I worry about your resistance to change. I worry about your anger and your grief and your fear."

When I am away for an extended time, it takes about two weeks for me to stop thinking about/worrying about church regularly. But this summer, three weeks into my vacation, the delta variant began to spread and I started worrying about how that would impact our reopening plans. And so one of the reasons it helps to get an extended break is I can actually switch off work mode - for real.

4. A sabbatical can help you see the bigger picture. When you're in the middle of it, just trying to focus on the details, and manage the day to day demands of ministry, it can be hard to see the forest for the trees. Cal Newport, a computer scientist at Georgetown University and author of *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World* says we're downplaying the problems created by constant interruption, we're

“weakening our ability to do the most challenging kinds of work,” which require sustained attention. Our chronic multitasking is making it harder for us to solve complex problems, and we deny ourselves the satisfaction that comes from fully devoting ourselves to a task. So a sabbatical is a time when we can take a step back and see the big picture. To tap into that ability to dream and vision that becomes more possible during periods of rest and retreat. Some of the great thinkers, like Carl Jung and Mark Twain, did their greatest work when they were away on retreat.

5. Because part of being a minister is modelling, modeling self-care and healthy boundaries, and what example does it set when I am preaching the importance of healing and rest and renewal and I am not taking care of myself too. I’ve been reading with fascination about the causes and feelings behind the great resignation, and the way countless people are re-evaluating their relationship to work right now. As someone who’s been preaching about work-life balance for years, I am so glad we are having these conversations now, and seeing things shift, and of course this applies to me too. I think everybody should be able to take a sabbatical, not just clergy and academics. The good news is that the trend is growing in nonprofits—my wife took one several years ago when she worked for Greenpeace—and even in parts of the corporate world. Moreover, we need paid time off for parental leave, for family leave, for mental health care. Sabbaticals are just one way to model a healthier work-life balance.

The top five things I am planning for my sabbatical:

1. Resting – After years of 6-day work weeks, I am really looking forward to more rest. Catching up on sleep, curling up with a good book, laying out in the hammock in my backyard listening to the songbirds. Now rest may take different forms. For me I find spending time in the garden incredibly restful, maybe not physically, but certainly mentally and spiritually. So it probably doesn’t surprise most of you that I plan to spend a lot of my time in the garden. Last year I began transforming our new backyard into a miniature food forest, and now we’ve got more than 20 fruit trees, plus several vines and berries, asparagus and artichoke. So I’ll be continuing that project, improving the soil and planting more annuals. But I’ll also be starting a new project, transforming our front yard into a drought tolerant native garden.
2. Spending more time with family and friends. That means not having to rush off after dinner for a meeting multiple nights a week, being able to put my daughter to bed more often, and especially spending the weekend doing activities together, rather than working on the service all day Saturday and then needing to take a nap after church on

Sunday, because I didn't get enough sleep the night before. So we'll go camping, hiking, backpacking, skiing, head to the beach when it warms up, go see a show or visit a museum, have more family game nights, a weekend road-trip up the coast or a longer trip over my daughter's spring break. Plus time with friends, deepening relationships with new friends who've got kids my daughter's age, and reconnecting with friends I've known for decades who I don't get to see as much.

3. Helping out around the house more. This one is especially for my wife. Long gone are the days when most ministers are men with stay-at-home wives who don't have a job outside of the house, and yet our expectations around ministry are still catching up to that reality. So this is a time to tip the scales of housework back in the other direction—doing more of the cooking (with all that food we're growing), and cleaning and childcare. As well as working on some bigger projects around the house, home decoration, fix-it projects, turning our place into more of a homestead. As well as volunteering at my daughter's school or with her girl scout troop.
4. Developing my ministerial skills. I'll be attending the UU Ministers Association's CENTER Institute for the Learning Ministry in San Diego where I will be connecting with other Ministers—another vital part of healthy ministries, and taking seminars on Spiritual Development for Unitarian Universalists & Empowering Resilience in Staff Management. And a few books on my list are related to church work.
5. And finally to having unplanned time to be open to whatever comes: As Rev. Russ Menk says "We can't schedule spiritual insight. We can't plan in glimpses of the sacred. We can't slate a time slot to be speechlessly awed. We can, however, make space for opportunities. We can be spiritually postured for feeling nudges [from God or the universe, and] We can be open to feel and see the beauty always around us."

And finally the top 5 things I hope for you all during the sabbatical:

1. That this is a time for leadership to flourish. Church is not about the minister, it's about all of us. That's why we call it a shared ministry. Our sabbatical team, Clinton Bench, Lynne Masuhara, Susan Siskin, Linda Morris, and Louise Rovner plus our office administrator Deborah Posner, will be helping take care of things. Joshua Berg, our sabbatical minister, will also help support the congregation, but he's only quarter time, leading worship twice a month, helping out with pastoral care, and supporting the board. And while I am leaving things in highly capable hands, I truly hope that you will find some way to contribute that's right for you. Not only because serving can be a

powerful way to grow, but also, your service is needed. There's a lot to get done! So I invite you to move into leadership positions, stretch yourself, take flight. And as you do, I hope your creativity, ideas, commitment and renewal can emerge.

2. That you be kind and take care of each other. That's it.
3. I hope you enjoy hearing the diversity of voices in our pulpit and styles of worship services that are planned for the sabbatical. You will of course be hearing from our sabbatical minister, Joshua Berg, his first Sunday will be January 9. And we will also have several other UU ministers gracing our pulpit, plus some lay led services, like our annual Fire Communion to mark the new year, and our Memorial Day service of remembrance, a service led by our pagan group, and some Sundays where lay leaders will be preaching, at least one for their first time. So I hope you enjoy the unique and varied perspectives and insight that each of them will bring.
4. I hope you miss me. And I don't say that to be egotistical or vain, but because it will make the coming back together in May that much sweeter. I know that, rested and renewed, I will be looking forward to seeing you all again.
5. I hope you take care of yourself, that you continue to find rest and prioritize healing, because we have all been through—and are still going through—so much. That may mean you need to let some things go for the time being. Let things be good enough. I hope this can be a time for you all to reflect on what is important and what can be set aside particularly in this liminal space of coming back after so long apart, even though we are not coming back to the way things were before. We are different, changed, and my wish for you is deepened reflection as well.

May this sabbatical time be good for us all.