

Dear friends,

It's good to have heard from several of you this month, and to add a new member to this network, thanks to a suggestion from Antonia Won, Canadian Unitarian Council staff person for the west of Canada. Let's start with a contribution from that new member,

from Kim Rogers

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Greetings from the north!

I'm a social worker who recently relocated to the beautiful, wild Yukon from Ontario. I had discovered the Unitarian fellowship and philosophy in my hometown just prior to coming here, but didn't have a chance to become a member or explore it in greater depth. I was subsequently dismayed to find nothing of the sort here, and find myself lacking a spiritual group that I feel in tune with, or that fits with my beliefs.

I'm particularly interested in raising my (3yr old) daughter with an open-ended range of teachings and beliefs, but find it hard to know where to start in doing that. I also wish there was a UU congregation here to nourish my own spirit.

I'm hoping to find some like-minded connections, and also to increase my own knowledge and understanding of the UU philosophies. I am looking forward to getting this newsletter!

warm regards,

*Kim Rogers
Whitehorse, Yukon*

Welcome, Kim!



from Janet Vickers

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*We are back into the post-holiday routine now. I am rehearsing the Gabriola Players next production which is *The Odd Couple* (female version). Don't know if I mentioned but Lipstick Press published another Unitarian poet - *Beach Cardiology* by Franci Louann. You can find information on <http://lipstickpoetry.blogspot.com/> and <http://www.lipstickpress.com/>*

I now have joined two committees at the First Unitarian Fellowship of Nanaimo - the Lay Chaplaincy committee and the Sunday Services Committee, and am also in the choir. Members of the fellowship have been very welcoming and have picked me up at the ferry parking lot to take me to the fellowship, which means I can walk on, thereby saving money by not bringing a car.

Best, Janet

from Stacey Ann Vickery

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I keep putting off responding - in the hopes that I will have more time later. Apparently later never comes.

The past few months have been adventurous - Soap sales exceeded expectations in November and December, Yay me! Kids now attend public school after five years as homeschoolers. Yule happened, as did two birthdays. Life is busy.

I have taken the chair position on my hall committee - change is good. We are having our second new event on the 18th, a family games night. It is more work than I anticipated, but I am making change so I guess that is where the work comes in.

Widdershins is a definite success-full business. I have a few clients who come to the house for soap and people asking me which markets I will be vending at. All in it is fun and I enjoy the varied jobs involved.

Kids are doing well in school - I never thought that I would be happy with them at school, but mostly I am. Cara is working at grade level (something I wasn't sure she would ever do) in all subjects except math, which is amazing for her. Brianna is a happy grade two student - her inability to read has kept her back a grade but she enjoys school and is becoming much more social. Nicholas will be attending next year (we thought one more year at home with us was a good idea). He is looking forward to the bus ride ☺ (the downside is the kids have brought home more stomach bugs than I ever wanted to experience - especially in one winter).



Things are a bit rough between David and I - we will see what comes of it. For now we are working on making a change for the better.

Hope this finds you all in good health and full of joy.

Peace, Stacey Anne

from Noreen Smith

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Hello to all.

I am keeping busy as usual. Still working my bus job, going to school and now I am in a practicum 3 days per week (non bus days), at a local preschool for regular and special needs children. Really enjoying this placement and learning lots!

Having a cold winter with lots of snow. I bought myself a pair of snowshoes for Christmas and have been having a terrific time walking my dogs in the woods. I always see wildlife (see attached photo). I have a nice circuit about 5 minutes from home that takes me through a beautiful forest with hills and valleys and continues onto a frozen creek with many beaver dams to cross - quite enjoyable!



We had our annual Ice Festival here and it was - 45, so very low attendance, then a week later we had +8, so huge slushy, muddy melt everywhere...today back to -20. I get a treat as I am going to Vancouver this week for a 3 day early learning conference in Surrey. Hope the rain stops for a bit and I can enjoy some greenery. Well, no other good or bad news, just plugging along with life!

Warm Regards

Noreen

from Elisabeth Michnick

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Since becoming chair of the residents' board at my retirement home, "The Terraces of Baycrest" I have been extremely busy. My aim is to help activate residents to participate in organizing fun and interesting activities.

Since this is a Jewish residence, I am working on a celebration of the Purim holiday. I am a member of our drama group and suggested we perform a Purim play for the occasion. We are busy rehearsing. We will also have mask workshops in our crafts dept. Hopefully the masks will be worn by the residents in a Purim parade.

I recently signed up to help my congregation "Toronto 1st" prepare to host the 2011 CUC gathering in May.

Best wishes to all,

Elisabeth

from Bunty Albert

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*After having been retired for almost three years, I have decided to go back to work for a few weeks as a casual employee at a federal agency to do Privacy Impact Assessments on some of their systems. It's a process I believe in, the timing is right (too cold to do much else) and it will help fund a trip to Thailand in about a year to visit my son Michael, daughter-in-law Amy and granddaughter Annabelle (now 6 months). My son is the country manager for **Right to Play** in Thailand and they live in Bangkok from where Michael travels about a third of his time.*

*Bunty Albert
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I also heard this month from Ben Wolfe, the Communications Director of the Canadian Unitarian Council, who has just started putting out an e-newsletter, which he's happy to share with this network. It's another excellent way to make connections – although most of the people mentioned in this first issue of *enews* are members of congregations (as are some people in this network) there is absolutely no reason why you should not be in touch with them. I'm guessing anyone you contact through *enews* will be delighted to hear from you and will try to help ease any sense of isolation you have. Here's the link, and I'll include it whenever a new issue comes out:

<http://www.cuc.ca/enews/january2011/>

Another worthwhile publication available online is *The Canadian Unitarian*, issued three times a year – take a look at the latest one: http://www.cuc.ca/canu/CUC_Fall2010_web.pdf
And note this:

The Canadian Unitarian reports on newsworthy events in the denomination, including the annual conference each spring. It attempts to reflect all segments of Unitarianism and Universalism in Canada. We welcome all submissions; however, publication is based on the criteria of newsworthiness, relevance to readers, length and balance. We try to publish all letters to the editor, although they may be edited for brevity and clarity.

Perhaps this is also a good time to remind you about the wealth of other information and resources at the CUC website, www.cuc.ca Not only is there material about congregational life, as you might expect, and about social justice concerns, and about happenings within the organization, but there's also a list of talks by Ministers and others which are available at the click of your mouse:

http://www.cuc.ca/ministry/sermon_series/sermon_series.htm

I strongly encourage you to browse the CUC website frequently. Another page (which you may already have visited, hoping to find a congregation near you) is the list at

<http://www.cuc.ca/congregations/index.htm>

It's disappointing to find that you're a long distance away from a live UU community and are therefore unable to attend services and other activities – but I have a somewhat radical suggestion. Consider identifying the congregation geographically closest to you, then take a look at their website. If you like what you see, email the likeliest contact person and ask if they have electronic versions of their newsletters and other mailings. If so, I can't imagine they won't be very happy to add you to their list. Then, when you've become more familiar with them in this way, think about becoming a "distant friend" – a category I've just invented! No congregation that I know of requires you to attend if you're unable, and most require only a very small financial contribution, or none, to be affiliated with them, though formal membership might require more. You could perhaps find it helpful to have this kind of contact with UUs in a smaller area than the whole of Canada – **in addition** to this network, of course, not instead of it! Let me know what you think.

For the second half of this issue, here's another part-service (the children's talk, a reading, a meditation and the adults' talk) from a years-ago February. I hope it may be helpful to at least some of you.

In faith and love,

Anne

February: Month of Paradox and Possibility

Time for All Ages

A few days ago, it was Groundhog Day. There's an old story that on this day groundhogs, who've been sleeping in their burrows, their houses, since winter started -- on this day they come out to see what the weather's like. And the story says that if the sun is shining, so that it makes a shadow on the ground, and if the groundhog sees her shadow, she'll go back into her burrow for another six weeks, because she'll know that there will be another six weeks of cold weather. But if it's cloudy and dull when she comes out, and there's no sunshine to make a shadow, the groundhog knows that winter will soon be over and she might as well stay out.

Isn't that funny? It seems like it's the wrong way round, doesn't it? You'd think if the sun was out, that would be the sign of spring, and that the groundhog would say, "*Oh, good, it's sunny, I'll stay out and play!*" But the clever little animal knows that sunshine often goes together with very cold weather. And when she comes out and sees that it's cloudy, she knows that although it doesn't look very nice it may be just the right kind of weather for the ground to warm up and the spring flowers to start growing.

We might make some mistakes about how long the winter is going to be, because some groundhogs saw their shadow this year and others didn't. But the one sure thing is that Spring will come, perhaps in two or three weeks, perhaps in seven or eight weeks, but it **will** come. And the longer and colder the winter has been, the more we'll enjoy the warm weather when it comes. Even the groundhogs and other animals can only guess **when** Spring will start, but they **know** it will. Sooner or later, the trees will start getting leaves and the flowers will start blooming, and they'll look even more beautiful if we've waited a long time for them.

When I was a little girl I lived in England, where winter isn't quite so long and Spring usually starts about now. When I was six and a half years old, on the 14th of February, which is Valentine's Day, I went to stay with my grandmother for a few days while my Mom went to the hospital to have a baby. I remember that when my Dad took me to my grandmother's house, on the day that my baby sister was born, I saw crocuses blooming in grandmother's front yard. I often think of that now and wish that we could have Spring as early as that. But then I remember that in Canada the sun shines a little more than it does in England, and that they don't have a Groundhog Day there, and I think that I enjoy the flowers and the warm Spring even more because our winter is longer.

I hope you'll have fun for the rest of this winter, however long it lasts, and that you'll soon start noticing the first signs of Spring.

Reading: **The Brokenness of Creation** (*Richard Gilbert*)

The earth ball is not a perfect orb, we are told,
But flattened at the poles by simply spinning.
Some cosmic law denies it perfection.
Seasons come and go dependably
But not always on schedule.

Global forces are too complex for perfection.
It was not a model of perfection
When evolutionary forces conspired
To produce the likes of you and me.
We inherit the imperfection of creation,
Are the flawed products
Of its incomplete workings.

The fault line of existence
Cuts through us and all we create
As if to remind us of the incompleteness of creation.
History blunders on under our imperfect guidance,
More hill and valley to the unknown
Than smooth trail ascending to envisioned heights.

We partake of incompleteness,
Having only partially eaten
The apple of knowledge.
We are burdened with the paradoxical capacity
To contemplate perfection
While shackled with finite wisdom.
We are inheritors of finite bodies
Whose brain considers the infinite.

We consider eternal life
From temporal existence.
We contemplate absolute good
Even as we harm our neighbours.
We are flawed creatures in a broken world.
Just one question:
Where else is it any better?

Meditation

We live in many darkneses. We are often uncertain. We are sometimes afraid. We bring together many uncertainties, many sorrows, many joys, much wonder. Let us bring them together in quiet meditation now, allowing our minds to rest in the knowledge that we are not alone.

Reflections: **February, Month of Paradox and Possibility**

In February of 1991, I arrived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to take a semester of courses at Harvard Divinity School. I knew no-one there except one Toronto student who I'd met a couple of times at CUC events -- we certainly weren't well-acquainted. I'd acquired a major debt to pursue my studies, despite good counsel to avoid doing this if at all possible. (I had a romantic dream about attending Harvard which seemed worth a lot of money.) I'd given up my nice secure job, had left my house untenanted, and was without a car while in the States. It was all very new and a little frightening, to say the least, as well as exciting.

In March I went up to Montreal to "audition" for a student internship at the Lakeshore congregation and to meet members of the Board of the downtown Montreal Church; we liked each other pretty well. I began to contemplate another big move, in the opposite direction from most of the traffic. That in itself wasn't a new thing for me, but saying goodbye to the people and places which had been my home for 25 years -- that was hard. And in June and July, between getting back from and Massachussetts and moving to Quebec, I had to visit my parents in England, find tenants for my house and sort out all my stuff, lead a workshop at Unicamp, officiate at a friend's wedding and find a place to live.

Those were eight weeks in which I sometimes wondered just where and who I was and what on earth I was doing. Oh, and my former husband told me he was remarrying -- my children would have a stepmother who would see them (and my granddaughter) more than I could, from my new location in Quebec.

At the very end of July I moved to Quebec and started the work of ministry. It was a busy and fulfilling time, until an interview with the Ministerial Fellowship Committee in Boston in November, when my perception of myself was challenged in an unexpected and uncomfortable way as I was assessed as not yet ready for ministerial credentials. Again, I had to face the fact that the future is always uncertain, never as controllable as we all might like to think. And before I knew it, it was February again, and almost nothing seemed the same as it had been a year ago. What changes a year had wrought!

On the surface, at least, it had been a year of great turbulence, with all sorts of endings and barriers. But under the surface there had been change of the most vital kind, change which I am absolutely convinced would never, could never, have come about without the dark and sad times. As I lost or surrendered the old familiar supports of house and garden, social identity, vision of the future, I had to ask myself, "*Who am I?*" Who am I if I am no longer a settled householder, flower grower, nurturing mother, successful candidate for the ministry?

A couple of times in the past I'd had to ask myself similar questions and found them very painful and difficult. It was hard to face the emptiness of an open identity, the reality of aloneness, the fearfulness of not knowing who I was. I sometimes tried to retreat to the old familiar answers. But gradually I found myself doing less of that. Slowly, I found myself stronger, more able to hold up through the literal dark nights without having to telephone friends for comfort in the wee small hours, beginning to pose some tentative answers to the big questions about who I am: for one thing, a person whose identity includes mistakes and failure and difficulties of all kinds.

Perhaps you can see why I believe that we need regularly to have a dark night of the soul. I functioned perfectly well (most of the time) with my old comfortable identity. And I may not have been ready or strong enough to question who and what I was underneath it all. No, I take that back: I'm sure I was ready to question, because I was very used to doing that, but these vital questions can't be answered without the corresponding experience, which a book I once read called The Experience of Nothingness.

No-one in their right mind, of course, **invites** crisis, the human condition being such that there's plenty of trouble without asking for it. But I'd like to suggest some of the kinds of crisis which we might be called upon to cope with, and ask you to consider with me how we might react. We can have a mental rehearsal for a crisis which could happen at any time.

Let's imagine for a few moments what it would be like if we were to be stripped of all the external things which make up our identity, our roles, our friends, our home, even our name. What would we be left with? What would we then do? Who would we then be?

I'm not sure how possible it is to create an identity from scratch. Someone once told me about a friend who, just recovered from alcoholism and feeling like a new person in many ways, was planning a funeral service for himself -- to bury the old Robert Jackson and celebrate the new self, complete with new name. I thought about it for a while, considering whether I'd like to do this myself, and decided not. When I chose a new name for myself after my divorce, it didn't involve a burial of the old person so much as a recognition that an evolution had occurred.

But the image of death, burial and resurrection is a very powerful one. It's a persuasive paradox: death, after all, means finality, the end. If it's not final, it's not death. Yet resurrection means rising from the dead: it can only happen if death happens first. Jesus, among others, used this paradox in his teachings. For example:

"In very truth I tell you, a grain of wheat remains a solitary grain unless it falls into the ground and dies; but if it dies, it bears a rich harvest."

And, in another place,

"Whoever cares for his own safety is lost; but if a man will let himself be lost he will find his true self."

Perhaps if we could take a little less thought for our safety, we might find ourselves, our true selves.

Far from getting through crises and controversial situations as quickly and smoothly as possible, I believe we should work at them hard and long from every angle, painful though it may be for all concerned. As we used to be so fond of saying, glibly but truly, "*No pain, no gain.*" I believe that paradox. I believe, because I've found it true in my own life, that crises provide opportunities.



February, the dark and dreary month, is the one leading into Spring -- yes, the first day of Spring is next month! Only from this bleak and barren landscape, with no sign of life, can come the crocuses. We need our February. Let's experience it fully, all 28 days of it, before March comes.