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UU Expressions: Love in Real Life Episode 9: Art or Artifact

This groundbreaking 10-episode docu-series takes an inspiring and honest look at how Unitarian Universalism (UU) is evolving across Canada in 2024. This isn't just a celebration—it's an invitation to all of us to reflect on what it means to live our UU values in the diverse communities we call home, from bustling cities to small towns, and for diverse people to shape diverse expressions of UUism beyond congregations and, if so, what this means for our national identity.

In each episode, Erin Horvath and Amber Bellemare, the Canadian Unitarian Council's Justice and Equity team, interview Unitarian Universalists who have formed groups outside of congregations and are experiencing an alternative kind of UU community. The individuals share their perspectives and reflections on their experiences, and speak only for themselves. We thank them for their generosity.

Transcript for Episode 9 - Art or Artifact

In this episode, we get curious about new ways of being and what it means to remain the same.

Our guests include:

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- Rev Anne Barker, Rev Linda Thompson, CUC staff, Congregational Life
- catherine strickland, Robyn Newton, UU's of the Salish Sea in British Columbia
- Claire Heistek, Rassemblement unitarien universaliste d'Ottawa
- Anonymous leaders of QUUeer Connecting
- Liz James from Mirth and Dignity
- Reverend Wendy Luella Perkins, founder of Soulful Singing.

Episode playtime is 46 mins



MUSIC	
Rev. Anne Barker	What we do in this moment has to be creative. And sometimes that means we change our structure to fit the moment. Sometimes it means we collaborate with other people who are participating in the broader culture in different ways.
	And we build relationships.
Amber	Welcome to UU Expressions: Love in Real Life. My name is Amber Bellemare, and I am joined by my co-host Erin Horvath and together we are taking you on a 10 episode docu-journey that discovers, celebrates, and challenges how Unitarian Universalism is practiced across Canada in 2024. That was Rev Anne Barker reflecting on making difficult and exciting decisions in the face of change and uncertainty. In this episode, we get curious about new ways of being and what it means to remain the same.
Erin	As you remember, Peter Scales, reached out to me with what I felt was a very beautiful email.
Amber	I do, and I want to read it so everyone can feel it's depth:
	He said, "I want to make sure that recognition is given to the group which is largely represented in the congregation I attend (Capital UU Cong., and Victoria) and who I also see when I travel to other congregations: older, straight, white, liberal-lefties of the two classical genders. UUism is their spiritual home.
	Many are retired teachers, nurses, civil servants; many came to UUism from Christianity and Judaism during their 30s, 40s and 50s. They are veterans of past culture wars including protesting the Vietnam War; Cold War protests against nuclear testing [They were doing] abortion rights protests; the fight for medical care for gay men during the 1980s HIV/AIDS pandemic; the struggle for legalization of equal marriage; and now the climate crisis.
	These folks are living important expressions of UUism in Canada. Perhaps they are even the core of UUism in Canada. When your study results are coming together, I hope your report will contain recognition of this."
Erin	It made me quite emotional when I think of it. It's just that when I read that, I felt like it was like my grandpa, or somebody's grandma writing to me to say, "you know, sweetheart, all of the good things you do don't forget that we're good people and you come from good roots."
	At the same time, it got me emotional because I'm working with this particular Indigenous community who had figured out that they have about ten years time until most of their knowledge keepers will have passed. And so I was going between one set of emails to the other and just had this feeling of like, this is an example of UU elders that are saying, don't forget us and honour where we come from.



Amber	I appreciate you drawing a parallel between Indigenous Elders and UU Elders, because so often I hear people talk about our need to grow, evolve, expand as a faith- and that is important, but we don't often acknowledge that where we are today as a faith <i>is because</i> of those who came before us in this classical expression of UUism.
Erin	True. And I think it's important to bring this concept into our awareness as we talk about change because I would hate if people listening concluded that we are saying that to change is good and that not changing is bad. Like the Shakespearean play vs the contemporary production metaphor that I spoke about in earlier episodes is simply a concept to get us thinking. It's not a literal pronunciation that because something that came before us is out of date it is therefore irrelevant, unevolved, or insignificant. Most of us would not dream of saying that Indigenous Elders are out of date, and still, working with Indigenous communities I can assure you that the younger generations are presented with the challenge of how to take the teachings of their Elders with them, while also exploring ways of being that their Elders may not embrace in the years before their passing. And some would say they don't want them to change either. They want them to honour the culture that the elders represent.
Amber	And especially to acknowledge that our elders may never want to change what they've built and that's perfectly ok. There are processes in place for communities who wish to explore that option, with potential for fertilizing the next generation or not. Definitely an important concept to put in the forefront of our minds because we're not necessarily facing an either or situation but more like how do we authentically and relationally handle the inevitable changes heading our way.
Erin	Here is Rev. Anne Barker of the CUC's Congregational Life team explaining the bittersweet trends that she and her colleague Rev. Linda Thomson are witnessing:
Anne	What we do know is that there is a continental decline in religiosity and a continental increase in the need for spirituality or the recognition that people are looking for ways to engage with spirituality. And this is a shift we can make. We think of ourselves as less religious maybe than other religious organizations, although, we have a lot of religious looking things, but to be able to shift from a religiosity face to a spirituality face would not be beyond our ability. It's an opportunity. It won't necessarily fit for all congregations, but it will fit for some.
Erin	I think you are on to something there, in terms of what I've heard the young adults say. Again, it's not like they are speaking with one voice and they are all identical, but the ones we've interviewed have said that they crave an experience of being connected
Erin	As Rev Linda said in our interview, it is now impossible to deny this societal shift is happening, so now congregations <i>must</i> decide what comes next for them:
Linda	At the best, people are going, okay, so what are new ways to engage? Because the reality is people still have a need for a spiritual life, whether or not they define it that way or not. We all have a personal theology. The way that we understand that the world works



	and the values behind our relationships.
	And so congregations that are willing to be creative about that, I think have a bit of a head start on what this next possibility is going to look like.
Erin	And with any change, there is an opportunity, depending on the perspective you take. Here's Rev Anne to explain more:
Anne	I would add that out in the world, this is a time of great uncertainty. Everything is in transition. And when everything is in transition, it's also a time of great opportunity.
	And so what we're experiencing also mirrors what's out in the world. Now we have various pieces that are related specifically to religion or to UUs themselves, but we mirror the broader culture.
	We don't necessarily have to be a whole different thing, but we have to be related and relevant to the community somehow and it might mean contracting that out, right? It might mean supporting initiatives and projects that we're not doing because we're aging and we've got just the leadership resource to keep the congregation going, not necessarily to start a bigger, broader project, but there's nothing preventing us from participating in bigger, broader projects or being supporters in the ways that we are available to.
	So this is a moment where nobody really knows what the exact answer is, but that's helping because it starts to lower resistance....
Linda	...And I think increases curiosity because people know they don't know.
Amber	It feels intense and sad and invigorating all at once. Was there anyone you interviewed who displayed what making a big hard decision looked like?
Erin	I was really struck by the bold move First Unitarian Fellowship of Nanaimo did in relation to their shelter for the unhoused. They decided to transition their community-based ministry in order to ensure it flourished past their particular congregation's life span. I shared excerpts from a conversation I had with Kathryn-Jane Hazel, a member of the housing committee in an earlier episode.
Amber	For those that need a refresher, this shelter started in 2008 and expanded in more recent years to include a shower program in the park for the unhoused, case management to get people into housing, a clean team initiative that gives honouraria for shelter guests that work with a staff to clean up garbage and graffiti, among other things. So it has become a very important part of the fabric of the community.
Erin	Over the duration of their operations, the majority of fundraising and staffing was done volunteer but as their congregation ages and the operations become more complex, it became clear that operating the shelter was unsustainable for the board and other congregational volunteers. They also found that many government agencies, foundations and granting bodies, were no longer giving to faith-based organizations in the same ways they had in the past. So a change was needed.



Amber	That's a pretty big deal that they were willing to admit this. It can be hard to let go of something when they have invested so much.
Erin	In this case, though, it was <i>because</i> they invested so much and knew the need for the service was higher than ever, that they were determined <i>not</i> to close or jeopardize its ability to grow just because they didn't have the capacity. It was a humble and courageous move to seek out an agency that was stable, would continue to run the shelter the same way, and that shared UU values around the worth and dignity of all people. So on Jan 21, 2024 the congregation voted in favour of the Nanaimo Family Life Association taking over the operations of the Shelter while remaining in the congregation's building for at least the next 5 years. They are also taking over the running of the shower programme in the park.
Amber	Oh wow, so this is really putting into action what Rev Anne was saying about doing things differently including building strategic partnerships and contracting out others to carry out the work. In a funny way, even though they let go, their story wasn't over.
Erin	Now the congregation can <i>and is still</i> very involved in the Shelter. In fact members of the congregation sat on a committee to ensure the transition went smoothly right up until the transition date at the end of June 2024. Plus they remain on as volunteers. This change ensures that the community-based ministry they poured themselves into for so many years will continue to be a living, evolving expression of UUism for the years to come.
Amber	And in making this proactive decision, this group has ensured that hundreds of guests they service through the shelter continue to experience the high level of care they had no doubtedly come to depend on.
Erin	It's a huge responsibility when you have the welfare of 500 or more people to consider.
Music	
Erin	Anne shared with me the excitement congregations are reporting during their Congregational Conversations when they become meaningfully engaged in their local community.
Anne	One of the things congregations are excited about is any time they figure out how to engage beyond their walls. So for instance, we heard that the larger Ottawa congregation has been running OWL (Our Whole Lives), which is our comprehensive sexuality program, and has different levels for every age, like from kindergarten up to seniors. And they've been running multiple levels of OWL and it's super helpful and informative.
	It's experiential and it goes beyond, you know, it's rooted in our values, but it goes beyond what you think of as a church or a congregational program, and it translates really well into the public. They were saying they ran kindergarten owl for the first time and they had more people from outside of the congregation participating than people



	from families inside the congregation.
	And that's because they're building relationships with other people. And so when they're able to do things that include people beyond their walls or the congregation is finding ways to go beyond their walls and be in relationship in other places, that always feels like a really enlivening win.
Linda	And I think really on point with your UU expressions - when UU expressions and varied UU expressions don't necessarily need to be things that are congregational based.
	These are congregations figuring out how to live those values, to express their UU identity and do it as they engage with people who aren't a part of the congregation, who may never be part of the congregation. Some will likely find their way there. But the reason to do it is not because we're trying to recruit new UUs, but we're trying to live our values in the world and help other people maybe find a connection point with that to see how that could work for themselves.
Amber	The bit about not engaging in the world in order to recruit people to congregations feels very important.
Erin	I agree. Because, like Rev Anne and Rev Linda have said, people can sense when they are being engaged with for recruitment instead of relationships.
Amber	What about groups that have chosen to create something new together? Have you heard how that's going?
Erin	The UU's of the Salish Sea, which is the new UU community that has sprung forth (in BC), are taking their time as they rethink their entire expression.
	Here's catherine strickland, speaking to their experience.
catherine	I don't know that we have clarity. The exciting part is like what actually is going to serve?
	What's going to serve us? What's going to serve the wider community of UUs, what's going to serve the wider community of where we are in the world.
	What's going to make us survive and thrive is about really rethinking where the resources come from, where the component pieces that are going to allow us to be out in the world doing the work that we're wanting to do, but also nourishing ourselves in the process, where the pieces going to come from, where can we get them, what can we contribute to that?
	Just really thinking through what is our piece in the bigger context. For me what's exciting about being in this community is that nobody's trying to create these rigid pieces too quickly and we're really trying to imagine something different. The parts that are there, will they stay? I don't know.
	I do think that we all appreciate and enjoy the opportunity to be together in what we define as worship. I think we all have some connection and commitment to that piece. How that all evolves and what it ends up looking like is a bit of an open question.



Erin	While they may not yet know the outcome they are going for they do know a key intention that is guiding their conversations as they consider UUism on a regional level. Here's Robyn Newton, to explain more:
Robyn	One of the lessons I've sort of taken away is there's being welcoming, you're welcoming people in, but there's also can we change the way we do things to make people feel more welcome rather than expecting them to fit into a traditional, for example, worship service.
	We've only had a few services. We don't have a minister, but they're recognizable as worship services. That could change and we're just learning how they might change. We feel like we're on a learning journey and what our quote 'worship' will look like a year from now could look different as we learn what people need and want in this current time.
Amber	I just want to interject here that worship, in and of itself, is not new. There are still some of these identifiable characteristics of what we might call church, but I love their willingness and openness to the possibility of it taking an entirely new shape. Ok sorry, continue!
Erin	Right! Here's what I told them and their response:
	That makes a lot of sense to me, especially if you're looking at it in terms of that regional collection of options people have. It makes a lot of sense to me that you would have open space so that you're not necessarily trying to duplicate the same things. Because then from a diversity perspective we're scanning back and looking at UUism and how that shows up in the world.
	Is it a greater service to have two things that are kind of alike but have these subtle differences, or is it in greater service to have these bigger differences which allow in some cases for the members who stayed where they are to have their affinity group and then another group becomes their own thing.
	And I'm wondering, as you speak and as I'm thinking about this regional hub thing, if that actually might end up being a more beautiful and more inclusive expression of diversity rather than trying to get some people to have the spoons to read the book and change the pronouns and care about the things that are like, you know what I mean?
	Where it hits the fan for me, in my work that I do with Indigenous communities is when I see people's deep respect for their elders and the fact that they went through a lot of the residential schools. And so they have faith that maybe the younger people look at and go, That's not my expression, but they don't try to change the elders.
	They don't say to them, You learn the wrong thing, give that up now, become a proper whatever. They don't even go there. They just say, No, we're going to just gently do our own things and allow things to evolve as they do, but respecting deeply. And so you have to think about how inclusive you should be, you know, like do I for example, want a



	locker room, a football locker room to become so inclusive that I can go in it?
	Not really. Like I never, my life is fine if I'm never included in a men's football locker room. You know what I mean? Like, I never I don't need them to include me, but I need my space somewhere, right?
Robyn	Yeah, I think that's a great way of expressing it. The group of us actually came together as sort of a support group for our minister when he was under a lot of criticism.
	I am not at all distressed that some people enjoy the traditional worship, way of being in faith... That's not a betrayal to me. A lot of the seniors feel more comfortable with the traditional way of worshipping.
Amber	The UU's of the Salish Sea are working to let go of some aspects of tradition in order to make room for something different to be created that feels welcoming to a different demographic of people than we typically see in UU congregations.
Erin	Yes, and in this case, they have a specific goal of being more welcoming towards younger people who identify as UUs but do not have a place of worship. This is an example of building a bridge toward Young Adults, which we discussed in detail in earlier episodes. And it's not just older UU's doing the work to engage younger UU's. There are young adults who are actively engaged in co-creating this new space because they want to be a part of an intergenerational faith community that feels like home for them.
Amber	One of the things I most appreciate about UUism is that there is space for all sorts of expressions within groups and between groups.
Erin	Here's Rev. Anne Barker explaining the balance between differences and similarities that all UU communities experience in one way or another and how the idea of making room for differences is not a new thing- in fact it was a key feature in our evolution.
Anne	We think of ourselves as a pluralistic faith, although some people wouldn't say faith and I think that's one of our most precious attributes, is that there is room for difference in this place. And what that did was make room for people who didn't necessarily feel connected or accepted in some other place, like maybe I'm an atheist and I want the church experience, but my Christian church didn't have room for my atheism.
	That's not true in all Christian churches now, but there was a time when that would not be welcome. You don't have to have a specific belief to be welcome here. But what also happens is that we want to gather together with like minded people. So we tell all our friends of whatever flavor we are.
	If I'm pagan, I might tell all my pagan friends, this is a place where we can be and be in community and do stuff. And then you might get an influx of a thing. And then sometimes our communities get shaped around a particular identity and then we have to work harder again at being pluralistic, at remembering that it's okay to also be not that thing or to be another thing or to be a blend of things.



Amber	This makes me think that there is a lot of potential in developing regional hubs that contain multi-expressions who choose to engage with each other intentionally. Then no group is trying to change the other to suit their needs, but also not becoming closed off and then stagnating.
Erin	It's that balance we spoke about in the episode 4 about Authenticity- opportunity to be with people who are similar and different. So, to expand on Rev Anne's example, the UU group that is more pagan leaning and operates a social enterprise intentionally chooses to engage with, say, the UU group of activists and the congregation practicing classical UUism.
Amber	This way of thinking about it takes the emphasis away from a single unified expression and back onto the reason people want to engage in spiritual community in the first place. But to accomplish this we may need to revisit our commitment to pluralism because over the years people have reported, and I have personally experienced that rigidity has crept in, resulting in some people making declarations about how things are done or not done, words that are spoken or not spoken. You know, the joke is that UU's will read ahead in the hymnal to decide if they will sing along or not or what words they would sing. This stance has a tendency to repel other people who are different, and whose involvement might have the effect of shaking things up.
Erin	Right. Here's Rev Linda Thomson with an example of how this UU phenomenon of rigidity of language has shown up.
Linda	A spiritual practice is something that puts you in a better relationship with yourself, with others, and all that is - creation, the divine, however you define that.
	And I think that I actually think that's a fairly universal need for humans to try to figure that out. So language can be a trip up because if you say divine something there are the crusty folks in our midst who like, I don't want to hear that language. I once had a guy say to me, Well, I don't believe in anything I can't see.
	And I said, Well, what about love? ...he was such a literalist in the world that anything that sort of smacked of mystery or unknown just made him profoundly uncomfortable.
	And yet there he was, an active member of a UU congregation. But I had used the word mystery in what I'd said, and that made him a little angsty. But we were able to kind of go, well, yeah, maybe love.
	It was a fascinating conversation because he was so sure of himself until we actually began to ask, well, what do those words mean?
Erin	Now imagine that this encounter was not between Linda and this person but between a new person who showed up one day looking for spiritual community and connection to the divine.
Amber	Right. It could very well have a gatekeeping effect where the new person feels that they can not share their interest in connecting to the divine with those in this space because



	even the use of the word is prohibited.
Erin	And this is particularly problematic in that many of the young adults we interviewed for this research indicated that they want deep relational connections, they crave spirituality. In one case, a young adult indicated they are <i>only</i> interested in deep spiritual encounters which they currently look for outside of UU spaces because they do not feel they will encounter it within the versions of UUism that are currently available to them.
Amber	Wow, we really do need to be thoughtful of the impacts our pronunciations and preferences have on a space.
Erin	Anne shared what she and Linda are seeing occur as people realize the impact rigidity has on people.
Ann	I've been hearing some really hopeful stories lately of people saying, you know, I have an identity that I hold really closely, and then there's another identity. I wasn't really comfortable with, and I was glad there wasn't <i>that</i> in my congregation. (Except, it probably is in your congregation) and how they were saying, you know, and then somebody said to me, it's not safe to be this other identity here.
	I don't feel comfortable sharing that. And they transform in their minds that, look, I'm so invested in this being a welcoming and safe space. I had to change my attitude around other people and we're hearing these stories in our congregational conversations. We're hearing people celebrate that cracking open of their willingness to be comfortable, are willing to engage with difference that they might not have been looking for intentionally.
	And that's a hard human thing to do. And congregational life is a great place to work on learning how to do it.
Erin	Linda pointed out a very fundamental difference between younger and older generations of UU's that seems to be playing a big role in creating the culture gap we've been discussing. In the segment, Rev Linda starts by discussing the mindset of older generations in relation to their identity.
Linda	They were defining themselves very much by what they weren't. And subsequent generations are creating an identity and claiming something. And I think that's beginning to be felt in the kind of reality that Ann's talking about. There is more curiosity and more openness and more willing to say, okay, we don't all have to be humanists or whatever here.
	And that for a time, some of our smaller lay-led congregations were very much stuck in a humanist identity, and now they're going, okay, well, maybe not because they've gotten to know and and be in relationship with people who don't define themselves that way.
Anne	But it is a growing edge and it is a work in progress, right? It's just really meaningful to hear people volunteering their stories, of changing their mind about something that is wonderful.



Amber	And this makes sense. The story of the congregational expression of UUism includes lived experiences of leaving other faith traditions that felt exclusionary because of their adherence to specific dogma and beliefs. And when the UU's of <i>those</i> times created a space for themselves there was an emphasis on <i>not</i> excluding others based on religious ideals or identities.
MUSIC	
Erin	Now, in my time getting to know UU's and hearing about UUism, one of the things that has been most inspiring to me is the willingness of some people to reconsider their position on things rather than get imbedded in their ways.
Amber	This was really evident through the various national forums that took place between 2021-2023 where UU's examined exclusion as it relates to race, class, age, gender, family and relationship structures, and disability. While some resisted learning about the experiences of other UU's, there were folks who <i>really</i> embraced the process with vulnerability and openness. That willingness sent the message to others that it's its ok to not get it right. Perfection isn't the goal: authenticity and compassion is.
Erin	Liz James from the Hysterical Society spoke to me about the critical role that vulnerability has played in their process. As a UU expression that generates humour in the world, they take a lot of risks. Sometimes they get it right and other times they don't. Here's Liz.
Liz	Something we've noticed is vulnerability and being crappy at things has been our hugest asset. Like when you think about a brand, your branding, the brand, we're just trying stuff out. We're doing the best we can. Who knows? Has been a huge asset to us because then when we do something wrong, it's not a problem. We just share the thing we tried and why it didn't work and we ask our people to help us..
	And that's also a cultural shift from traditional structures that I think - churches are trying to do a really good job and the CUC's been sort of nudging that it's okay to not be perfect. Let's have a little bit more vulnerability here. And I think that vulnerability way of thinking allows us to adapt and try new things and it's such a huge asset.
	I think it's a really good thing you guys are doing.
	How do you avoid being offensive? You don't - you just be easy to correct when you make a mistake. Be understanding.
Amber	While not all of us are in the business of taking risks through humour like the folks with the Hysterical Society, they model an approach to co-creating that doesn't aim for perfection or fear making mistakes. They can't become rigid and predictable or they lose their humour. In order to stay alive, they need to resist the urge to become rigid. They need to live on the edge of acceptable and unacceptable, and constantly be dismantling and re-assembling their views on things in order to notice the humour in front of them.



Erin	Yes, their relaxed stance about imperfection frees up others to embrace their own imperfection - and in doing so they become approachable. In our personal lives it's the same sense of vulnerability and warmth that often has us seek out advice from our friends and mentors that are open about their shortcomings rather than from those who present themselves and unchanging and infallible.
Amber	That's true. As a faith community, if we do not fear being imperfect, and lead with vulnerability, sharing our shortcomings and half realized intentions perhaps will make us not just more approachable, but trustworthy.
Erin	Yeah, that's very possible. Now, here's Rev Anne sharing what inspired the title of this episode:
Anne	I have a theory that we come together, we build a thing, this good thing that is Unitarian Universalism, for example, and we build it out of necessity because we need a place to go where we fit, we belong, and where we get our needs met and where we can feel a meaningful connection with other people of similar values and do good in the world.
	So we create this thing because we need it and we couldn't find it anywhere else. And then we tend to it, and we care for it, and we polish it, and we love it, and we are invested in it, because we should be. And at some point we have to ask ourselves if we are still making art or if we are creating an artifact.
	Sometimes we polish it in a way that keeps it exactly the same. We might even put it in that case with the glass and lock it and say, "This is the beautiful thing." I get how we get there. I love congregational life, and I'm sure I've said, "No, no, there's a better way to do this. We have to do it this way.
	We've always done it this way." I'm sure I've said that at some point - I apologize to the universe. So if we keep it exactly the same frozen in time, it's still beautiful. We can still love it and appreciate it. there will be people for whom that is perfect, that is exactly what they need. But if it is not renewing itself, we have to notice that it's not working in this moment, in this culture, in this demographic.
	What is the need in this moment? We came together because we needed a place where we didn't have to have a creed. We could still be meaningful people with connection, do good in the world without being told what we had to believe.
	It was a brave move. What's the brave move now? ... We have to figure out how do we be relevant.
	And that means going out there, not going out there to lasso humans and pull them into church, but going out there to find out what is the need in our community, which is different in every community. What do people need? What can we offer? Sometimes, especially if you're an aging congregation, but you own a building, what you have is space.



	<p>You have real estate. If your building is filled with small organizations that can't afford an office and community groups that are having vital meetings about the pressing needs, the climate, the queer justice, how are we protecting our trans people, health care being demolished? If those conversations are happening in our building, does it matter if we organized it? Does it matter if it's labeled Unitarian Universalist?</p>
	<p>I don't think it does. So we want to be relevant in a way that is useful, but also within our ability and our capacity. Then we might, you know, when we talk about succession planning, we might be able to see, maybe this makes a better community hub than it does congregation, because this congregation is not renewing itself in a fashion that it will continue to exist, and we create something new in its space or allow something to be created in its space.</p>
Amber	<p>I can't help but see the connection between Anne's theory and your theatre metaphor. I would also connect it to the old growth metaphor from Casey in episode 2. I imagine how integral the nurse trees are to the UU ecosystem, you know the ones who have fallen but are fertilizing the new shoots? "What's the brave move now?" is a question that challenges us to be relevant and open to renewal <i>even</i> while acknowledging that some things might just crystalize.</p>
Erin	<p>There are examples of this happening already within UU spaces. Take the Unitarian Universalist fellowship of Ottawa - they are part owners of a strip mall. Here's Claire Heistek who, after speaking to me about the french speaking affinity group, shared her experience of her congregation buying a building.</p>
Claire	<p>It's a big complex, and our sanctuary used to be a Giant Tiger store! It still has the same windows.</p>
	<p>I resisted it personally because the buying a building, first of all, the responsibility of having a building and the maintenance. And I just didn't see it...then we were about 70.</p>
Erin	<p>It was the connection to a larger mission that helped the fellowship finally make the decision. You see, they are part owners of this building with an organization called Heartwood House, a non-profit organization based on the principle of "better together." Through this partnership, member organizations of Heartwood House have affordable access to their space during the week, when they would otherwise usually be empty. As part of their collaboration, they have an art gallery in their foyer, which is a joint project between Heartwood House and the UU fellowship called UniHeART Gallery.</p>
Amber	<p>So this is different than buying a building for the sake of having a space to meet. Being co-owners is making it possible for Heartwood House and its member organizations to have a place to meet also.</p>
Erin	<p>And the benefits of collaboration don't end there.</p>



	<p>We provided them with what they needed to start. And the relationship is very good. I mentioned that we use an owl (meeting system) for the hybrid services in French. Well it comes from Heartwood House and it's loaned to us free of charge. We also share our space. We have the only big space. They pay us a nominal fee for the cleaning and administration of the space. Some of us will support certain parts of the organization by being the facilitators during the use of the space.</p>
Amber	<p>It sounds like an intentional partnership that is serving the needs of both groups.</p>
Erin	<p>Claire credit's their success to the people involved.</p>
	<p>I must say that in all cases, in both the Fellowship and Hardwood House, the partnership depends strongly on the people.</p>
	<p>Even though we develop policies, we develop procedures, protocols, the good intention of the people that are at the decision making level and at the administrative level are extremely important. Right now it's working very well because of that.</p>
Amber	<p>This is an interesting innovation - co-ownership with another not-for-profit entity.</p>
Erin	<p>This group of older UU's are engaging in a partnership understanding that it doesn't solve their challenges of declining membership, but it does keep them relevant and engaged in the needs of their community in a real way. It's a "brave move."</p>
Claire	<p>Our demographic is on the upper end.</p>
	<p>We need to find more help but everybody is taxed by the amount of work and energy they need to expend in order to keep going. We have no solution for it. Thankfully we have enough people at the moment to keep the structure going and enough Francophile and francophones that are willing to share. We know that there might be an end.</p>
	<p>I can see that with all Unitarian activities, all church activities right now we need people and there's attrition through whatever reason. And you have to keep renewing.</p>
Erin	<p>Investing in this collective was a huge step toward renewal, even though they do not yet know how they will solve the challenge of declining membership. They've put themselves in a building that has a community focus because of the collaboration, and in a low income area that has the potential to have lots of diverse community building with the many immigrants who live there.</p>
Claire	<p>What you're trying to do is introduce yourself to groups that are not necessarily like you and you have to break that mold so that it is perceived that this is something that you might be interested in.</p>
Erin	<p>When I asked about collaborating with Young adults Claire was hesitant to even imagine what collaboration would be like, knowing the cultural differences...</p>
Claire	<p>They have to come on their own. It has to be perceived as something they want to do or need to do.</p>



Erin	And when I talked to the YA's leading Queer Connecting, they had something similar to say about older adults.
	They urge their elders to figure out exactly what they want <i>their</i> expressions to be like in the next 50 years by asking "what really wants to be saved?" and then putting the structures and people in place to do so, instead of simply "hoping that replacements will come."
Amber	"What really wants to be saved?" That feels like an important question to be asking ourselves. It really is like creating a living will. These words remind us that Young Adults will not be carrying on with UUism in the same way that their elders have, but there are aspects of it that they do want to carry forward. It's not up to Young Adults to decide what is being offered for the generation to use moving forward. What the elders feel is important is necessary <i>and</i> it needs to be an active process of critically examining if their desires meet the needs of UU's today.
Erin	And as congregations make decisions about what to do with their remaining wealth or resources, it's important to know that on a national level anyway, there are Young Adults ready to innovate. So, instead of allowing the remaining resources to deplete, it could be of greater value to consider making a conscious gift towards a specific UU initiative or project that has the potential to grow into a new expression of UUism in the world.
Amber	Seeding the next generation of UU's so to speak.
Erin	Exactly.
MUSIC	
Erin	One other thing that came up in these interviews is the fact that, more now than any time in recent history, people are showing a willingness to collaborate. And, they are coming with vulnerability to say, "We don't know what to do next. "
Amber	That is a really big deal considering for years congregations have prided themselves on their independence and freedom of expression, at times resisting opportunities to engage with other UU's in favour of a rugged individualism.
Erin	Well, not anymore. And I think that's a positive thing. Rev Anne and Rev Linda have been hosting a series of Congregational Conversations and this is what they had to say about them.
Anne	I'm really excited about these conversations. And ...I'm thrilled that we've had a good uptake like lots of people are signing up for them and coming for them and different people to different conversations. So that really feels bright and joyful to me. I think we're in a time when people are a little bit anxious because of all the challenging factors right now.



	<p>And what we're seeing is more willingness to work with one another or to learn from one another. And that's really exciting. So UU congregations can be kind of fierce independent identities, just like people can. And in this time when nobody's quite sure exactly what's going to happen next, people are talking to each other in a "What do you have to offer?"</p>
	<p>Or, you know what? This worked for us" kind of way. And you can see the lights come on in people's eyes when they feel like there's a connection and they're not alone in their struggles. And there's more ideas than just what's in their group.</p>
Linda	<p>I would add the exciting thing for me is that I and some lay leaders have been having conversations for quite a few years about, you know, maybe maybe you could actually collaborate beyond just share resources.</p>
	<p>There are things that you could do together: train leaders, hire staff, whatever. And there was always this resistance. They couldn't see their way to how that might work. And so it just got shut down. And I'm hearing increasingly here the focus is more on our smaller lay-led congregations. We can figure out a way to do that, and it would be beneficial.</p>
	<p>So that's really exciting. One of the things in my work for all the years that I've been doing it, it's like I hate it when I see people reinventing wheels and we don't need to do that. So there is, as Anne says, a greater willingness to have those conversations, and that's thrilling.</p>
Amber	<p>So from this place of willingness to collaborate and ask questions we seem to be entering into a new era of UUism. One that has many unknowns but also many potentials.</p>
Erin	<p>And from this place of openness we can ask ourselves a very important question "What are the needs?" I'd like to end with words of Rev Wendy Luella Perkins who, in her story telling, said it basically comes down to whether an idea creates goose pimples.</p>
Amber	<p>Goose pimples!?</p>
Erin	<p>Yes. She will explain it much better than I. Here she is.</p>
Wendy Luella	<p>I remember Larry Peers from the Unitarian Universalist Association was a mentor of mine and he worked for the UUA for a long time and I worked with him. And he always talked about, you know, what are the real needs you're meeting - asking yourself what the real needs of real people you're programming or whatever you're choosing to do or meeting.</p>
	<p>And you really try to articulate that really clearly, like what are the real needs? When I think of sort of singing what the real needs of these people are like, oh we were scared, oh, gathering community can make a bridge when we are in a state of fear because we know that we're not alone.</p>



	<p>We can see that other people also share some of those experiences. And sharing a shared humanity: people are fearful, people still have creative expression. They want to be able to create. Creativity is like a human. It's a driver of humanity to be creative and how we can be creative. So anyways, addressing all the real human needs are meeting and he would say, "It's responsive programming, if you cannot then generate a thing that excites you about responding to real people's needs, then it doesn't generate goose pimples."</p>
	<p>Even me describing it right now, I feel goose pimples because it's like this is for real people who are hungry for something. They're really hungry for genuine community, they're hungry for creative expression, they're hungry to remember what really is important to them. They're hungry to put priorities in their life, whatever, and then to say, "What I offer feeds that."</p>
	<p>And he would say, "If you can't generate the goose bumps, if you can't generate the emotional energy for that, then maybe your ladder is up the wrong building, or maybe it's not a ladder you need. Maybe it's something completely different. And I think that remembering that even in this conversation with you is like, yeah, it's really meeting people's genuine."</p>
	<p>It's not fulfilling a structure - because a lot of church, I have to say, you know, when you think about what church is in congregational life, it's building a pretty big structure that needs to be supported. Now, if you're able to meet people's real needs in maintaining the structure, good for you. That's hard to do. If I was in congregational life, I'd be asking that question: How is serving on a committee meeting people's real needs?</p>
	<p>And if you can make it work so that that's happening, that's great. But if it's not meeting their real genuine needs and fulfilling something deep inside of them, then it becomes obligation..."Oh my God, I have to do this. I guess I'm the only one that can do this." But it's not connecting to deep fulfillment or joy or meaning.</p>
	<p>And we're about meaning making. That's as a Unitarian Universalist congregations and most religious congregations are about making meaning. That's the line of thinking I'm thinking about there and then responding to real people who have real needs. And there's many different expressions to meet those needs, many different expressions. I'm sure as you're listening to the people's stories, that's the exciting part.</p>
Amber	<p>Rev Wendy Luella's words really raise the bar. I have to admit I have felt goosebumps during some moments of this series.</p>
Erin	<p>Yes, we now have an additional UU standard by which to measure everything by- the goose pimple or goose bump standards. I love that! Haha, Imagine what UUism would be like if everyone was engaged in an expression of UUism that made their heart sing <i>and</i> that met a real need in the world. That intersection of factors would be magnetizing. And thrilling to be a part of.</p>
Erin	<p>A lot to consider as we prepare for our final episode where we will see if we can pull all this together and explore some ideas of where we can go from here.</p>



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End of Episode 9 transcript
