

**South Nassau UU Congregation**  
**In the movie version**  
**A service by Laurie Stuart, October 26, 2014**  
**South Nassau UU Congregation, Freeport, NY**

**PRELUDE – *Theme from Back to the Future***

**CALL TO WORSHIP:**

As we enter into worship, we put away the pressure of the world  
that asks us to perform, to take up masks, to put on brave fronts.  
We silence the voices that ask us to be perfect.

For in this community of compassion and welcoming.  
There is nothing that we have to do to earn the love  
contained within these walls.

We do not have to be braver, smarter, stronger, better  
than we are in this moment  
to belong here.

We only have to bring the gift of our bodies,  
no matter how able;  
Our seeking minds,  
no matter how busy;  
our animal hearts,  
no matter how broken.

We bring all that we are, and all that we love, to this hour together.  
Let us be in worship together.

**CHALICE LIGHTING:**

The chalice lit amongst us is a beacon  
A beacon of hope, in a world in crisis  
A beacon of possibility, made manifest in community  
A beacon of warmth through our interconnections  
A beacon of light illuminating our shared wisdom  
A beacon of connection by our being together.

## **RELIGIOUS EDUCATION MOMENT:**

This morning we were going to hear a story by Avery Benson about a real life situation involving a middle school football team. Avery can't tell the story today, although he will tell it next month, because he himself is involved in a real-life story where he is practicing for a school performance. So I'm going to tell you a quick Halloween story to set you up for your Halloween Party in the RE Wing this morning.

There was once a Long Island family, who were getting ready to come to church on a Sunday morning, the Sunday morning before Halloween. While they were putting on their costumes for the annual Halloween Party, there was a knock on the door. When they opened the door, there stood an old woman, who had a pointy black hat, a full black gown, and pointy black boots. She leaned forward and said, "Do you want to know what I can do, with my long thin fingers and my red red ruby lips?"

Their mom spoke up, "No, no really we need to get to church and we're running a bit late, costumes and all. Thanks." And she closed the door.

The family went to church and had a great time at the Halloween Party and the At the Movies Sunday service. At dinner, they were talking about all the great themes that people had shared with each other about what their movie version of their congregation was and how much fun it was to be in the RE Wing with church friends at a Halloween celebration. They were interrupted by a knock on the door. And when they opened it, the old woman was there again. Dressed all in black, with a pointy hat and pointy shoes, she said: "Do you want to know what I can do with my long thin fingers and my red red ruby lips?"

"No thanks," they said. "We want to go back to our dinner and talk about what a great time we had today at church." They closed the door.

The week passed quickly, and soon it was Friday night, Halloween. They had a great time at school, with friends, and giving out candy to all the neighborhood kids who had come trick or treating. Late, the doorbell rang and the family opened the door one last time. There was the old woman, dressed all in black, with her pointy hat and pointy shoes. She looked tired. "Do you want to know, what I can do with my long thin fingers and my red red ruby lips?"

The family breathed a resigned sigh. "Sure," they told the woman. "What can you do with your long thin fingers and your red red ruby lips?"

The woman smiles a strange, rather satisfied smile. “I can do this,” she said.  
Bbbbbbbbbbbb.

*The old woman puts her fingers to her lips and makes a bubbling sound.*

I don't know about you – but the first time I heard this story, I thought something bad was going to happen. And I like the fact that something funny happens. That's the beauty of a story. That's the beauty of all our stories. We really don't how they are going to turn out. But what I think we all do know is that in our families and in our church community, when we all work together we can create a happy and joyous ending.

### **READING:**

Our reading today is the Bible story of Jonah offered in the idiom of a West African native. These stories were transcribed by Lorenz Graham, the son of an African Methodist Episcopal minister. This story is part of a book called “How God Fix Jonah,” and it is heralded as an important historical representation of the language and culture of Africa as well as an important interpretation of the Bible. I offer it today in solidarity and connection for the suffering of the West African people and the Ebola virus. (As an explanation: There is the use of the word palaver, which suggests trouble or troubling business. Another word is wa-wa, which connotes mischief or naughtiness. Lastly is the word savvy, which means to know.)

### **CHORAL ANTHEM: Sunrise, Sunset**

### **SERMON: In the Movie Version**

When my son Zachary was a little boy he would sometimes wonder about different things that happened to him. If he would fall down and hurt himself, or someone was mean to him in school, he would ask me why it was that these things always happened to him. I would tell him that he was the star of his own movie and that things always happen to the star and not the supporting actors.

Good movies, my now 31-year old film editor son tells me, have a beginning, middle and end. They start by setting up the characters, with particular flaws, explaining and illustrating how they lack in something. Then a problem gets introduced and there is a call to action. The character refuses the call. (You might see now why I choose the Jonah story). Then there is a second call to action and there is no choice but to respond and to start to solve the problem.

At first, the character thinks it's going to be easy, but that turns out to be false. Something happens that changes everything, and it gets really difficult. There is a dark night of the soul. Then, the character with their particular flaws, somehow learns how to use those flaws and finds a solution. They have learned what they needed to learn; they have transformed; the problem resolves.

That's the movie version. A person is called to do something, refuses to do it, is called again, and then in the darkest of despair or perhaps because of amazing hard work or better yet, good luck or friends along the way, they triumph – at least in the movie version.

And that is what we want to think about this morning. The movie version of South Nassau UU Congregation. I want to do this exercise as a way of opening our minds to a fantastic story. To think out of the box. To not only imagine a future but to construct a story about how we got there.

The reason we do this is not just that it's fun; it is a very serious step to informing and encouraging the future. It's a way to cast ourselves out, to break ourselves out of a mold. To be sequestered, almost, in the belly of a whale, so that we can fulfill our destiny. To intentionally create a fruitful moment, to expect, like a character in the movie, an epiphany.

So dream big, be expansive. Don't judge the story. Just write it down. We'll take about five minutes or so for you to imagine a movie version future and write down how that future came to be.

And when you're done, roll your sheet the long way and put it in the chalice. The chalice will be moved to the foyer after the service and over the weeks ahead we can enjoy reading everyone's version of this congregation, ten years in the future.

To set the stage: In our movie, the main central character is South Nassau UU Congregation. It has a beginning, 11 people gather in a home in Baldwin, Long Island in 1949. In that beginning, they develop a covenant to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another. They call a minister, two years later in 1951, the Reverend Lon Ray Call. Theirs is a vibrant congregation. They don't always dwell together in peace and sometimes love, or perhaps congregational harmony, is hard to find.

Still, the congregation flourishes. It ebbs and flows.

There is an influx after 9/11/2001 as families flock to its sanctuary, for its sanctuary. Thirteen years later, the founding members are aging and dying, the children of those new families have grown and, in 2014, the Board of Trustees makes the hard decision to pull in the financial reins. A long-time minister leaves, transitional ministry begins and the congregation digs in their heels and wholeheartedly, some would say strong heartedly, reinvents itself.

No one could have predicted, looking back at that time, now 10 years ago, that the congregation would be where it is today. Not only has the congregation found its mission, it's thriving beyond belief. Today, in 2024, the story of the South Nassau UU Congregation is transformational and how it got there was nothing short of an inspiration.

Here's where we are now, here's how it happened ...

*Selection of movie theme music to help people concentrate on writing their story.*

In my movie, South Nassau UU Congregation spends its first transitional year getting its house in order, rediscovering its vigor to look deeply at itself. The work of the small group interviews, and congregational conversations and activities bring the issues that no one wants to deal with or talk about, out into the open and the congregation examines them with joy and creativity. People feel safe and free to fully inhabit all sides of themselves, socially, politically, theologically. A strong diverse leadership blossoms. Differences are not just tolerated and accepted, they become the variety, the spice of the congregation, that is exciting to explore.

A congregational unity is reborn, not because everyone agrees but rather because everyone agrees that what the congregation has to give to the community is essential. They feel like they have been tapped on the shoulder, just as Jonah was tapped by God to bring the Word to Ninevah, a place of despair. A place that needed healing, a place that needed a saving message.

In my movie, our world needs the healing message and the loving support of Unitarian Universalism in the world. It needs the stable presence of people of faith who find the one thing that they uniquely can do to help bring some measure of harmony and peace, equity and balance to a divided and aching world.

In my movie, the South Nassau UU Congregation is one of over 1000 Unitarian Universalist congregations that help bring about social transformation. South

Nassau UU Congregation opens its doors and fulfils its destiny to be a sanctuary of beauty and harmony, a celebration of arts and spirituality that affirms children and youth, welcomes people of all ages, races and orientations, and is a beacon of transformative action in our communities, living in balance with our ecological home.

Its future, its present and its past rest securely in the members of the congregation, who are joyful and thriving, in the face of whatever comes their way.

But like the stars in the movie, like the reluctant prophet Jonah, they know that life is not a movie. There's not a clear cut beginning, middle and end. There are defining moments – clear choices that we make to embrace our path.

May we continue to be willing to show up. May we continue to face the world, and our path through it, with creative imaginings, a playful spirit, a curiosity to treasure the diversity of our companions, and an acceptance of our own individual particularities. Let us always remember that with good intentions, hard work, and by seeking love through truth, we will feel empowered to grow spiritually and emotionally, and embrace a vibrant, essential and mission-filled version of South Nassau UU Congregation in the days to come.

May it be so.

**CLOSING HYMN: #128 For All That Is our Lives**

**CLOSING WORDS: Where Does the Dance Begin, Where Does It End?**

Don't call this world adorable, or useful, that's not it.  
It's frisky, and a theater for more than fair winds.  
The eyelash of lightning is neither good nor evil.  
The struck tree burns like a pillar of gold.

But the blue rain sinks, straight to the white  
feet of the trees  
whose mouths open.  
Doesn't the wind, turning in circles, invent the dance?  
Haven't the flowers moved, slowly, across Asia, then Europe,  
until at last, now, they shine  
in your own yard?

Don't call this world an explanation, or even an education.

When the Sufi poet whirled, was he looking  
outward, to the mountains so solidly there  
in a white-capped ring, or was he looking

to the center of everything: the seed, the egg, the idea  
that was also there,  
beautiful as a thumb  
curved and touching the finger, tenderly,  
little love-ring,

as he whirled,  
oh jug of breath,  
in the garden of dust?

By Mary Oliver-from Why I Wake Early (2004)

### **BENEDICTION AND EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE**

May we be:

A beacon of hope, in a world in crisis  
A beacon of possibility, made manifest in community  
A beacon of warmth through our interconnections  
A beacon of light illuminating our shared wisdom  
A beacon of connection by our being together.

Until we are together again.

### **RECESSIONAL MUSIC: Theme from Rocky**