

Stone Soup

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

Rev. Rodrigo Emilio Solano-Quesnel

11 June, 2023



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In September of 2021, when we celebrated our building's 140th anniversary, I drew attention to our corner stone, dated 1881. I called that sermon *Upon this Stone*, recalling the biblical story that lays out the foundation of churches, which invokes both the physical properties – a stone, or a building – as well as the personal embodiment of the people of a church community. The stone in the story is, of course, Peter, which can be translated as “Rocky” – the nickname for Simon, one of the legendary leaders of the early church.

As we celebrated our building, and the stones that it is built upon, we considered the value of a physical place like the one in which we often gather, in offering a home for our community. And we explored the... complexity of coexisting realities, as we saw that we had options for gathering, including virtual and online options – which offered their own set of advantages... and drawbacks.

We acknowledged a newer understanding that it is... possible for a church to survive without a building – we were witness to that for well over year (and on-and-off since then). We also recognized that a physical gathering space goes beyond the ability to survive, rather offering tools to thrive, by inviting deeper connections, and sharing interpersonal warmth, in a way that is much more challenging through telecommunications alone. The literal stones upon which I often speak, can add... something special.

Something special is the role of the stone in the story of Stone Soup, in which a clever character begins cooking soup with nothing more than a pot, water, and a stone, eventually inspiring a community of limited

means to pool their resources, by suggesting this “magical” soup would taste better with a few vegetable “garnishes” and the odd savoury additions, begetting a hearty meal that nourishes everyone.

As it turns out, the stone is not strictly *necessary* for the eventual soup to exist – all the other ingredients are already there, somewhere – but sometimes, a stone is *essential* for all of it to incorporate into something that feeds a community. It became a good excuse to come together.

I often speak of church, and church time, as a good excuse to get together. This space, and the spaces that come from it in other forms, can draw on the magic that is already there, somewhere, to truly become miraculous.

And that is the other lesson in the story of Stone Soup, the integral value of the people, who come together, and make something greater than they could on their own – to serve one another.

Today, we make another space to recognize those magic ingredients that come together. We’ve been witness to them right here, be it sitting in the pews, watching or listening from home, or reading online or on paper.

This very building, came up and stays up, because of the magic of volunteers who look after it, offering time, physical effort, sometimes money, often... enduring headaches, to maintain this a place where we have the option of gathering. Without them, there is no pot.

The major decisions that allow our community to function, act in good faith and follow best practices, are made real by the work of volunteer directors on the Board, and by subsequent follow-ups in the Governance Documents Committee, and the Finance Committee. These may not always sound like the most glamorous titles, but they are necessary and essential. Without them, the pot tips and holds no water.

The music that we hear every Sunday is only a reality by the devotion of lay talents that folks share with us, who put themselves in the vulnerable and venerable position to perform for us and with us. Without them, the fire fails to catch.

The opportunity to gather or receive a Sunday service, and receive perspectives and inspiration from professional, lay, and guest speakers only comes about through the work of the Sunday Services Committee, who make preparations and facilitate services, and the Techs who enable that connection, in real time. That includes lay folks who participate in each service, often literally lighting the fire.

The possibility of learning about, and doing something about, the issues that affect our wider communities opens up through the spaces made and identified by the Social Responsibility Committee, where we can seek ways to work collectively and individually in the service of humanity. To find what is in the pantry that we haven't thought about offering to serve each other.

The opportunities to learn more about our spirituality and deepen it, outside of Sunday or pulpit time, come from leadership and participants in our Lifespan Learning Team. A seasoning that adds that special flavour.

The food and refreshments that we enjoy after a service, sometimes modest, sometimes more substantial, and the housekeeping that goes on around that, only happens because of the members who are committed to hospitality. Stirring the pot, and often washing it afterwards.

The stories that come from this exalted excuse to get together are often still told because we can peruse them in our records, as curated and preserved by our Archives Team. Through them, we can hear the story of this stone soup, retold across the ages.

One of the greatest hazards in naming specific contributions is that inevitably, someone is left out in the naming. This is not because their

contribution isn't significant (often, it's quite the contrary), but because of the nature of the task, or through fallible memory, the contribution remains invisible, at least sometimes. The contributions that are sometimes invisible are also part of our community. They are the anonymous carrots and turnips, that make the soup substantial, but whose source is not always clear or immediately easy to acknowledge.

Some of you will hear, or see, or remember yourselves in fulfilling those holy tasks, if not today, perhaps in days gone before – or can imagine yourself doing so in days to come. Some of you make those holy tasks possible by contributing financially, so that the decisions and duties may be made – with concrete outcomes. Some of you, offer encouragement and gratitude, thanking folks for a job well done – or simply for taking on the job and doing it to the best of your abilities.

This morning, and into the afternoon, many of us were able to further benefit from – and *celebrate* – the contributions of our many volunteers, by sharing in a feast that was, fittingly, made possible by our volunteers – past and present. There are many people who made decisions, preparations, purchases, set-up, and service of the food we received at our annual church picnic.

And even now, we benefit from past volunteers from the former Women's Association, who set up the Legacy Fund that financed this picnic.

My friends, you too are contributors, even if you were not directly involved in the planning. Be it through donations that keep the fund afloat, or by having brought your own containers or utensils, making the workload on our volunteers lighter, you are collaborating with our volunteers.

And, my friends, by showing up, as you are able, to this and other times when we have offered an excuse to get together, you invite another

opportunity to serve, be served, and offer gratitude for making this community happen.

My friends, let us be grateful, for our mutual service to each other.

So may it be,
In the spirit of gratitude,
Amen

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Suggested Hymns:

Opening Hymn #288 All Are Architects

~)-| Words: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1807-1882

~)-| Music: Thomas Benjamin, 1940- , © 1992 Unitarian Universalist Association
WOODLAND

Hymn #128 For All That Is Our Life

~)-| Words: Bruce Findlow, 1922-

Music: Patrick L. Rickey, 1964- , © 1992 Unitarian Universalist Association
SHERMAN ISLAND

Closing Hymn #1010 We Give Thanks

~)-| Words & Music: Wendy Luella Perkins, 1966- © 2004 Wendy Luella Perkins
arr. Susan Peck, 1960-