

# the steeple

*The Congregational Newsletter of the First Unitarian Universalist Society of Burlington*  
October 2023

## *From Our Senior Minister*

### **What is the Central Task for Humanity at This Moment in History?**

*By Rev. Karen G. Johnston, Senior Minister*



We exist at a precious and precarious time. A tender time of transition – and I do not mean ministerial transition.

I mean, the impact of addiction, mental distress, and insufficient housing in Burlington. I mean, the diminishing landscape of religious life in the United States. I mean, the impact of the climate crisis on all life on the planet and our own varying ways of integrating this (or not) into our daily lives. I mean, the ever-rising presence of fascism in the world and in this nation, at times far too close to home. All of which I consider to be signs and symptoms of late-stage capitalism, the drive for ever-increasing profit, and an ethos of extractivism.

That's unnerving. It can be overwhelming. It's exhausting. It can tempt us into enclaves of smaller and smaller affiliation. It can also be exciting. It can be clarifying. It can be energizing. It can be purpose-defining.

And the way, I believe, to spend more time in this latter experience, is through the intentional, sometimes awkward, often inconvenient cultivation of community. And not just community for the sake of its extant members, but community that serves a greater purpose besides perpetuating its own existence or serving its own needs.

Rev. Peggy Clarke, the Senior Minister at Community Church NYC,

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*Image credit: Charlie Rathbone*

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writes a substack (basically a blog) and creates a podcast. Until a month ago, it was called [Hope & Heresy: Life on the Religious Left](#). (It is now called Disrupt Church.) Last year, its fifth season, this podcast interviewed a wide range of “UU luminaries” and asked them all the same question: What is the Central Task for Humanity at This Moment in History?

It’s a BIG question. The responses are thought-provoking on many levels and worthy of reflection, conversation, and exploration. I loved the responses from Carey MacDonald, the Vice President of the UUA, in [episode six](#). He first offered an answer on the pragmatic side: “a cheap, easily-accessible, environmentally-sustainable battery” for all. Then he offered an answer that was far more imaginative, yet resonated for me as more real: “a way to pause trauma cycles long enough for us to address what is happening right in front of us.”

Let’s take a page from this playbook:

**What is the Central Task for FUUSB at This Moment in History?**

In my years as a UU (nearly 30) and in my years as a minister (about a decade), I have come to believe that every UU congregation must actively engage in a conversation about how to stay relevant. I have come to understand that all congregations must prioritize whether their dedication is to model (sustaining the familiar model of church, no matter what) or to mission (knowing and following our deeper purpose, even if it means letting go of the familiar). I feel far too new at FUUSB to be able to fully answer that question for this congregation. Yet, some

thoughts are beginning to take shape. The more time I spend as your Minister, the clearer my answers will become. While I anticipate that there will be many sermons in our future that touch on this topic, the first one will be on November 5.

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*“Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once, but of stretching out to mend the part of the world that is within our reach. Any small, calm thing that one soul can do to help another soul, to assist some portion of this poor suffering world, will help immensely. It is not given to us to know which acts or by whom, will cause the critical mass to tip toward an enduring good. What is needed for dramatic change is an accumulation of acts, adding, adding to, adding more, continuing.” (Clarissa Pinkola Estes)*

This question is not just for me. It is for all of us to wrestle with. It is for all of us to begin to articulate responses, then live into them, try them on, tweak them, following a path of emergence as we do. Yes, it can be a formidable question and a daunting process. And it can also be one that opens new possibilities.

I am blessed to be on this journey with you.

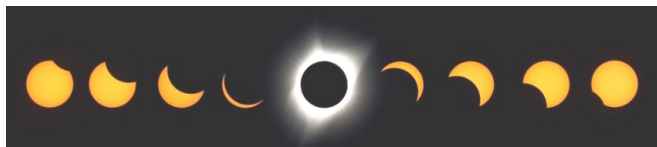
~ KRev (Rev. Karen)



(left-right) Rev. Karen G. Johnston, Gene Bergman, Zoe Hart, Peggy Owen Sands; Vermont Interfaith Action annual convention, September 2023. Image credit: Zoe Hart

## The Eclipse of the Sun Is Coming!

By Nina Harrington, Mark Kuprych, Susan Ogden, & Courtney Power-Freeman



*Monday, April 8, 2024 at 2:14 PM EDT,  
a partial solar eclipse begins.*

*At 3:36 PM a total eclipse will darken  
Vermont's daytime sky for 3 minutes.*

In April 2024, many thousands of people from around the world are expected to gather in Burlington for this Celestial Event, connecting us with early humans who must have been awestruck by an eclipse and wondered about its meaning.

And they did not have access to special safety glasses. But we will!

Our UU Meeting House in Burlington will be uniquely located to create an event for the Burlington community, as well as scientists, astrological enthusiasts and other visitors who want to come to Vermont for the 3 minutes of solar excitement known as totality.

At FUUSB, we are planning a fundraiser around this cosmic event and we need your help. The primary fundraiser will be offering homestays (we hope 30 or more households will participate) where UU members can donate a room, suite, or area in their homes for out-of-town guests. Homestays would be from 1 to 3 nights around the time of the eclipse (April 6-9) with all proceeds going to FUUSB.

**Will you host an eclipse-enthusiast during this time?**

We will be developing a database of available

homestays. These will be listed on an online site for potential guests to view descriptions and images of donated homestay spaces, make reservations and pay for their stay. As a homestay host, you won't have to deal with money. FUUSB will take care of all that!

We plan to advertise the opportunity as widely as possible, using networks of FUUSB folx, UU contexts, and placing announcements/advertisements in public forums such as Front Porch, Burlington Facebook, Seven Days, Vermont Digger, national outlets and more.

Please contact Mark Kuprych, (802) 999-1738, or [Eclipse@uusociety.org](mailto:Eclipse@uusociety.org) for more information.

Let's rock the 2024 Eclipse!



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### **HOMESTAYS: WHAT WE ARE LOOKING FOR**

Homestay hosts come in all shapes & sizes. Maybe you have a guest bedroom. Maybe you have an in-law apartment. Maybe you have a second place in the area to offer. We are looking for:

- Households with a clean, uncluttered guest space, where someone could comfortably stay, ideally with access to privacy (think: a room with a door that closes rather than a couch-surfing situation)
- Willingness to share bathroom (toilet, shower) facilities or dedicate a bathroom for the guest's use during their stay
- Provide access to a breakfast meal (but not other meals)

Eclipse homestay hosts are not expected to

- Create description of homestay by yourself - we can help you create the perfect description
- Be an expert (or even knowledgeable) about the eclipse
- Provide meals other than breakfast
- Entertain or occupy their guests (unless you want to)
- Be involved in the transaction of money

### **WHAT DO WE NEED FROM YOU NOW?**

**There will be a form to complete, coming soon.** Please fill out the form to let us know more about the space you are offering, including photos which will be uploaded to our online site so potential guests can gain an understanding of what they are paying for. We will not be revealing specific addresses online; yet we will want to share generalities of the location of the homestay (town if outside of Burlington; neighborhood, if in). The sooner we can gather this information, the sooner we can begin to advertise this opportunity.

We will accept offers to be a homestay through February 28 but if you can complete the form by November 1, the sooner we can begin the next phase of this project: getting the word out.

**We could use some more folks on the Eclipse Homestay Team.** Want to help us make this opportunity a reality?

Please reach out to Mark Kuprych, (802) 999-1738, or [Eclipse@uusociety.org](mailto:Eclipse@uusociety.org) to join our team, or if you are considering donating a homestay and have questions.



## Striving for Balance: Hospitality & Safety on Our Beloved Grounds

By Kathy Stamper, Board Member

The beloved green space on which our meeting house sits once belonged to the Abenaki (*pronounced ah-BEN-ah-kee*) people. It is ours to borrow, to nurture, to protect, and to share with our community. As we strive to be a welcoming and supportive community resource, it is important to consider the safety and emotional well-being of all who use this space, including our dedicated staff, members, tenants, neighbors and guests.

Several FUUSB board members walked our property with Blake, our new Facilities Manager, on a hot July afternoon. Blake is a skilled and caring individual committed to tending to the maintenance and preservation needs of our meeting house and its grounds. Stories emerged of Blake and other staff encountering used syringes and other human refuse from guests on our property who experience substance use disorder, mental health challenges and/or homelessness. Our staff, Narcan in hand, are frequently put in the uncomfortable position of having to ask individuals actively using drugs on our property to leave.

From our staff: *"... 7:45 a.m. this morning moving eight folks doing heroin and packing up from sleeping on the porch at 30 Elmwood last night. Thankfully, the last guy walked off just before the tenants arrived."*

Impacts on our beloved grounds include property damage (e.g., external electrical outlet broken into, forced entry, trash, human waste, etc.) and injury (e.g., a property guest's dog attacked one of our parking tenants, tearing their pants). Additionally, bushes have been cut down and more signage has been added to discourage drug use and weapons. Staff are managing these stressful and potentially

traumatizing dynamics amid already very full job descriptions.

FUUSB owns several adjacent properties and rents out its parking spaces during the week. Blake is frequently contacted by these tenants to listen to safety concerns and/or be asked to "pick up a needle" left on a porch. Some tenants have hinted they may vacate, risking valuable funding streams for the FUUSB. The picnic table under the trees was removed after Clarke Street neighbors complained of loud, late-night gatherings that disturbed their sleep.

The FUUSB is well-positioned to embrace radical hospitality in this time of so much societal vulnerability: Our meeting house rests between the Howard Center's safe and free needle exchange site on Clarke Street and the much-needed Elmwood Emergency Shelter Community. We are a green oasis in the middle.

How do we balance hospitality with safety? One board member said it well: *"It's important to create a space where ALL feel welcome and safe."* How might we do this? We encourage folks to visit and use the FUUSB green space not only on Sundays, but during the week. You can bring folding chairs and meet a friend for lunch or a take-out cup of coffee. If you wish, you can also check in with Blake to learn how to safely collect drug paraphernalia, to help to keep the space safe. When you're there, interacting positively with other guests on the property becomes an extension of our beloved community.

*The FUUSB Board may be contacted at [Board@uusociety.org](mailto:Board@uusociety.org).*

## Love at the Center: A Faith Development Offering on the Changes to the UU Principles

*By Rev. Karen G. Johnston & Sarah Russell*

This is a year in which we as a faith movement and we as a congregation have the opportunity to discuss and discern who we are and how best to communicate that to ourselves, one another, and the world. Unitarian Universalism is in the midst of a significant change that comes about every 15 years or so: shifting language around our Principles and Sources towards Values and Inspirations, deepening our covenant with one another and clarifying just what our shared values are. This has been a multi-year process, with a two-year voting for approval process that began at General Assembly in June 2023 and will end at General Assembly in June 2024 – either with affirmation of the shift away from Principles to Values, or a vote to stop this change altogether.

We are offering a 4-session Adult Faith Development curriculum series, developed by [UU Wellspring](#) to help us explore and learn about this topic, which is often referred to as the Article II changes. This is a follow-up to the sermon Rev. Karen gave on August 20. You can [view that sermon here](#). Or [read the text here](#).

Wednesdays, 4:30-6:30 p.m.,  
every other week for 4 sessions:  
January 17 & 31 and February 14 & 28

In-person at the Meeting House

This series will be facilitated by Sarah Russell  
& Rev. Karen.

Pre-registration required – Please sign up if you can commit to attend at least 3 of the 4 sessions – [Sign up through Realm at this link](#).

Space is limited; additional series will be added if there is interest, including one series facilitated online.

A special invitation: to those who do not know much about the changes, or feel that you do not support them, we hope you will sign up for this class. We would like to prioritize your involvement in these classes, while welcoming anyone who wants to participate.



Sunday, October 1, 2023: Child Dedication Ceremony (top);  
Sukkot Presentation with Rabbi Jan Salzman. Image credits: Erika Reif



The Immigration Justice Team (IJT) are FUUSB members and friends who believe that immigrants leave their homes, families, and loved ones only because their situation at home is so dire that they see no alternative. We facilitate action on the local, national, and international levels on behalf of people facing immigration challenges.

Whether fleeing political persecution, violent crime, failed crops, or economic instability, immigrants often make dangerous journeys to start a new life. Many recent immigrants to the United States are seeking asylum, the internationally-recognized right of individuals to seek protection in a new country due to fear of political or other persecution in their home country.

The IJT works in conjunction with local organizations providing direct assistance to recent immigrants who have settled in Vermont, and advocates on behalf of individuals seeking to make the U.S. their home. Those organizations include Chittenden Asylum Seekers Assistance Network, which provides housing, food, clothing, transportation, and a welcoming presence to families settling in our area while their asylum applications are processed, and U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants-Vermont, which provides mentors, transportation, language and job search skills, and assistance with setting up new homes. We have also spread the word about actions of Migrant Justice, a Vermont-based organization advocating on behalf of migrant farm workers. We support their Milk with Dignity campaign, which seeks basic human rights and labor protections for dairy

workers in our communities.

Since we were founded in 2019, the Immigration Justice Team has provided opportunities for our congregation to write on behalf of several individuals held in deplorable conditions at Immigration and Customs Enforcement's detention centers. In one case we wrote letters of support to the detainee, and in another case we collected funds to support the detainee's pro bono attorney. Fortunately, those we have supported have mostly beaten the very unfavorable odds and have gained freedom and some ability to remain in the country. We also collected funds to assist a Syrian Kurdish family to escape to France, and have written on behalf of individuals detained in other countries.

We continue to advocate on behalf of immigrants and asylum seekers, including young people who signed up for the DACA program, and Afghan refugees, among others. If you would like to hear more about our advocacy, please join us on the third Monday of each month from 5-6 p.m. on Zoom. You may contact the IJT at [immigrationjustice@uusociety.org](mailto:immigrationjustice@uusociety.org) or on Realm.



*Sunday Morning Breakfast Crew, August 2023.  
Image credit: Sarah Rosedahl*

## Invitation from the Climate Justice Team

By Caitlin Waddick

Climate actions should happen at the individual level, for sure, but we also want to affect the policies and practices of our congregation, our city, our state, and beyond! I am preparing to attend the United Nations Climate Summit (COP28) next month. When I have attended previous summits, I often met up with other UUs there, some of whom represent the [Unitarian Universalist Association Office at the United Nations](#) (UU@UN). Did you know that the UUs have a UN office and participate in international climate justice?! Pretty cool!

I love feeling connected at many levels of action, yet the most important work is always the work that we do, right here, where we live. “Think globally, act locally.” We are the ones!!!

Please look to the eNews blasts and Realm to hear more about the Climate Justice Team. We are working with 350VT to educate the congregation about the proposed expansion of the McNeil Generating Station in Burlington. We believe the expansion would harm our health, economy, climate, and forests. Learn more in [this document produced by 350VT](#). We will have a specific ask for you soon. We are also following the state-level action to tighten the Renewable Energy Standard and will bring up other issues affecting our communities throughout the year.

At our most recent meeting, we adopted a shared leadership model in which members of the team will rotate roles using a standard agenda format and “living meeting minutes.”

(The Racial Justice Team uses this model!) I will facilitate the meetings through the end of this year, then someone else will rotate into the role of facilitator. We will also rotate roles for notetaker, communication, and guardian (aka vibes-checker).

If you are seeking a way to act, join FUUSB’s Climate Justice Team to discuss potential projects through our connections within our Society, our community, UUA, and partner organizations, such as 350VT and Vermont Interfaith Power and Light. Also, you may wish to join the newsletter of the UU Ministry for the Earth for support and connection to climate justice practices in our faith at [uumfe.org](#).

The Climate Justice Team will meet in person (likely with a hybrid option) on October 29, at FUUSB after the service, 11:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m. Send optional RSVPs, or to be added to the email group, [contact Caitlin here](#). Also, for more ways to engage racial, immigration, or climate justice through our congregation, check out our webpages: [uusociety.org/justice-and-outreach](#).



Pride Fence Weaving, September 2023.  
Image credit: Peggy Owen Sands



## The Climate Justice Team Garden

*By Mary Andrews, Climate Justice Team*

Have you noticed the garden inside our semi-circle driveway? If you've looked closely, you have probably seen many different insects on the flowers, from larger butterflies, moths, and bumblebees to many types of tiny native bees, wasps, and flies.

You may recall that in the spring of 2022, the Climate Justice Team established these native plantings in the hope of attracting these native pollinators and the species that feed on them. The garden has taken off and the insects have begun to arrive.



The native plants that are thriving here were chosen as varieties that do well in the sandy, sunny conditions of this particular spot. They include Ironweed, Boneset, Blazing star, New England aster, and Mistflower. These species evolved with the other native plants, fungi, insects, and wildlife of our area in a complex, interdependent web. We plant them here to sup-

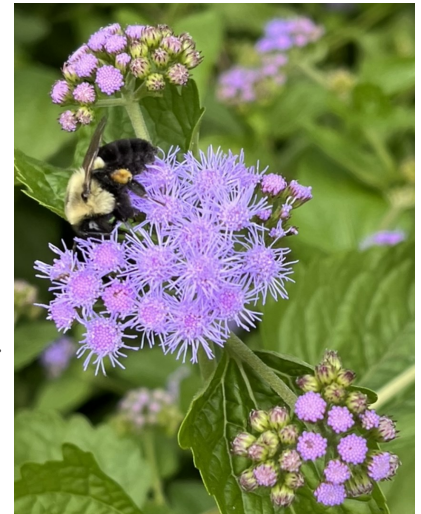
port our native food web, from the vital soil microorganisms to the birds, opossum, and fox that share our neighborhoods.

These plants send their roots deep into the soil—much deeper than lawn grasses. If planted in a suitable spot, they do not require watering once they are established. Nor do they require fertilizers, which can wash off of our lawns and gardens and cause algae blooms and overgrowth of aquatic plants in our waterways.

To help support this native ecosystem throughout its lifecycle, we:

- Leave the leaves - because many insects, including some of our favorite butterfly species, as well as other tiny creatures, spend the winter in fallen leaves collecting on the ground;
- Leave dried flower heads - because many birds seek out these seeds as a vital food source in late fall and into winter;
- Leave flower stems and stalks - because many native bees make their winter nests in hollow flower stems and stalks of various heights and diameters.

While these plants have been spreading out and self-seeding beyond the original plan, we hope the exuberance of this garden inspires you. It can be peaceful and calming to pause and watch the tiny native wasps and bees at work. Do stop by!



*Image credits: Mary Andrews*

## *From the Radical Welcoming Team* **Centering Gifts of the Spruce Up Team**

*Nancy Hellen & Peggy Owen Sands*

Our congregation owes much gratitude to the Spruce Up Team and all those who supported this team!

The gifts are many and diverse when considering the contributions each member brought to this collaborative workgroup. This past spring, the Spruce Up Team members Mary Gade, Sarah Forbes, Ann Kalinoski, Suzanne Stimik, Peggy Derby, and Linda Graves assessed and sought input, planned and started a “sprucing up” of the interior of our Meeting House.

Christina Fulton, with her gift of envisioning a way forward and a long wish-list, sparked the work by asking Sarah and Mary to head up the project. They pulled together a team to create solutions emphasizing intentional welcoming and uplifting our values.

Upon reflecting on the process, Mary Gade writes, “Sarah skillfully, artfully, and sensitively organized and guided this endeavor...” Mary, as archivist, brought her gift of a historical perspective. She shared, “When doing research for the booklet about the Old Brick Meeting House on its Bicentennial in 2016, I was reminded how often and why our Meeting House has been remodeled, added to, and redecorated over two centuries. The alterations reflected the changing size and needs of the congregation, the activities held in it, and fashion. And most were instigated by the women of the congregation from the day it was built. The last major alterations occurred in 1993 with an addition to the north end of the Meeting House, the installation of an elevator, and other renovations throughout the building.”



Sarah Forbes shared that Ann Kalinoski, as a representative of the Women's Alliance, was a very important person to include on the team since the Women's Alliance has a long-standing history of caring for the Parlors and Sanctuary.

Suzanne Stimik brought her creativity and sense of space as an interior decorator and a colorist. Peggy Derby's connection to flowers and special events and Linda Graves' wonderful aesthetic sense were also essential additions to the team. Each sharing their individual gifts helped the team weave together choices of paint colors, design and placement of banners, and visual layout of the foyers.

The Spruce Up team began by speaking to many representatives of committees to gather key hopes and create a vision. Next they reviewed all the spaces in the building, thought creatively about usage, needs, aesthetics and keeping the Society's values and goals up front to figure out creative enhancements. A master list of projects was made and work started with the vestibules because they are the “welcoming” spaces that visitors experience first. We’re in good hands for future “Spruce Up” projects!



## ***Service of Loss & Remembrance***

An annual service to mark moments of loss  
in our lives

**Wednesday, November 1, 2023, 7 pm**

With poetry, song, stillness, & ritual  
gathering in-person and via Zoom  
at [bit.ly/3Qa5U1Q](https://bit.ly/3Qa5U1Q)

Open to the community

Led by Rev. Karen G. Johnston & worship team,  
including the FUUSB Choir led by  
Director of Music, James Stewart

**Come find solace:**

If you have experienced loss this year:  
the death of a loved one;  
a change that brought more absence than joy;  
grief that continues to be your companion;  
a painful shift in how you understand  
the nature of god or the Universe

*All who welcome are welcome here*



**Save the Date!**

**Mark Your Calendar!**

**Plan to be in Burlington!**

**Saturday, May 4, 2024**

in the afternoon

***Installation of the 16th Settled Minister***  
*First Unitarian Universalist Society Burlington*

***Reverend Karen G. Johnston***

A celebration of our shared ministry

~ A storied history ~

~ A new era ~

~ Emerging possibilities ~



*Outdoor Worship Service, August 20, 2023. Image credit: Erika Reif*