

**“We Are the Flame”**  
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The chalice is the world, the galaxy, the universe - our base  
 We are the flame -  
 our hopes, our fears, our aspirations, failures, and successes  
 are all the light and warmth and color that is life.

-Evelyn Christensen

In 1989, long time member, Evelyn Christensen wrote these words for the woven chalice she was commissioned by First Church to create in order to celebrate the 100th anniversary of our original building structure (mostly this sanctuary) on Linton Street. The chalice has hung in the foyer for the last sixteen years, but since our foyer is about to be gutted, then re-created, I asked to have Evelyn's chalice moved into the sanctuary for the duration of renovation. Here it will bear witness to our past, our present, and most importantly, our hopes for the future, and all of the many good people who have created this congregation along the way.

I heard a rumor that at a recent First Church dinner party the gathered guests were wondering if our upcoming renovation would give us an enlarged lobby and nothing else. Just a bigger room to wander around for \$750,000. This made my laugh. I'm sure many of you have wondered the same thing, or some other thing. Why are we doing this again? Can we afford this? All of the big questions, that we cannot completely answer at the moment. That no one could answer.

Founded in 1830, this is First Church's third building in the city. I am absolutely certain that one hundred twenty years ago our fore-bearers had the same type of conversations we are having today. Someone said, "We need to have a magnificent center piece window in the sanctuary. Perhaps a Tiffany." Someone else said, "You're crazy! We can't afford that! Are you a papist? This isn't Notre Dame Cathedral!" And yet look at the incredible legacy some uncertain, divided, probably financially stressed congregants left for us. And under this window, its sanctuary and vision, we have prospered. Last week I preached on the sweet life, embracing the unexpected moments of the present. What I didn't emphasize enough is that the sweet life is an active life, not a passive life. The sweet life requires action, risk, creation, motivation, some dreams and vision.

Recently two of our staff member recommended that I read the management book *Who Moved My Cheese* by Spencer Johnson. People either love or hate this book (my apologies to you if you hate it). I rather liked it. The premise of the book is that humans have a hard time embracing change, harder than creatures like mice, with less complex

brains, thoughts and emotions. In the book two mice named Sniff and Scurry, and two humans, named Hem and Haw go to the same cheese pile every day. When the cheese runs out the mice, attentive to its gradual decrease, immediately go back into the Maze. Hem and Haw, who like coming to Cheese Station C, who moved their houses near it, who like to show their cheese to friends, who ignored every sign of cheese change around them, stand around in betrayed disbelief saying priceless things like "What! No Cheese? No Cheese? No Cheese? Who moved my Cheese? It's not fair!"

The point of the story, as Haw is about to learn, is that nothing moves cheese; cheese just moves or molds, or somehow changes, and if we pay attention, we will see the handwriting on the wall. Life changes, cheese moves. This book can be applied to careers, relationships, dwindling checking accounts. How many times have you looked at a bank statement in angry disbelief? "Overdrawn! There must be some mistake!" This is a scenario that has occurred in my household. But when you think about it, there was the vacation, paying the plumber, the new rug. Money doesn't just disappear. We slowly overspend until we are overdrawn. Cheese moves, whether we pay attention to the changes or not. Haw goes out into the maze, but Hem refuses. He says, "I like it here. It is comfortable. It is what I know . . . I'm getting too old for that. And I'm afraid I'm not interested in getting lost and making a fool of myself. Are you?"

Well, are you? What if you build a big lobby, make a fool of yourself, and no one comes? What if you are getting old and the bank asks for 10 limited liability guarantors? (Which I have since learned, is asked of almost every congregation in Cincinnati) What if you get lost in the maze of construction? What if it is comfortable here and you don't want to go to St. John's for summer services beginning on June 19 because this is what you know?

We don't know if Hem every goes back into the maze, but we do know that his "old beliefs don't lead him to new cheese." We do know that "It is safer to search in the maze than remain in a cheese less situation." We do know that "imagining myself enjoying new cheese even before I find it, leads me to it." And, we are advised to "smell the cheese often so that [we] know when it is getting old."

If you haven't seen the handwriting on the wall, how do I break this to you? At First Church the people are vibrant, but the cheese is shrinking and moldy. We thrive not because of our building, but despite it. Our inaccessible restrooms, among other things, have left us in a mission-depleting situation. I prefer to imagine a \$750,000 lobby with an attractive, intentional space for membership, social justice, quiet coffee hour goers, folks in wheelchairs and with strollers, and an entrance that is obvious to visitors, rather than the old, disappearing cheese.

Truth be told, I moved my office upstairs last week and, to my delight, I discovered I don't really need an office the size of a living room. You, the members of this congregation can make better use of my former office space than I. I am happy to let go of my oversized, moldy cheese so that I can find new cheese (if not just get rid of books I don't need that were weighing me down). My friends, this summer we are about to take the plunge into the sweet life. With all our hopes, fears, aspirations, failures, and successes, this is the warmth and color that is life.

As your minister, I am so proud that you have found the sweet life right here at church, because when I came to First Church seven years ago I was very clear about one thing I never shared with you. First Church was at a crossroads about whether it was

going to live or die. The death would not have been imminent, rather a sort of many-decade dwindling, but I was not going to remain until the final doors were locked and shut. I couldn't tell if the members here had the energy and the vision to regenerate, to create something new. Sure the members were loyal, cautious, sincere, but, I say this with great love, you were also stuck, trapped by an old building that didn't meet your needs (rotary phone?) and blind to the shabby lady that was the building of First Church. This former, glorious building had become musty and worn-out through the years. Hearing this might be a shock for those of you who are new here (at least the part about the people - everyone has seen the peeling plaster by now). Today we are vibrant in people. But seven years ago First Church was at a crossroads in every way.

By 1997, the attendance at services had been dwindling for over a decade, before the contentious tenure of Reverend Peri Murdock, back into the tenure of the talented and well-loved Reverend Bob Clarke. In congregational management this is the first sign that a congregation's vitality is waning. The first stressors don't appear in finances or membership, but in diminished Sunday morning attendance as a proportion of membership. Since at least the late 1980's, and maybe earlier, the cheese has been dwindling. But then again, First Church has always been both surprisingly slow yet hardy. The Luttons will tell you that when they joined First Church in 1939, only fifty people came to Sunday morning services in this sanctuary. I have often wondered how First Church ever survived the Great Depression. But here we are.

Perhaps a secret to our survival lies in an interim report left to me by the Reverend Michael Boblett, the interim minister who preceded me here. He wrote

I exchanged packets with First Church in March of 1997. Their packet was beautifully assembled, the most professional I have seen as an Interim and better than many I've seen for settled Ministers [the same was true of the packet I received a year later]. This was a clue to something I have noticed repeatedly about First Church: When they choose to do something wholeheartedly, they do it superbly.

I remember learning upon my arrival that when the parking lot was put up for sale just a few years before I arrived, the members here raised over \$200,000 in less than four months in order to buy it. Wow. It seems to me that First Church struggles more with will than way. I have great faith in you folks. You always have way. When you choose to do something you do it wholeheartedly and superbly and you find a way. I've sometimes wondered if you like to hide your light under a bushel.

I am so proud of you now for finding the will to match your way. Will requires a vision, without certainty about outcome. At this point, for clarity, I need to remind you that I never suggested a mission statement, renovation, or a capital campaign. Simply put, these things were not my idea. Board President Roger Robinson is the first person I heard mention renovation. Then, Board President Carol Scott reclaimed our basement space for our own usage (it used to be rented to a day care and we couldn't use it - cheese had moved). Then we had beam damage above the sanctuary, which made us aware we were going to need over \$100,000 just to fix the beams and roof.

Then Jim Percival gave money to fix the senior high room. Then so many folks complained about the restrooms that the congregation realized we couldn't fix the roof

without creating accessible restrooms (which meant more money). Then our consultant, Jerry King said we needed a mission statement. I remind you of these things so that you remember, and please remember, I have walked with you and cheered you on the whole way. I have been a significant participant, but the ideas, even the idea for the ideas did not come from me. They came from you, the people of the will and the way.

Every Sunday morning we read our mission statement "Our urban Unitarian Universalist COMMUNITY celebrates and supports one another on our SPIRITUAL/ETHICAL PATHS. We work for JUSTICE, dignity and respect for the web of life." Our mission statement also has objectives like, "to explore weeknight activities that building community and facilitate committee work," "to renovate our building so that it enhances our worship and honors our history and welcomes all," and "to explore the responsibilities of being an urban church in the 21st century."

Our current building cannot support our mission or objectives. We need to renovate to make way for good new things (along with old good things like choir rehearsal and Thanksgiving dinners). And if we are going to be relevant in this world, then we are going to have to pay for that privilege. The world around us has moved in the last 116 years, and we can't accommodate wheelchairs, strollers, computers, air-conditioning, or multi-purpose meeting room space with what is currently here. Our fore-bearers, unable to imagine these things, still gave us the best of their vision.

We have a beautiful stone building designed by James McLaughlin with historic woodcarving. All of it on the national historic register. We have not one Tiffany window, but three. In their day our forbearers created a modern, inspiring, beautiful sanctuary to meet the needs of their mission. Now it is time for us to show some respect and proudly, with hope and courage, renovate that same building to meet our mission, honoring both past and present.

I learned a lot about building usage from our member, and the architect of the 1950's addition, Jim Alexander. A few years ago I asked Jim if it would upset him if we renovated or changed what he had lovingly created so long ago. He said, "Buildings are meant to serve people. They always have to change." He was not in the least offended that we were renovating, only interested in what we were creating. Here is a man who understands that cheese moves. Building serves people and mission, and they must evolve with the cheese. I was inspired that Jim was so interested. Rather than holding on to what was comfortable, what he created, he was interested in what could currently be created, what is vibrant and alive, what is evolving and relevant today. In this, Jim is living the sweet life.

Think bigger than a lobby, friends. There is so much potential here. *Who Moved My Cheese* asks, "What would you do if you weren't afraid?" Embracing the chaos of renovation is a journey of faith. Our emotional and intellectual approach to this journey is as important as the physical details. As Haw works his way through the maze we are told, "He was discovering what nourished his soul. He was letting go and trusting what lay ahead for him, even though he did not know exactly what it was . . . When you move beyond your fear you feel free."

Yes, our budget went up this year to cover our mortgage, and it will go up again one more time next year before we totally absorb the cost of the construction mortgage. Yes, the bank has asked us for 10 limited guarantors to cover the bank loan. Yes, we were not able to do all we wanted with this renovation, like air-condition the sanctuary,

update computer equipment, or fund new furnishings. And, we will have accessible restrooms (I hope you will be proud - I will). We will have an elevator. We will have space to meet after events and coffee hour. We will have modernized meeting space. I hope this means we will have more renters that help us enact our mission. We will have new paint and carpet. We will have an obvious entrance for visitors. Most of all, I hope all of this makes us more inspired, more visible, and spreads the good news about Unitarian Universalism in Greater Cincinnati.

If you really think this is just a glorified lobby, as your minister I am going to ask you what you are afraid of and what do you secretly hope for - they might even be the same thing. What could we be? How could we be motivated? How can we live our mission? How will we have learned to adapt to change? The purpose of this renovation is not to complete all renovation needs, which is impossible (remember the moving cheese?). The purpose of renovation is to learn how to renovate and update so that we can keep doing it, so that our building supports our mission rather than prevents it.

I hope we celebrate our renovation. I hope we embrace the newness, the familiarity, the adventure, the anticipation of what might be. I hope we rest. Then, I sincerely hope we look around and say, "You know, they keep moving the cheese. I wonder what we should do next?" Much will be done. Much will be left undone, and this is a good thing.

Before then, if you able-bodied, I hope that you will move one item, at least, from the first floor after service. We are clearing out everything on the first floor to make room for construction. I urge you to move one item, examine it, smell it to see if it seems old, and remember what this experience is like. It is a life lesson that all of us will face in multiple ways again and again. "The cheese moves." "Get ready for the cheese to move." "Smell it often." "The quicker you let go of old cheese, the sooner you find new cheese." There is always new, "renovated" cheese out there, whether in jobs, careers, relationships (especially healing relationships), love, homes, or health. May Evelyn's chalice watch over us as we embark on an adventure full of our hopes, our fears, our aspirations, our failures, and successes that create the color that is our life because we are the flame. Amen.