Story for All Ages: When I was about 11, I think, the high school in my home town was selling white mice as pets. My brother and I heard about that and thought that we’d love to have our own white mouse. (I never found out why the high school was selling mice, by the way.) Anyway, we asked our mother and dad if we could buy a mouse with our own money. Of course, we wanted to keep it in the house so it wouldn’t get too hot or too cold and so we could play with it.

I don’t think our parents liked the idea of a mouse in the house, whether it was a pet or not. They sat us down and we had a talk about responsibility. Can anyone tell me what “responsibility” means. That’s right, it’s taking care of something, isn’t it. Well, my dad and mother told us that if we were going to get a mouse and keep it in our home, my brother and I had to be responsible for it. That meant we had to check on the mouse to make sure it had enough water to drink. We had to make sure it had enough food to eat. We had to clean its cage. And we always had to make sure we put the top of its cage back on.

My brother and I promised we would be responsible. So my dad helped my brother and me build a wooden cage with a top we could take off. We got some wood chips for the bottom of the cage and a wheel for the mouse to run on. And we got him something he could drink and eat from. And then we went to the high school and bought our mouse. We thought our mouse was probably the smartest one. So we named him Einstein. We took him home and played with him and put him in his cage.
For several weeks, my brother and I were very responsible. We made sure Einstein had plenty of water and food every day. We cleaned his cage and we always put the top back on.

But then one day when it was my turn to take care of Einstein, I forgot to. Einstein wasn’t new anymore. I got kind of tired of cleaning his cage and even playing with him. It wasn’t as much fun. And I started not taking very good care of him. Some days I didn’t even check on him.

One day, I went by Einstein’s cage and he wasn’t running around on his wheel. He was lying down and didn’t seem to be feeling well. I called my dad to look at him and my dad thought Einstein was sick. I knew that I hadn’t been taking very good care of him. And I felt very bad. I told my dad that I thought it was my fault that Einstein had gotten sick.

My dad and I went to the kitchen and sat down. Then my dad said that sometimes animals just get sick, like we do. He told me that it might not be my fault. And later Einstein did get better.

But then Dad said that I could learn an important lesson from that experience. He told me that when we take responsibility for something, that’s like a promise to care about it. And if we care about something, we should take good care of it, like making sure it is OK. We should make sure it is OK even if we have to do that for a long time and even when it’s not very fun. What I’d like you to remember this morning is this: When we really care about other people, or a pet, or anything, we need to take care of them and make sure they are OK. Will you try to remember that? I’m glad that you were here this morning!
Reading: Hebrews 12:1 (New International Version (NIV))

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”

Responsive Reading: # 646, “The Larger Circle,” by Wendell Berry

“We clasp the hands of those that go before us,

And the hands of those who come after us.

We enter the little circle of each other’s arms

And the larger circle of lovers, whose hands are joined in a dance,

And the larger circle of all creatures,

Passing in and out of life, who move also in a dance.

To a music so subtle and vast that no ear hears it

Except in fragments.”

Sermon: One of the things the UU Ministers Association has asked the ministers to do this year is to think about the question, “Whose are we?” It is easier for me to think of that question as asking, “To whom do we belong?” Belonging is one of Abraham Maslow’s basic social needs. To flourish, every human being needs to belong to someone or something outside herself or himself. After our physiological needs, and our needs to be safe are met, we need to belong to others, to give and receive love and affection.

So to whom do we belong? As individuals, we may belong to significant others, spouses, families, friends, and voluntary associations. What does it mean to belong to someone? There’s a chorus from an old song, “Button Up Your Overcoat.” It was
written by the Tin Pan Alley songwriting team of Buddy DeSylva, Lew Brown, and Ray Henderson. The chorus, and I'll bet some of you can sing it with me, is: “Button up your overcoat, when the wind is free, take good care of yourself, you belong to me!” When I first heard that song, in the righteous indignation of my youth, I rebelled. It seemed to me to be a completely archaic statement of possession or ownership. I thought, “Wait a minute. No one belongs to another person. I don't own you and you don't own me.” That's true, of course. But then I looked up the first verse: “Listen . . . now that you've got me made, goodness, but I'm afraid something's going to happen to you. Listen . . . you've got me hooked and how, I would die if I should lose you now!”

Belonging in the sense of a bond of affection is different than possessing someone else. What does it mean to say I belong to you, or you belong to me, in that sense of affection? First, I think it means to care about another person. And second, I think it means to care for them, or to take care of them. And to feel that we are cared about and for. Belonging requires reciprocity. If I belong to you, you also belong to me. It is a need to be together, to feel connected. “I'm afraid something's going to happen to you.” I don't want to lose you. I want to help and protect my family and friends, and they want to help and protect me. In the relationships to which I belong, I want to give them something of myself, something of worth. They want to do the same for me.

A friend of mine was telling me about his husband who recently had surgery for prostate cancer. The surgery has rendered my friend’s husband temporarily incontinent of bladder. There were five wounds from the surgery, one of which became infected. The wounds have to be cleaned out every day and the bandages changed. My friend does that for his husband. I told my friend, “That wasn’t what you signed on for when
your relationship started, was it?” My friend said, “No, or at least I didn’t know it then.” He stopped a moment, then went on, “But I love him. And somewhere along the line I realized that I like taking care of him. Even when actually doing it is unpleasant, I still want to take care of him. When I took off the bandages the other day, he asked me how the wounds looked. Surprised, I said, “You haven’t looked at them?” “No,” he said. I said, “What would you do without me?” He just said, “I don’t know.” That’s when my friend got tears in his eyes.

We know the other individuals we belong to and who belong to us. But what about belonging to a voluntary association, a tradition, a larger community? Last month I went to the Homecoming celebration at the small college where my dad taught. That was in my hometown of Winfield, Kansas. Southwestern College was founded in 1885. I did not do my undergraduate studies there. But my mother, my dad, both my sisters, and many of my friends did. That’s where my dad and mother met. As a family, we spent so much time there: so many plays, concerts, recitals, football and basketball games, piano and cello lessons, music camp. Much of my history is tied to Southwestern College.

Still, as the orchestra played the College’s song and the choir and audience sang it, I was surprised when I got so choked up that I couldn’t sing anymore. Southwestern College has tradition I care about and it’s had some notable successes. They just finished a capital fund drive, including a new football stadium and a totally renovated performing arts auditorium. When the College’s chief fundraiser asked for donations to finish those and other projects, I pulled out my wallet. I contributed more than I had intended. As the fundraiser said, “Success breeds interest.” I want to be part of the
College’s future, giving new generations the chance to study there. Because even though I didn’t, I feel connected to that college, that tradition.

So as Unitarian Universalists, to whom do we belong? Whose are we? First, I would suggest that, as the reading from Hebrews this morning reminded us, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses in the Unitarian Universalist tradition. Who are those witnesses? Our ancient progenitor, Origen of Alexandria, who believed that all people could be saved. Michael Servetus, who was burned at the stake for his belief in the unity of God. Philosophers, theologians, and ministers Ralph Waldo Emerson, Hosea Ballou, and Theodore Parker. Scientists Joseph Priestley and Nobel laureates Linus Pauling in chemistry and John Bardeen in physics. Suffragist and civil rights worker Susan B. Anthony. Humanitarians and social justice workers Clara Barton, Florence Nightingale, and Jane Addams. What of worth have they given us? What do we want to give them in return? How do we want to care about and for what they have given us?

And we do not just belong to the great cloud of witnesses who brought us here. We also belong to those who come after us, whom we may never know. We belong to both our tradition’s past and future. Future generations of human beings will also need our liberal religious tradition; a tradition of openly trying to figure it all out unbounded by any particular creed or doctrine. Indeed, that tradition may well, in the end, offer humanity its best hope. To care about each person on this Earth; to respect each one’s free and responsible search for truth and meaning; to see that we are all connected strands in the interdependent web of all existence; to hold all existence in awe and reverence. That is our saving message for our world; a world in which one’s worth is
sometimes judged by what he or she believes, or the circumstances into which she or he is born; in which the greed or apathy of some deprives others of life.

I think we also belong to Unitarian Universalism’s present, and maybe that most of all. As Wendell Berry said in our responsive reading, “We clasp the hands of those that go before us and the hands of those that come after us.” We are the bridge between our tradition’s past and its future. That means that right now, we belong to a world that needs our message of openness, of hope and faith in the best that human beings can be and do. That people can put relationships first and differences last.

And belonging to Unitarian Universalism’s present means that we belong to each other, right here in this congregation. “We enter the little circle of each other’s arms,” in Wendell Berry’s poem. That we take care of each other, that we meet each other’s needs, that we can depend on each other.

What does it mean to belong to others and to a tradition? I think it means at least two things. The first is faithfulness. The second is vision. And they’re related.

Whether within more personal relationships or within traditions, we can’t belong if we’re not faithful. That means we have to honor the community to which we belong. A young woman I know, not in this congregation, has confessed to me that she has been unfaithful to her husband. At some point, she stopped honoring the marriage community and the seven good years it lasted. She and her husband are now getting a divorce. He has said he can no longer trust her. Without that trust, they no longer belong to each other.
Within a tradition, if we do not honor its past, I don’t see how we can belong to it. If its past is unimportant to us, then we do not belong to it and it does not belong to us. Instead, we belong to something else.

But faithfulness requires something more than just knowing and honoring the past. It means that we won’t easily give up on our feeling of belonging. If we are faithful to our communities, we don’t cut and run at the first sign of trouble. We don’t stop caring about or for the other just because it becomes difficult and unpleasant. Maybe the husband now planning divorce can find his way back to trusting his wife. If so, their bond of belonging to each other does not have to break.

And that brings me to the second thing that belonging to someone or something means: a vision for the future. Vision is related to honoring our past, but it goes beyond that. At the moment, the couple who are planning a divorce have given up not only on their past, but also on their future. They no longer have a shared vision of belonging to each other. They no longer dream of what they might make out of their shared lives, what their marriage might yet become.

The same is true for the religious community to which we belong, to this church. We ought to honor our past. Both Unitarian Universalism and this congregation have given us much. That should inspire fidelity in us. A faithfulness to what we have received. A faithfulness to the gifts and sacrifices others made to give us our religious heritage. If we are faithful, we will not easily stop caring about or for our tradition or our congregation when it runs into disagreements or difficulties. Not even when belonging becomes personally unpleasant.
And faithfulness does not mean just preserving what our tradition and congregation have handed down to us. We do not honor the past if we do not plan a future. We do not honor the past if we do not try to carry it forward in our time and place. We have inherited the gifts that cloud of witnesses gave us for a larger purpose than displaying them as artifacts in a museum. In other words, we honor the past with a vision for the future. Including any changes that seem good to us by our best lights. We need to see our tradition and our congregation going somewhere. As our Hebrews reading said: “Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” Our religious saints and heroes have given us a direction, not a destination. That is up to us to choose.

I see our church of the future. It is the center of family, community, and individual life. It is a larger church, with dedicated space for the religious education of children and adults. It has meaningful activities for everyone. Teens and college students, as well as children and older adults, will find like-minded friends here. They’ll work together to meet the world’s needs. It is a gathering place for those who love music and theater, a gathering place for public learning and public witness. Worship services that inspire – that are feasts for minds, spirits, ears, and eyes. A church that is widely known not only as a refuge for all, but where its members live out their principles by witnessing and acting for social justice. A place in which people feel united rather than divided. A church that finds ways to care for each person’s spiritual deepening. And a church that finds ways to care for the rights and needs of those the rest of the world cares least about.
We’ve talked about what it means to belong to someone or to a religious community. It means caring about and caring for that person or community. Caring about someone means paying attention to their welfare. That’s part of the lesson I learned with Einstein, my pet mouse. But what does belonging say about how we care for people and communities?

Let me share another personal experience with you. In the past, I shared living space with several young men in their twenties who were on their own for the first time. I was one of them and so was one of my brothers. As with any household, ours required certain cleaning and routine maintenance. But the fact that the household required cleaning and maintenance did not mean those chores always got done. Indeed, it turned out that my roommates and I were not very interested in putting much energy into the household in order to maintain it. Predictably, the household began to decay. My brother still tells the story of a fish stew that he made. It sat on the kitchen stove for at least three days until he finally took on the unpleasant task of disposing of it. I won’t describe other details, like the state of the bathrooms. But you should trust me when I tell you that it wasn’t pretty. After some period of time, we didn’t want to live there anymore. We just wanted to escape.

That was a real-world example for me of two things. The first is the Buddhist observation that all compounded things are subject to decay. The second principle my early household experience illustrates is entropy, the second law of thermodynamics. “Entropy”: “the tendency toward randomness or disorder . . . .”

In other words, to keep a relationship, or Unitarian Universalism, or this congregation alive, we have to put energy into them. If we don’t want things to fall

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apart, we have to work at them. That’s true of our physical bodies, our relationships, our institutions. As with creation stories, out of chaos we create order in our world by the energy we put into it.

This coming Friday night, our Stewardship Team will host our Pledge Drive Kickoff Pizza Party. Stewardship. It means the responsibility to take care of something belonging to someone. Whose are we? This Unitarian Universalist congregation in Surprise, Arizona belongs to us, and we belong to it. It is ours and we are the ones responsible for it. Because we care about our congregation, we need to care for it.

How should we care for this congregation? As we think about our pledges to this church in the next year, I would suggest several questions that might help guide us. Do I believe this church and Unitarian Universalism are worth not just preserving, but growing and moving forward? Do I want to be connected not only to the “cloud of witnesses” in the past, but also to our own vision of the future? How much of my resources, my time, and my energy am I willing to dedicate to fulfill the promise of this church and the hopes of those who were here before me? What does the level of my involvement and my giving say about my connection and commitment?

I hope that we all feel we belong to each other in this congregation, as well as to a religious tradition. May we honor the tradition in the most meaningful way possible – that is, by having our own vision for its future. And may we honor each other not only by caring about the church, but by caring for it – with our time, our talents, and our treasure. This religious community is in our hands. May we prove ourselves worthy of what has been given to us. “Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” Amen.
Benediction: Whose are we? We belong to a tradition, to a world, and to each other. They all need us. May we care about and for them. Go up to glory, shouting “Hallelu!”