

Minister's Report to Annual Meeting 2021

It is my personal opinion that the reason BUUF exists is to provide a safe place where we can learn to live more authentic lives. The reasons we do this is so that we can be more whole, creative and compassionate people who make a difference in the world for peace and justice. And because life is just more enjoyable and meaningful when we are present to it. So, the question I hope to answer, in this report, is how did we do, as a congregation, in our endeavor to be a fully alive, evolving, helpful people. A question that is made more interesting by the fact that all of the 2020-2021 church year has taken place during a worldwide pandemic that has killed millions of people including 600,000 Americans.

First, I am glad to report that no one in our immediate congregation has died from Covid, though we have members and friends of the congregation who have lost loved ones. For this, I am truly sorry.

So, how did we do? Pretty darned good actually. We have learned how to Zoom. Our Board has provided excellent leadership in difficult times. The number of voting members has grown. We have regained our status as a Welcoming Congregation. Our Green Sanctuary team has been very effective in keeping the environment in the BUUF consciousness while working towards Green Sanctuary status with the UUA. Our pledge drives have been visionary, creative and effective. Our BUUF musicians have stepped up with really stellar music every Sunday. The

Social Justice Committee has become more focused and much more visible. In a stroke of community building genius, we have sent out gift bags to all BUUFers. Our religious education program has adapted to the pandemic and been phenomenal, especially for adults. Our electronic BUUF Announce and orders of service have been the communication glue that binds us together. We have continued to serve at the soup kitchen. A teen youth group is starting up. The worship committee has grown and become very creative in providing service themes and other support for our Sunday services. The church driveway is being patched. We have a new, visionary 5-year-plan. And best-of-all, lay participation in our Sunday services has increased and our services are much, much better for it.

Yes. We have done very well. I am confident, as we face the challenge of restarting in-person services, that the Creative Spirit will prevail and we will continue to be a powerful voice for liberal religion, racial equality, LGBTQ+ awareness, and social and ecological justice in the St. Joe/Benton Harbor community.

On a personal note: I am getting a lot of personal satisfaction and enjoyment from being a part of BUUF. My heart is filled with gratitude. Thank you, everyone.

Rev. Jim McConnell

On a whim, I have included my favorite story.

Ellie Wiesel prefaced his novel, "The Gates of the Forest" with this famous Hasidic tale to which he added a coda:

When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov
Saw misfortune threatening the Jews
It was his custom
To go into a certain part of the forest to meditate.
There he would light a fire,
Say a special prayer,
And the miracle would be accomplished
And the misfortune averted.

Later when his disciple,
The celebrated Magid of Mezritch,
Has occasion, for the same reason,
To intercede with heaven,
He would go to the same place in the forest
And say: "Master of the Universe, listen!
I do not know how to light the fire,
But I am still able to say the prayer."
And again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later,
Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov,
In order to save his people once more,
Would go into the forest and say:
"I do not know how to light the fire,
I do not know the prayer,
But I know the place
And this must be sufficient."
It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn
To overcome misfortune.
Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands,
He spoke to God: "I am unable to light the fire
And I do not know the prayer;
I cannot even find the place in the forest.
All I can do is to tell the story,

And this must be sufficient.”
And it was sufficient.

God made man because he loves stories.

We make the assumption that the stories we tell, religion, philosophy, psychotherapies, etc. are stories about reality. I do not think this is entirely true. It is my opinion (my story) that we, each of us and for that matter every particle and every galaxy, are the Creator God in disguise and that the stories we tell are God in the act of creation. (By way of footnote: In my story, God is also hidden from God's self. This is why some folks think that enlightenment is discovering the God in one's self.)

So, it seems desirable that the stories we tell should be really good ones.

Further, reason, while it has its very important uses, seems a very poor tool for getting at the nature of things. It has a tendency to curl back on its self and lead to despair. Story is how we dive head first into the great uprush of creation. Story is mana. Story allows us to drink deeply from the Waters of Life. That's my story and I'm sticking to it.