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Keep the porch light on.

Extending the Gift of Sanctuary

The porch light beckons. It feels good to see it in the distance, whether we live on a dark road or in town. Once we see the porch light, we're on familiar ground. Almost home. Safe. Assured of warmth, of belonging, on a cold night.

We leave the porch light on for each other. For the teenager Saturday night. For guests arriving in the wee hours. We leave it on for our partner or our roommate when we turn in for the night. You know you're somebody when someone leaves the porch light on for you. It says, "Welcome! You're home. Come inside." I stay at a cottage up on Turkey Street a couple of nights a week, and during the day I'll dash over and turn on the porch light for myself. That evening, I like seeing its glow through the trees on the long dark road. A resting place. A roof. Sanctuary.

Like the porch light, like a candle in the window in the days of the Underground Railroad, the flaming chalice of our faith has long symbolized "sanctuary." Austrian artist Hans Deutsch created it for the Unitarian Service Committee in 1941, the year after the Nazis invaded Paris. The USC operated out of Lisbon, the only open port in Europe—it mission was to help people escape.

UU Rev. Dan Hotchkiss describes those harrowing times: "The USC was an unknown organization [he writes]. This was a special handicap in the cloak-and-dagger world, where establishing trust quickly across barriers of language, nationality, and faith could mean life instead of death. Disguises, signs and countersigns, and midnight runs across guarded borders were the means of freedom in those days. [Executive Director, Rev. Charles Joy,] asked Deutsch to create a symbol for their papers 'to make them look official, [wrote Joy] to give dignity and importance to them, and at the same time to symbolize the spirit of our work....' "¹

The artist, not a religious person, found himself in awe of this organization and the selflessness and commitment to others of its leader. When he drew the flaming chalice, he knew nothing of this faith except for the dedication of its followers to help people find *sanctuary* in the hardest of times.

We, too, live in hard times, and sanctuary—a place or feeling of refuge or safety—comes in many forms. We find sanctuary in the loved one who's there for us every time. Sanctuary can be a Planned Parenthood clinic or a doctor's office with a rainbow flag on the door. It can be home, a halfway house, a shelter or an embassy. It can be a gender neutral restroom or a jail cell. For millions of people, America has meant sanctuary.

¹Dan Hotchkiss, *The Flaming Chalice* (a UUA pamphlet), www.uua.org/beliefs/chalice/flaming-chalice.

Houses of worship offer sanctuary, too. For many seekers, walking into a UU church feels like spiritual sanctuary—a place where our whole self is welcome and safe, where our call to make sense of things and live into our best selves is not only encouraged but honored. What a relief for those who come from religions with strict doctrines! And (not that we're always on our best behavior here every minute!) what freedom to feel that we can take off our armor at the door and climb the steps to this space, knowing that our worth and dignity is explicitly affirmed here. What a gift to raise children in this environment!

You may have been drawn to the UU faith by its outward, justice-seeking history of offering sanctuary to others—its call to make a difference in the world by taking action on behalf of people marginalized by unfairness, xenophobia and oppressive power systems. Indeed, part of the UUFES mission is to improve the world through social action and outreach, to offer sanctuary—refuge and safety—to people in need.

And so, we tend to our souls in this place, *and* we look beyond ourselves to a broken world. Extending sanctuary to the wider community is the theme of this year's pledge drive.

People are afraid today. The pastor of the Indonesian community in Dover, a classmate from divinity school, has been in touch recently. She writes that her people are terrified of being deported to their home country where they could face religious persecution and lose freedoms. In today's climate, working toward citizenship does not protect them from coming under the administration's harsh immigration policies. In fact, it can lead the authorities right to them. Imagine living under that cloud.

John and I had the privilege recently to go to Florida for a long weekend with friends. As it happens, just before we left, I heard a rumor through the justice grapevine, that these days, if you're driving on 89 or 93 in New Hampshire and you have brown skin, it's not uncommon for an officer to pull you over and demand to see your papers. Not all officers and not in all towns—Dover and Somersworth, for example, notably refuse to tow the federal line, busy with more pressing concerns than harassing long-time members of their communities. Still, that story about our state was hard to hear.

The day we left for Florida fed my dismay. Thrust into the crowds of travelers, we stood in line and sat with passengers whose faces and races reflected many cultures and backgrounds. Being part of the mix felt noticeably good, as if we'd been missing something and now felt more whole. More connected. Like riding the subway in New York last year and feeling exhilarated there, too—exhilarated by the mix of us all, everyone thrown in together, different and unique, and belonging. What does it say about New Hampshire life that everyday travel in the air or under the ground can tug at our heart and feel profoundly stimulating?

Florida, though, was a hard landing, everyone on the beach white and everyone in the stores and restaurants people of color, their English accented. Economic inequality was loud and uncomfortable. Impossible to ignore—a daily reminder of those officers on I-93.

Home after the weekend, our Sunday paper featured, of all things, a story about the Indonesian community up Route 16 and their pastor, my classmate, who is known for her work in tirelessly

helping people through the documentation process—our neighbors. UUFES’s newsletter told of Shana, Ricky and John building bridges with the Portland and Dover mosques—our neighbors.

Shana’s made friends with the Turkish man at the gas station. He asks about her violin—“How’s the fiddling?” he wants to know, and e tells her about winters in Turkey—our neighbor.

We can build on these beginnings. As Washington continues to threaten and vilify, we can go beyond holding our Muslim and immigrant neighbors in theoretical warm regard. They live right here! What would it mean for UUFES to be a beacon of light? For UUFES to be Carroll County’s version of the Unitarian Service Committee in Europe, which saved people targeted by powerful systems of hate?

Our neighbors feel at risk these days, and they’re not imagining it. How can we be at peace when they are being pulled over because of the color of their skin? How can we live with ourselves when Muslims down the road may become targets of hate?

To build a land that celebrates what we cherish—love, dignity and justice—we need a porch light that people can count on. To build a land that’s a place just right—“a valley of love and delight” for all—we need a high wattage porch light. A light people can see from a distance.

How to be that light? It’s for UUFES to live into this conversation however you want to do that. As your minister, I will walk with you and help us do this work, at whatever level of risk it might mean to our community. (Sticking your neck out, even for a good cause, involves risk).

The next few weeks, the people of UUFES have an opportunity to fuel our porch light—to be a presence in this county of solidarity and sanctuary. We’ll be asked to quantify what sanctuary means to us. If you have found sanctuary here, how to put a monetary value on it and on the UUFES mission of making a difference in the world?

For those with the financial wherewithal to pledge, equations can be helpful. Give so much a day, so much a Sunday. Divide the budget by 365 days and go from there. Challenge yourself this extraordinary year of suffering for so many to increase your level of giving.

For me, this year I will pledge a percentage of my earnings. To serve UUFES as a $\frac{3}{4}$ time minister, you pay me a salary of \$45,000. My way of helping our porch light shine will be to pledge 4% of that salary this year, which is \$1800. Maybe that equation works for you ☺

You will find your way to give to UUFES, and that includes giving time and heart and talent. It takes heart, not money, to connect with our neighbors, to enter into relationship. Not to guess what they need but to *ask them what they need*. To be turned down and to ask again.

Long ago, in business school, they taught us not to dream up great products but to go out into the world and find a need. We need to learn more about our neighbors. Who in our neighborhood is living in fear today because of their religion or their immigration status? We need to let them know that we’re here should they need us. We need to let them know that they are not alone.

May the UUFES community send the clear message that we are neighbors who want to BE neighbors. May we hold close the image of the porch light. May we cherish the sanctuary we find here, and may we BE sanctuary.

Amen.