



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“The ‘Home Sweet Home’ Church,”  
a sermon given by Julie Lombard  
on November 24, 2013

Many of you may know that I come down to Haverhill from Concord, NH on Sundays. Concord is an hour north of here by the junction of Interstates Rte. 89 & 93. It's NH's Capital city with a population of approximately 45,000. Like Haverhill, Concord's has a busy downtown, rural back woods, and even working farms. It's a quaint community with a handful of steeples poking out above the other buildings and one of those churches is my home congregation, Concord UU.

Concord UU is not in the midst of the bustle on the Main Street area anymore, but it's not far. It is settled near the hospital, about a mile west of downtown on Pleasant Street. The property was once the location of the governor's house, Governor Winant. After his death, the land was gifted to the church. Before the UUA merger in 1961, the downtown churches sold their buildings and erected a new UU church on the property.

Everything about Concord was smaller then: the city, the nearby hospital campus. The one thing that wasn't smaller was the woods behind both the hospital and the new UU church. Eventually the landlocked woods would become what is now known as Winant Park. It's a nice park with many walking and biking trails, with enormous glacial rocks, vernal pools, and beautiful vistas.

For a long time the woods could only be accessed by obscure entrances like the path that lead from the back of the church parking lot. That path lead to a sweet little clearing in the woods on the church property before you entered the park. The clearing is a great space for Earth Centered Spirituality Worship and we've even hosted some campouts around the fire pit. That space really doesn't get used all that much and many members hardly ever go back there. It sounds nice! I find it sad that it's under-utilized... until I heard that it wasn't as under-utilized as I thought.

As I drove by, I noticed that the roadside pulpit said something about homelessness. The weekly e-news expanded slightly more by saying, “Join a conversation in Fellowship Hall to share your thoughts, and listen to others' thoughts, on the subject of homeless individuals camping on land behind the church.” There was to be a Forum on Homelessness at Concord UU church after the Sunday service on the 17th.

Lucky for me, I had that Sunday off. I could go & find out what was going on. I was grateful to go to my own “Home Sweet Home” church because it was news to me that homeless folks were camping out on the church property. I may have had an odd response compared to many in that community. It was, “Thank God! It might be the only way for that congregation to truly get involved in assisting the homeless of Concord... to have them camping out on the property.”

Could these campers be some sort of protest? Like the “Occupy Wall Street Movement”? Is this a “Occupy Pleasant Street Movement”? I don’t think so, and as a matter of fact, I know it’s not!

A good friend, one of my UU softball team coaches, told me it was only a couple of folks in the woods. This wasn’t their first year there either. He had befriended them and said they were nice people surviving the best they could. Not trying to bring attention to their situation. He told me that one of the campers was a Native American, a veteran who didn’t drink or smoke.

My friend also happens to be the handy-man of the church, often doing many of the projects on the grounds for free. Last year he asked these guys living if they wouldn’t mind helping him with a project and they were eager to help. My friend knew it would be nearly impossible to get the church to pay them for their labor because the work order hadn’t been approved by the board. Instead he paid them out of his pocket \$600 and he bought them lunch every day they worked.

A long time ago, this same friend was the Board President. So, he wasn’t naive to the way the church worked. He fully understood sometimes you have to work around a system to do what’s best for all. The church needed job done, since he was the one to do it and he knew he needed help, he asked the homeless men who were willing to work. The homeless workers didn’t expect to be paid, they were helping their friend. The only thing they asked for was to charge their cell phones while they were working. Yes, homeless folks sometimes have cell phones.

So, what to do about the homeless living on the church property? Are you thinking like me that this is an opportunity rather than a problem?

Of course, like any UU church- Concord UU would have to get the congregation together and talk about it, again, and again. Would they continue to let the folks camp out back there or would they open their doors for these folks to campout inside where it was warm? Would they call the police to come and remove these people, giving them a one way bus ticket to someplace far away or would they welcome these folks around a table and cook them a warm meal?

I love this story for a couple of reasons!

First, it is a true story. One that is unfolding as we speak, as the ponds begin to ice over, and we finalize our personal plans for Thanksgiving, these homeless people are living all around us.

Second, I also love it because one of my learning goals here at this church is to learn about homelessness in Haverhill. I find it absolutely amazing that this church has a rich history of seeing the needs of the homelessness as an opportunity rather than a problem. What an opportunity it is to be able to help the homeless population, opening the doors of this sacred place to those most in need of a warm place to be. What a blessing it is to host a homelessness drop-in center, community meals, and to dedicate some space to a food pantry. What an opportunity and a blessing to be able to be so connected to their needs and to be able to offer them some security. You are the prophets that remind the greater community of their inherent worth and dignity. What a blessing to be able to live out our first UU Principle and make a difference in this community. You know what I think Jesus would say? “Right On!”

So you may imagine that getting to be an intern minister here is such an honor for me, not because I can say you’ve warmly welcomed me in here, to teach me how to become a minister, but because you’ve open your doors to invite everyone into this sanctuary, into this warm and

loving place. That's the kind of church I've always dreamed of being a part of. Look, here I am, in your pulpit, talking to you about the inherent worth and dignity of homeless people. Somebody pinch me!

On Veteran's Day I had the privilege to preach to the UU students at Andover Newton Theological School about homelessness Veterans. With the topic fresh in my mind and the grim statistics still buzzing in my head, I was mystified that my "home sweet home" church was now the home for a forum about homelessness. Especially since one of the men was a homeless vet.

If we use the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs eligibility criteria to determine which veterans can access services, then the eligibility for VA benefits is based upon discharge from active military service under other than dishonorable conditions. These benefits vary according to factors connected with the type and length of military service. Here's the sad truth behind these folks that we honored on November 11th: too many of our veteran's are homeless.

13% of the adult homeless population are veterans. They are predominantly male, with 8% being female. Most are single; live in urban areas; and many suffer from mental illness, alcohol and/or substance abuse, or co-occurring disorders. 40% are African American or Hispanic. 9% are between the ages of 18 and 30 and 41% are between the ages of 31 and 50. Nearly half served during the Vietnam era. Two-thirds served our country for at least three years, and one-third were stationed in a war zone. 1.4 million non-homeless veterans are considered at risk of homelessness due to poverty, lack of support networks, and dismal living conditions in overcrowded or substandard housing.

Have faith, I told my fellow UU students and friends, we can make a difference by doing these things...

- Determine the need in your communities: Visit with homeless veteran service providers. Contact your mayor's office for a list of providers.
- Participate in local homeless coalitions: Chances are, there is one in your community. If not, this could be the time to bring people together around this critical need.
- Involve and educate others & make donations. If you are not already part of an organization, align yourself with a few other people who are interested in taking on this issue & share you knowledge and your treasures.
- Contact your elected officials. Keep the discussions going about what is being done in your community for homeless Veterans. Make every day be "a day of listening" for these brave warriors who risked their lives for our nation.

So, how many of these things is this church doing? You have determined the needs of the homelessness in your community and you graciously participate in bringing people around this critical issue. You are actively involved and assist other organizations that are working at this mission. Bravo! You are the model church! Helping the homeless is your identity.

It is an ongoing concern, so how can you educate more people about this topic or keep the discussion going? I know how this church is connected to this issue, but how are you, as individuals, connected to the homelessness issue in Haverhill? I want to know because you are

my teachers and I want to learn all I can from the best of y'all. I want to know: are you my teacher or are you someone like me who still has a lot to learn about this issue in this city?

Spiritual Siblings, as we gather around our tables for thanksgiving feasts, let us all learn from those who have already discovered the opportunity of working for justice for all. May we have a profound sense of pride and value the importance of the teamwork and leadership that these people who have championed this vital work have shown. May we be aware of their adaptability and how they saw this church not only their "home sweet home" church, but a "home sweet home" for all. Let us never forget the many veterans that have fallen victim to homelessness or are at risk. We can be their link to hope and a better life, we can listen to their stories, we can connect them to programs in our area.

Let us face the uncertainty in our own lives with the bravery that these folks have shown us. May we have pride in the lessons these people have taught us. May we be vulnerable enough to feel their pain and strong enough to march beside them to make the changes needed for future generations that may fall victim to homelessness. May we work towards the end of this plight so someday our children ask us, "What was homelessness?" May we help secure that every soul has a "home sweet home".

So may it be. Amen.