

A Perplexing Puzzle

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Last Christmas, when relatives were scheduled to arrive, I poured puzzle pieces on a table and left the box with the image on it next to the pile so people could put it together. After hugs and hearty welcomes, my family members walked past the table, saw the puzzle and made all sorts of comments. "I don't have the patience for a puzzle," commented one person looking over it. "Do you think we are old people with nothing better to do?" said another as she put her suitcase down. There was laughter and much cajoling at my attempt to keep people occupied.

Do you know what happened? Over the course of three days, I watched as my sister-in-law inched over to the table and added a puzzle piece here and then, one there. My spouse and stepdaughter found their way to the table and began to compete, saying, "I found more pieces than you." (The holidays often bring about a competition between those two.) My role was to walk past and say, "Wow, that is really coming together. You all are awesome." By the time our visit was over, the puzzle was complete except for one single piece. We looked all over for the missing piece and never found it. "Way to go," said a loved one. "You suckered us into working on an incomplete puzzle."

I cleaned up after everyone left. Listen I'm a decent housekeeper, not the best, but I'm ok. And yet, three months later, as I was sweeping under the table after dinner one day, I noticed a little piece of cardboard stuck under the table leg. I lifted the table and found a mangled puzzle piece with little indentations that appeared to be made by teeth. It was the missing piece from the Christmas holiday. I deduced my sister-in-law's sweet dog found the piece on the floor, gnawed on it and somehow got it wedged under the table leg.

"Life is a puzzle" is a common phrase. Last year, our family happily gathered after a nearly two-year withdrawal from visiting due to the pandemic. Metaphorically speaking, I guess at the time, life was a puzzle that came together except for one missing piece. It was this question: Although we are grateful many things that came together again to provide a little reboot to life, what will happen now in our new future?

As the winter holidays approach nearly a year later, life remains a puzzle that we are all slowly putting together. I feel this way about my home life, and I certainly feel this way about the needs of our cherished congregation, the Unitarian Universalists of Clearwater. And yet, I don't feel like our UUC puzzle is resting on a table. I think it exists on a lazy Susan, one of those wooden discs that sits in the middle of a table. Our lazy Susan does not hold condiments. Ours holds a puzzle and each time we think we find the right spot for a puzzle piece, the disc turns and there is a totally new section that needs pieces.

Consider solutions to creating a better sound system in the Octagon, help with Children's programming, finding new approaches to communicate events, addressing building and

grounds issues and growing the music program, these and more are all puzzle pieces that leadership at UUC has been working to fit into place. And frankly, we are operating so to say on a puzzle without a visual guide because UUC won't appear the same as it did before the pandemic. Meaning, there is no box with a final picture to show us where and how everything should look when we are finished.

Beloved friends and members of UUC who are striving to fulfill our mission and vision are picking up the pieces, turning each challenge around and over to find out how to make the puzzle pieces fit together. Some of us are muttering, "This won't work but maybe this will. Yes? No? Let's try it this way." A few of us are embracing the challenges of putting the UUC puzzle back together in a new way and others are leaning over, whispering, "Go faster. We can't wait to participate much longer!"

Where am I? I'm your minister gnawing on one perplexing puzzle piece after another saying, "Wow, this is really coming together. You all are awesome."

Happy Holidays!