

“If You Build It, They Will Come...”
Rev. Nancy O. Arnold

June 17, 2018
UU Congregation of Danbury

“There comes a time when all the cosmic tumblers have clicked into place and the universe opens itself up for a few seconds to show you what’s possible.”

These words from the fictional 1960’s writer, Terence Mann, frame the movie *Field of Dreams*.

I’d like to think that our interim time together has been an opportunity that showed you what is possible. Like religious communities, *Field of Dreams* is about building something on faith and vision. It reveals to us what is possible if we allow ourselves to be moved by a vision, or called forth by a “voice.”

In the almost two years since we began this interim ministry together, you have courageously examined many aspects of your congregational life. You’ve reviewed the past, identified your strengths and challenges, and envisioned the Congregation you would like to become. Unlike “the Voice” that called out to a farmer: “if you build it he will come” you hear the call of many voices. Some of them are yours. Other voices have not yet found their way to this fellowship hall. Some of them have been heard and forgotten.

You have all the potential for realizing your vision of becoming the vibrant community you envisioned ten years ago. But sometimes we need times of transition in order to see things with new eyes.

Your intention to move here in 2005 was to return to your roots in Danbury and engage with the local community in significant ways. It was a time of transition, energy, and growth.

Once settled in here, Brad Greene directed the 2020 Vision initiative for more than a year to focus that energy toward a greater vision. Since then, you have fulfilled at least one of your goals in moving back to Danbury: this Congregation is an integral part of the Danbury community serving those most vulnerable. You’ve partnered with groups such as ARC to staff the Soup Kitchen, Dorothy Day, Comida, the Interfaith Peace Camp, and to introduce new programs such as KIDS in the schools.

You might not know it by your actions, but there were other goals that garnered much more interest in the 2020 Visioning process: services and spirituality, music, programs, and physical space. All of these focused on serving and feeding the spiritual needs of the community as it is, while welcoming in the community you would like to become.

Although it has taken a lot longer than you had hoped, you are finally meeting your goal of making your physical space more inviting and sustainable. With the completion of the parking lot last year, the addition of solar power, and soon the completion of the build-out for added RE space, you are well on your way to achieving that goal.

But how many of you remember that the vision also included a bigger sanctuary? Until you received a recent bequest dedicated to its construction, that idea had been almost forgotten. Since you will be losing space in this sanctuary with the addition of stairs to the RE space, it may be time to re-visit the need for additional – dedicated – worship space, just as you are doing for the children’s religious education. Why?

Because one of the recurring themes here is your desire to grow the Congregation.

When you moved to this space, there was a surge in membership. But you weren't able to sustain and build on that growth. You thought that going to two services would be a sign of welcome that allowed for greater attendance. While successful in making room for more people, it also left many of you feeling as if you were split into two separate congregations. If you choose to go to two services again, you will have to be much more intentional about providing the time and space for the congregation to be together as a whole.

Growth and congregational unity might also be addressed by fulfilling another of your 2020 goals – offering “robust cultural (programs) through the arts, lectures, forums, youth activities and other events to draw in the larger community.” There is so much talent in this congregation that goes untapped – except perhaps on Sunday mornings. With so many gifted people here it would be a natural for you to open this space to the community for concerts, coffee houses, and theatrical productions. You've been hiding your light under a bushel! The Danbury community needs to know what you have to offer here.

What might the UU Danbury of the future look like?

- a diverse congregation of different beliefs, interests, ages, ethnicities, socio-economic, sexual orientations, family status, education and wealth.
- a spiritual center that offers year-round programs reflecting the diversity of the membership and the surrounding community.
- a growing congregation because you have created a spiritual home in which seekers feel welcomed, accepted, and nurtured.

How will you become the Congregation you aspire to be?

It begins by *listening* to each other's Voice in ways that engender trust and respect.

In *Field of Dreams*, “the Voice” has a very prominent role. It calls out to a farmer working in his corn field: “*If you build it he will come.*” Ray Kinsella is the farmer who hears the Voice, but he doubts what he is hearing.

“*If you build it, they will come.*” Like Ray Kinsella, some of you may have doubts about what you are hearing from each other. Ray sees a vision of a baseball field, complete with night lights, just beyond his cornfield.

You see a vision of a vibrant, all-inclusive, community of faith that grows its soul together.

Religious communities tell stories to their children to teach them right living. Ray was told baseball stories by his father, many of them about his father's hero, Shoeless Joe Jackson. Ray's father had never made it as a ballplayer himself, so he tried to make his son into one. At age 14, Ray refused to play catch with his dad anymore. He left home right after high school and he never went back – until his father's funeral. When he left, he told his father that he “could never respect a man whose hero was a criminal.” His dad died before he could take back the words. Ray's penance is to live with that regret.

Houses of worship offer forgiveness and reconciliation.

Ray decides that the “he” who will come is his father’s hero “Shoeless Joe,” a ballplayer suspended from the Chicago White Sox for throwing a game in 1932. But like the “they” who will come here, “Shoeless Joe” brings others to play on the field because he likes what he has found. The field of dreams attracts men who harbored regrets about their failures or shortcomings as ballplayers.

***Religious communities attract people in need of healing,
who are adrift in a search for meaning in their lives.***

Ray Kinsella is a dreamer who builds a field of dreams where his corn once grew. When Shoeless Joe Jackson finally appears one night, he asks:

“Is this heaven?”

“No, it’s Iowa,”

Ray responds. The baseball field becomes a place where peoples’ dearest dreams come true. Shoeless Joe is thrilled to be back on a baseball field, with all its sounds and smells. He’s happy to be back playing the game he loved so much. He invites other banned players to join him on the field of dreams.

The game is visible only to those with a vision for what might be. Ray and his family watch the games from their own bleachers. And Ray tells his daughter the stories of the players while they demonstrate their idiosyncrasies. Each night after the game, the players disappear into the rows of corn that border the playing field. They don’t even stay for coffee hour.

Ray has built the field, and “he” has come. But the Voice returns again and again. “*Ease his pain*” the Voice says this time. Ray decides that he’s supposed to ease the pain of Terence Mann, his hero from the 1960’s. Terence Mann was a writer whose work in the civil rights and anti-war movements influenced a generation of youth. He, too, loved baseball. In fact, he had used Ray’s father’s name in one of his stories. Now he creates interactive children’s games and he just wants to be left alone.

Ray travels from Iowa to Boston to take Terence Mann to a baseball game at Fenway Park. At the game, they both hear the Voice say: “*Go the distance!*” This time the Voice is accompanied by the lighted game board which flashes the name of Archibald “Moonlight Graham.” “Moonlight Graham” played one inning, with no chance at bat, with the New York Giants in 1922. Ray and Terence drive together to Minnesota in search of “Moonlight Graham.”

They meet him as “Doc Graham,” a man who left baseball to study medicine. “Doc Graham” describes the one inning he played in the majors as “coming this close to your dreams and watching them brush past by you like a stranger. Sometimes we don’t recognize the most significant moments of our lives while they’re happening,” he tells Ray. “I thought, ‘Well, there’ll be other days.’ That was the only day.” His one regret in life is that he never got a chance at bat.

Faith communities provide a place for second chances.

Ray and Terence return to Iowa with the young Moonlight Graham. (You’ll have to watch the movie to find out how that happened.) While Ray was away listening to Voices, the bank foreclosed on the farm. And yet Ray resists signing over the farm to the bank. As they watch the game, Ray’s daughter tells him that he doesn’t have to sell the farm, because people will come to watch the game. Terence agrees.

People will come to Iowa like children, longing for the past [he says]. It'll be as if they dipped themselves in magic water. And they'll be willing to pay \$20 for the experience. The one constant has been baseball – it has been erased and rebuilt again. It reminds us of what was good, and what could be again. People will most definitely come.

Churches have been around a lot longer than baseball.

After the game, Terence joins the players as they leave the field. There is one lone player on the field after the others depart. The man is Ray's father when he was a young ballplayer. His dad asks:

Is this heaven?

Ray, of course, tells him,

No it's Iowa.

heaven is the place where dreams come true,

his father says.

Maybe this is heaven,

Ray responds. And then he asks his dad if he wants to have a catch. As they toss a ball back and forth to each other, a stream of cars can be seen approaching the field.

Building a "field of dreams" is an opportunity to live out a vision, to reconcile the past, and to forgive ourselves and others for past transgressions.

Religious community is about vision, reconciliation, and forgiveness.

"It reminds us of what was good, and what could be again."

"If you build it they will come."

"Ease their pain."

"Go the distance."

Many people attend a house of worship as children. They leave when they no longer believe what they are hearing. This is especially true for the children of the sixties and seventies, and now their children – the Gen Xers and Millennials. Baby Boomers learned to substitute political involvement and social action for religious conviction and spirituality. Many raised their own children with no religious affiliation. Now middle aged, with children, and sometimes grandchildren, they may still be searching for some meaning in their lives. And they are in need of vision, reconciliation, and forgiveness. They are in need of a place to belong.

People come to congregations such as this in search of community and meaning for their lives. Like Ray Kinsella, they are evaluating their lives and what might have been. They want to discern a vision of what might be still. They seek out other people with whom to dream and act. Rather than build baseball fields, some of us build Congregations and churches.

"People nowadays want a church that offers a broad range of choices in teaching, scheduling, and programming," according to sociologist, Lyle Schaller. People are seeking some meaning for their lives. Congregations that can address the question "What does it all mean?" in a non-threatening manner are "bound for glory." (*Newsweek*) As one pastor put it, "Boomers

[their children and grandchildren] are looking for a religious experience that makes sense of their lives and gives them some answers to their questions. To the extent that a congregation can do that, it will be successful.”

That is the Voice you have been waiting for! What better place than a Unitarian Universalist congregation to help people consider questions such as “What does it all mean?” in a non-threatening manner? Like Ray Kinsella, people want to live out their dreams and make them real. Like baseball, congregations have been erased and rebuilt, and can be again: *if* – you begin with a vision of what might be possible – and *if* you allow yourselves to dream.

People today are very much in need of what you have to offer. You can provide a welcoming community for all ages, small discussion groups, worship, social action opportunities, religious education, and fellowship. You can be a full-service congregation with programs to meet the needs of all kinds of people – families, singles, gay and straight, people of color, and folks in the greater Danbury community. You have it in you to become a field of dreams for many more people than you serve today.

If you build it will they come?

Well, you may be wondering what you’re supposed to build. After all, you’ve already built a meetinghouse – and they came – at first. But the growth couldn’t be sustained. They will come – *and stay* – if you build on the strong foundation you have here as a spiritual community. It means offering a path to belonging for those who enter here.

You are fortunate to have so many strong friendships among the people here. But that can also be a drawback to growth. Your intimate connections have their own kind of exclusiveness. It’s easy to feel left out. So there must be greater intention to invite newcomers into the circle of community in ways that make them feel welcome. And I don’t mean just by having them bid on a dinner at the auction. Maybe *you* can bid on the dinner and invite a newcomer to join you at the dinner?

In previous generations, there were always a few people who reached out to newcomers. They would invite them to lunch or dinner, or to a particular program. On Sunday mornings they would stop to chat with them and then introduce them to their friends. We don’t see that much anymore.

If you build it will they come?

What will you build? You will build an intentionally welcoming community that draws people in and makes them feel they belong. You will build on the strong foundation you already have here to offer others the spiritual home you love so much. If you can attract the minister of your dreams, you will have someone with a warm, charismatic personality and an inspiring style of ministry to help you grow into your vision.

There comes a time when all the cosmic tumblers have clicked into place and the universe opens itself up for a few seconds to show you what’s possible.

– Terence Mann

I am a dreamer, and I believe that *now* is that time for this Congregation. This place built by you can be a field of dreams where you ease each other's pain, and go the distance.

Ray Kinsella's dream brought together his wistful childhood memories with the chance to right a wrong with his father. The *pain* he eased was his own, and his father's, and all the other players who had lost something they loved. The *distance* Ray travelled was over time and generations of hopes and regrets. The baseball field provided the opportunity for people to return to what they loved most – and to live out the dreams that had failed them in the past.

*Can you, as a religious community,
not offer people at least that?*

The Voices you must heed are your own – perhaps inspired by something greater than yourselves. You are ready for a chance to be a presence – not only to each other, but to the world outside these walls. The players are all out there – they're waiting for you to invite them in – waiting for you to make a place for them where they can realize their own dreams and claim what they have lost, or perhaps never known.

And once people come, and discover what you have to offer, they might ask: “Is this heaven?” “No,” you'll answer. “It's the UU Congregation of Danbury.” But “*heaven is the place where dreams come true...*”

May you make it be so.