Making Room for What We Are Becoming
2026 Water Communion and Ingathering

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Norwich
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Land Acknowledgment

We acknowledge the Mohegan people as the traditional caretakers of the land and the rivers where we now live and worship. We honor and pay respect to the Mohegan ancestors and their lineage, who, to this day, uphold traditional practices, artistic expression, religion, and education.

Sermon: Making Room for What We Are Becoming

Good morning, and welcome home.

Some of us are returning after summer travels. Some are returning after a quieter season. Some may be walking through these doors for the first time. Some have been here all along, tending the life of this congregation while the rhythm and the world around us changed.

However you arrived, Ingathering reminds us that a congregation is not simply a place we come back to. It is a community we keep creating.

We gather again carrying what the summer has given us: rest or weariness, joy or grief, clarity or confusion, stories we are ready to tell and experiences we are still trying to understand. We do not return as exactly the same people who left. Life has happened to us. Life has happened within us. And life has happened around us.

This morning we will make room for some of those experiences through our Summer Stories. In years past, this sometimes felt like the comfortable first assignment back at school: What did you do this summer? Where did you go?

Who did you see? And there is nothing wrong with sharing those things. The places we visited, the people we spent time with, and the ordinary moments that gave us joy are part of our lives.

But this year, I want to invite us to go one layer deeper. Not into a travelogue, but into reflection. As you remember your summer, do not ask only, "What did I do?" Ask, "What did I experience—and what did that experience do within me?"

What surprised you? What stretched you? What restored you? What unsettled you enough to pay attention? Did something become clearer? Did something soften? Did you release an expectation, recognize a need, rediscover a joy, or find courage you did not know you had?

And as you listen to your own story, consider our UU Values. Which Value stood out most clearly in the life you actually lived this summer? Where did you experience Interdependence, Equity, Transformation, Pluralism, Generosity, Justice, or Love? Which Value challenged you? Which one do you want more of in the months ahead? And what do you need less of—less hurry, less isolation, less certainty, less fear, less of whatever keeps you from living in alignment with what matters most?

A Summer Story does not have to be dramatic to be spiritually significant. Sometimes the deepest shift comes through a quiet conversation, a changed routine, a loss we are still absorbing, a moment of beauty, or the realization that the way we have been living no longer fits the person we are becoming.

So the question before us this morning is not only, "Are we glad to be together again?" I hope we are. The deeper question is: What kind of people—and what kind of congregation—are we becoming as we gather?

Our Unitarian Universalist Values give us language for answering that question: Interdependence, Equity, Transformation, Pluralism, Generosity, and Justice, with Love at the center. But Values do not become the life of a congregation merely because we can name them. They become our life through what we notice, what we make room for, and what we practice together.

This morning, I want to invite us into three practices for our new congregational year: Listen beneath the noise. Make room at the table. And practice becoming. Together, they begin what I hope we will understand as our season of becoming—not merely a season of exploring our Values, but of manifesting them in the way we live.

What

Let us begin with listening.

We spend a remarkable amount of our lives listening—or at least, we spend a remarkable amount of our lives hearing. We hear conversations, news, music, phones, requests, opinions, and advice. Then there are the voices inside us: the running list of what needs to be done, the conversation we replay, the thing we wish we had said, the question we are trying to answer.

Even when the world around us becomes quiet, sometimes we do not.

And a congregation can be noisy too—not only in volume, but in the sheer number of concerns competing for our attention. There are programs to plan, budgets to balance, people to care for, justice work to sustain, buildings to maintain, newcomers to welcome, traditions to honor, and changes to navigate. All of it may matter. All of it may be worthy. But when every concern speaks at once, it becomes difficult to hear what is most deeply asking for our attention.

Music requires notes, but music also requires space. A rest is not a mistake in the composition. It is not the place where the musician forgot what came next. The silence belongs to the music. Without spaces between sounds, what we hear becomes noise.

Perhaps our congregational life is not so different.

Pluralism asks us to stay curious about wisdom beyond our own perspective. Generosity asks us to offer one another the gift of presence. Interdependence reminds us that we are not listening alone and that no single voice contains the whole truth. Love at the center calls us to listen for the person, not merely for the opening to insert our answer, our wisdom, or our opinion.

What might happen if, for just a little longer, we did not prepare our rebuttal, our story, our correction, our advice, or our response for when it's our turn? What if we listened for the hope beneath someone's words? The fear? The need? The truth shaped by a life very different from our own?

Listening does not require agreement. It does require presence. And sometimes one of the most generous things we can offer another human being is the experience of being heard without immediately being managed.

We also listen within—not with the analysis that can keep us awake at two o'clock in the morning, but with a gentler question: What is happening within

me right now? Joy, weariness, grief, gratitude, restlessness, hope—or perhaps something we are not yet ready to name. We do not have to know. Awareness itself can be enough.

And we listen beyond ourselves: for God, Spirit, conscience, wisdom, Love, the sacred, or the natural world as teacher and relation. We do not all name it in the same way. The practice begins with humility: remembering that we are not the only voice in the room—and perhaps are not always meant to be.

So What

But listening, by itself, is not the end of the spiritual work. If we listen deeply, sooner or later we may hear something that asks us to change.

Imagine that we are planning a special dinner. We decide that everybody is invited. We find a great big table, place chairs all around it, prepare wonderful food, open the doors, and say, "Come in! Everybody is welcome!"

People begin to arrive. Then we notice that one person uses a wheelchair and cannot fit comfortably at our table. Someone else cannot eat the food we prepared. Another person has difficulty hearing the conversation. Someone is very young, and everything they need is just a little too high to reach. Someone does not speak the language most people are speaking. And one person sits quietly at the end because they do not know anyone—and no one has spoken to them yet.

We really did invite everybody. We meant it when we said, "Everybody is welcome." So what is the problem?

The problem is that there is a difference between inviting everyone to the table and creating a table where everyone can belong.

That difference is where Equity meets Love.

Equity reminds us that treating people with Love does not always mean giving everyone exactly the same thing. Sometimes Love pays attention to what people actually need. Sometimes Love moves the chairs.

This is a vital Ingathering question because religious communities are often sincere when we say everyone is welcome. We put it on our signs, our websites, and our orders of service. But welcome is not only what we announce. Welcome is what people experience.

Do people find room for their bodies, their stories, their cultures, their questions, their gifts, their doubts, and their ways of understanding the holy? Do they encounter a community already complete without them, into which they may squeeze if they learn the customs? Or do they encounter a living community willing to change in their presence?

Pluralism says that we are enriched by the diversity of our experiences and perspectives. Equity asks us to examine which voices are easily heard and which people must work harder to participate. Justice calls us to change the practices and structures that keep belonging unevenly distributed. Generosity asks us to loosen our grip on our preferred seat, our familiar way, or our assumption that the table works simply because it works for us.

Interdependence reminds us why this matters: none of us flourishes alone. Transformation tells us that both people and institutions can change. And Love holds these commitments together—not as sentiment, but as a disciplined concern for the flourishing of everyone.

Making room may mean moving an actual chair, explaining what insiders assume everyone knows, or providing another way to participate. It may mean listening to someone who has not had a chance to speak, changing a rule that makes belonging harder for others, or noticing someone standing alone and saying, “There is room here. Come sit with me.”

And let us be honest: sometimes making room is inconvenient.

It may slow down a meeting. It may complicate a plan. It may require money, attention, patience, or a willingness to admit that good intentions did not produce the impact we hoped for. Love at the center does not promise that faithful community will always be comfortable. It asks whether our comfort is the highest good we serve.

That is why Ingathering is more than a reunion. It is a recommitment. We are not gathering merely to resume familiar activity. We are gathering to become more fully the community our Values call us to be.

Now What

And that brings us to the third practice: practice becoming.

Imagine a field of tall grass with no visible path through it. The first person who crosses must push through. The grass bends beneath their feet, but much of it

rises again after they pass. Then another person walks the same way. And another. And another. Eventually, something changes. A path appears.

Not because someone stood at the edge of the field and declared, “There shall be a path.” A path appears because we've traveled a direction repeatedly.

Our lives work something like that. So do congregations.

What we practice creates pathways. We practice patience—or impatience. Attention—or distraction. Generosity—or scarcity. Curiosity—or certainty. Courage—or avoidance. Compassion—or indifference.

We practice these things in small moments that rarely feel transformative as they happen: one conversation, one choice, one meeting, one response, one decision to try again.

Transformation sounds dramatic. Sometimes it is. Sometimes life divides itself clearly into before and after. But most transformation is quieter. We become shaped by what we repeatedly give our attention to, choose, tolerate, rehearse, and do.

This means our Shared Values are not simply beliefs we affirm. They are paths we make by walking.

Interdependence becomes visible when we remember that another person’s well-being is bound up with our own. Pluralism becomes visible when curiosity changes the way we listen. Justice becomes visible when conscience moves us toward action. Equity becomes visible when we make room and share power. Generosity becomes visible when we live with open hands. Transformation becomes visible when we release what no longer serves life and practice another way. And Love remains at the center when living these Values becomes inconvenient.

Not perfection. Practice.

Practice assumes we will not get it right every time. Nobody says they are practicing piano because they already play every note perfectly. We practice because we are learning.

Spiritual community deserves the same grace. We will forget. We will lose patience. We will close our hands. We will stop listening. We will miss an opportunity, misunderstand one another, or choose the old familiar path.

Transformation does not require us to respond to failure with shame. It asks us to notice—and return.

Return to Love. Return to the Value. Return to the practice. Take another step along the path we want to create.

So I am not going to ask us this morning to reinvent the entire congregation before coffee hour. That would make for a very long meeting—and probably a very quiet coffee hour afterward.

I am asking something smaller and, perhaps, more demanding.

As we enter this new congregational year, choose one practice that can help make our Values visible. Not seven. One.

Maybe your practice is listening for the person beneath the words. Maybe it is learning the name of someone you do not yet know. Maybe it is asking, "Who is missing from this conversation?" Maybe it is staying curious when you feel the urge to become certain. Maybe it is making room for a voice, a body, a need, or an idea that our familiar arrangements did not anticipate. Maybe it is asking, "What is mine to do?"—and then doing that faithful portion without trying to carry everything.

Choose something small enough to practice and real enough to matter.

Because an inspiring service can move us. A beautiful ritual can reconnect us. An Ingathering can remind us that we belong. But inspiration and transformation are not quite the same thing.

Inspiration says, "Something moved me." Transformation asks, "What will I practice because I was moved?"

That is the bridge between the Values printed in our materials and the values embodied in our life together.

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And now, we will make that bridge visible.

For generations, water has gathered communities together. It has carried people across distances, sustained life, marked transitions, and reminded us that no part of creation exists alone. Today, the water we bring represents more than where we have been. It represents what we have discovered, what has changed within us, and what we are carrying into this new congregational year.

In a moment, you will be invited to come forward and pour your water into our communal vessel. As you approach, I invite you to hold one question in your heart:

What value became clearer to me this summer?

Perhaps it was Love, Interdependence, Equity, Transformation, Pluralism, Generosity, or Justice. Perhaps you discovered a need for more courage, more rest, more connection, or more room to become.

We will not ask everyone to tell the entire story aloud today. Instead, let the water carry the story. As you pour, you may silently name the value you are bringing into our common life. If you wish, you may speak that one word softly: Love. Justice. Generosity. Transformation. Whatever has become more real for you.

If you did not bring water, water is available. Your experience and your presence belong in this vessel, too. If coming forward is difficult, please let us know, and we will add water for you.

Those joining us online are invited to pour water into a bowl or cup at home, joining your intention with ours across the distance.

As music plays, let us come forward—not simply to report where we have been, but to offer what our experiences have taught us and what we are becoming.

Closing

We have gathered again—not because we are all alike, not because we agree about everything, and not because any one of us holds the whole truth.

We gather because we belong to one another. Because many paths can deepen shared wisdom. Because Love asks something of us. Because Equity calls us to make room. Because Generosity opens our hands. Because Justice moves Love into public life. Because Transformation is possible when we practice another way.

And through it all, Love remains at the center—not a passive feeling, but the spiritual discipline that keeps calling us back into relationship.

So let us listen beneath the noise.

Let us create more than an invitation; let us create belonging.

Let us practice becoming—not becoming someone else, not becoming perfect, but becoming more fully the people and the congregation our deepest Values call us to be.

This is our invitation for the season ahead. We will do more than talk about our Values. We will look for the chances—large and small—to walk the walk: to make Love visible, to let our choices reveal what we claim to believe, and to practice these Values until they become recognizable pathways in our daily lives.

This morning, we began by noticing what the summer stirred within us, which Values became more visible, and what we may want more—or less—of in the season ahead. But noticing is only the beginning. If our Values are going to become recognizable pathways in our lives, they will need more than our agreement. They will need our attention, our choices, and our practice.

Today, we choose the direction. Next Sunday, we will ask how to take the next step on purpose—how to move from knowing what we value to planning a life that makes those Values visible, more real beyond this sanctuary: in our homes, our relationships, our work, our decisions, and our encounters with the wider world.

Today, we begin by noticing what life has already been teaching us and choosing what we are ready to practice next.

May the path we make together lead toward greater courage, deeper connection, wider welcome, and a Love large enough to make room for us all.

Welcome home. And welcome to the work of becoming.