

**Odyssey**  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver  
July 26, 2026

**Reflection on the Theme** by Alexis Balkowitsch

Well, I certainly have plenty to reflect on this morning! Along with the obvious—Reverend Kathryn’s retirement—this is also my last day as an official member of the Worship Associate Team. Of course, my “retirement” doesn’t mean I’m leaving—just taking a break from this role before I inevitably step up into something else—but naturally, these endings have me thinking about journeys, and change.

My first instinct when I reflect on my journey as a Worship Associate is to ruminate on all the things I think I could’ve done better. I feel like I could’ve opened up more. That I should’ve been more present. I definitely could have been more organized! I came into this experience thinking I might go into chaplaincy, but along the way I’ve discovered I have more personal work to do first—and while I’m grateful for the knowledge, I can’t help feeling a little disappointed, like I might be ready now if I’d let this experience change me more.

But how much have I changed—how much work have I already done—just to get to the point that I’m even here as a Worship Associate? Well, first I had to conquer my abject terror of public speaking. I had to live the experiences I’ve used in my reflections, and cultivate the confidence to share them. And I had to show up here eleven years ago, join a community, and actually stick around—even in discomfort and disagreement, through a pandemic, and during all the inevitable changes communities face.

In fact, I found this congregation during one of those big changes—our previous interim—so I guess this is kind of like going back to normal for me? Well, not “normal”, but maybe that’s why I’m not as anxious now as I expected I’d be. My introduction to UUCV was going through the process to find Reverend Kathryn...which far from being scary, led to the joy of an amazing nine year journey with a truly wonderful human being. And now we loop around to take the path again, similar but somehow completely different, sad to say goodbye, for sure. But perhaps also a little excited to see who’s waiting around the bend.

I suppose that’s where I’ve been changed more than I realize, because I’ve always been one of those people who hates change. But by being in this Beloved Community, I think I finally, truly understand that what is scary alone, is not so bad faced together. That the journey taken in community is not so daunting.

Love One Another, and Trust the Process.

**Odyssey? ©** by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

That piece of music (*Love is the Spirit of this Church* by Elizabeth Alexander) was commissioned by the Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Lansing for the opening of their new building. I was serving that church as minister when we commissioned the piece by Elizabeth Alexander. She came and worked with the choir and they performed it at the Building Dedication in October of 2016.

It had been a long journey to get to that day. I had been serving the congregation since 2002. I felt like we had been working on the building problem most of my 15 years with them.

But that's really to start the story at the end of my story with them. I guess I'm thinking about endings this morning.

If you, like my sister, panicked when you heard in the reading that Odysseys are an "hour or two" long, let me assure you I am not sharing with you my complete Odyssey this morning. That would have started with my having been named by my sister and father as they were driving home from church - Eastshore in Bellevue before they were a part of founding what is now called Northlake UU Church in Kirkland, WA.

I won't start there. I am only sharing some brief stories from my two ministries.

This one about the building from Lansing seems relevant this morning as we are packed in here and have been packed in here all summer - leading me to wonder if we should be holding two services all year round - and remembering that when you called me to serve as your minister, you had on your wish list a discussion about your space and buildings. We never got to that. Other crises intervened.

But what I want to tell you about my journey around space with the other congregation is that it took a lot of time and a lot of conversation with everyone for people to understand the space problem in a similar way. It may have helped that their building was really, really ugly. They had turned a fraternity house into a church, and besides being very inaccessible - two floors accessible because it was on a hill like your RE building, but with two additional floors on top only accessible by stairs - and it was ugly. You do not have that issue. In fact, your space is quite lovely, if not acoustically unique. Your grounds are lovely, if not buildable - you have land, but no place to build because of the flood plain. If you are anything like the Lansing congregation, you will find it hard to leave this land - and some of you will think it is necessary to solve your space problem, and others will not - some of you will even wonder why you need to make room for all those who are seeking liberal religion in Vancouver - because this place suits your needs just fine as it is, thank you very much. (a position your minister will object to, I can boldly say, even though I won't be that minister.)

The turning point in Lansing came with an exercise we held in the sanctuary in which we asked people to stand on an imaginary line forming a continuum - with one end being those who thought we should move, and at the other end of the continuum, those who thought we should remodel or rebuild in the current location. The result was stunning. Pretty much half the room was at one end and the other half at the other, with a few people in the middle ambivalent. But this was, I think, the first time most of the congregation recognized that there were those who really disagreed with them. It is a human tendency to talk with those you know and often with those with whom you agree - and they really didn't understand that they were split on this issue until that moment.

I forget how hard that first ministry was because I remember them as I left them, not when I started. The Lansing church was a miscondacted system. That is, leaders had abused their power in the past, and the scarcity thinking and power-hoarding behaviors were a reaction to that abuse of power. There had been a high turnover of ministers. In 162 years, they had never had a minister last more than 9 years, and the minister who served them for nine years had a negotiated resignation upon her return from sabbatical. There had been several big church fights over ministers. It was only after I

accepted a pre-candidating weekend interview with the search team that I learned about their reputation for “eating ministers alive.” Everyone warned me away from that congregation, but I decided to go through with the interview anyway. I had scheduled four other visits and thought I could use this first interview as a trial run. I visited with no expectation of accepting an offer. I had never been to Michigan in my life and no interest in living there.

I asked them about their reputation and pushed hard in the interview. I had nothing to lose. I had four more good possibilities lined up. I was surprised by their frankness in return. They answered all my questions and then some. They were fully engaged with their history and knew their reputation. They gave every indication that they were ready to turn a corner and do something different. No other search committee met me at this level, and despite other offers, I accepted theirs.

But they were a tough system. Because of the high turnover of ministers, the worship committee – called Celebrations (because Sunday services were called Celebrations of Life) – the worship committee led two services a month and the minister led two services a month and never the twain shall meet. I had negotiated a contract in which I led three services a month, so I had already invaded their space, and then I actually wanted us to work together to shape all the services. It was a very tall order and nearly insurmountable. Those meetings were excruciating at first, as were staff meetings. There was a staff person – a very part-time position, but long time member of the congregation – who just made it a point to oppose anything I might suggest. I don’t remember any of the issues – I just remember the opposition.

So, it was a challenging congregation. I was living far from home. When the pianist and his wife, who had two children close in age to our son, invited us for dinner on Sunday nights, we accepted. It was a great way to end the day, debriefing the morning’s service, and winding down from being “on” all morning. The kids had a great time. The adults got along. I became close to the pianist’s wife, who was in graduate school and didn’t really attend church at all. They invited the Music Director to join us, and that was fun.

Though I had an early sign of the problem with this arrangement when the Director of Religious Education overheard the Music Director making Sunday dinner plans with me and the DRE wasn’t invited.... But it became a Sunday night ritual. I even made the prescient remark one time, that this would only work as long as the pianist and his wife didn’t get a divorce... why I said that, I don’t know, and of course, that is what eventually transpired.

When the Music Director invited a member of the choir to join us at the Sunday night dinners, I objected. She insisted that this choir member wasn’t a member of the church but just liked to sing. I relented, these Sunday dinners were so important to us as a family. But that was the beginning of the end. This choir member and the pianist had an affair. His marriage broke up. I was left managing conflict in the church that I was a part of creating. The kids were devastated. I was devastated. It brought me back to my parent’s divorce and the issues in my family of origin. It put me back in the role of minister to that congregation in a way I had been neglecting. I had to supervise the pianist who was having an affair with a choir member and the Music Director who worked with him. It was messy and awful. I spent all my time with colleagues processing my bad boundaries and poor decisions.

And I learned a lot. I became a better minister. I understood how I had contributed to the dysfunction of the system, and I stepped up.

I'm sharing with you stories about my last ministry because they are further away in time, and the identities of the parties are unknown to you. But part of my Odessey, of course, involves our time together. The Music Director you had here when I arrived resigned under a cloud in the fall of 2019. I won't share with you the complications of the personnel matters or the stories that were spun at the time. Just know that it was hard on the congregation and the choir in particular. Just as we got through that crisis, in about January of 2020... the pandemic began.

We held a service on Sunday March 8<sup>th</sup> as usual in the sanctuary. We purchased hand sanitizer and sanitizing wipes. I bought these ridiculous baskets to put on poles for the offering so that we didn't touch the same surface. We thought then and for a long time afterward that the virus was transferred on surfaces. The afternoon of March 8th, I attended an installation at West Hills Unitarian Universalist Fellowship. The Rev. Tracy Springberry was being installed and ministers across the area were in attendance. I listened to the radio about the pandemic on the way there. When I arrived, I noticed a distinct difference between the ministers from Oregon and the ministers from Washington that day. We Washingtonians didn't hug and we kept our distance. The Oregonians hugged as usual and huddled close. It seemed to me that the Oregonians were behaving as if nothing had changed. I chalked it up to the fact that Seattle had been the epicenter of an outbreak in a skilled nursing facility and somehow we in Washington state were more alarmed.

Then during that week, it became clear that it wasn't smart to gather in the sanctuary. We had to go online. I never again got to use those baskets on sticks I was so proud of. I wasn't in the pulpit, so I filmed the service using a cell phone. Worship Associate, Karen Valbuena, was preaching. I think her daughter, Katherine, helped. There were a handful of us in the sanctuary, but we broadcast the service over Zoom. Because we held two services, what I remember is that everyone left as soon as the first service was over. I was instructed to push some buttons to replay the service over Zoom again at 11am and somehow I did something wrong and all that was broadcast were the images, no sound.

I don't remember how many Sundays we broadcast from the sanctuary, but pretty soon we were shut down, like every other place of business. I created a studio in the corner of my home office and we broadcast on zoom. We had hired an interim music director while searching for our next one, and Mandy was young and tech savvy and was able to create videos we could use for worship.

We managed to broadcast services on our own. We hired an Audio Visual Coordinator only once we moved back into the building. I still can't believe we waited that long. We started off broadcasting with that skeleton crew again in the building with the congregation still online, and then added people to the pews – using Eventbrite ticketing – remember when you had to have a ticket to come to worship? Unbelievably, the institution survived. We made it through. We survived, though more than 7 million did not. It was a chapter in human history that will not be forgotten. I think it's important to tell our stories of the pandemic, to continue our healing from it.

It felt like a big shuffle. Familiar faces didn't return. Some of them had become comfortable watching online and stayed home, but some had gone. New faces appeared. It felt like a different congregation. Leaders were exhausted and the new people were too new to volunteer. It was slow getting going again.

Nevertheless, I needed a sabbatical. I spent time on my sabbatical putting habits in place that would help me last in the ministry a few more years. I wanted my ministry to be sustainable, and the way we

responded to the pandemic was not. I was in crisis mode for well over a year, and that is impossible to sustain.

Both my sabbaticals gave me a taste of retirement, and I liked it. So, it didn't take long after my second sabbatical for me to begin dreaming of retiring altogether from the ministry. Besides the exhaustion of the pandemic, there was the election of Donald Trump for a second time. I had lived and preached through the first time he was in office. It was hard to imagine living and preaching through another four years. I was getting more interested in direct action, not trying to inspire others into direct action. I started volunteering with the Together Lab in Oregon, who help organize clergy to accompany migrants to appointments with ICE and immigration court. I was using my Spanish again and feeling helpful. And there were other interests I didn't make time to pursue while working full-time. I'd like to learn to drum. There was a lot of drumming in the village where I lived in the Peace Corps, but only men were allowed to drum. Women danced. I loved the dancing, don't get me wrong, but I always wanted to get my hands on the drums. Now I can.

I'd also like to be able to work at my own pace. I always felt as a minister that I needed to respond to others in a timely fashion, and it was hard to keep up. I'd like to slow down and not feel like I need to answer to others so much. I'd like to lead the contemplative life that I had once imagined ministry promised.

Ministry is an odd profession. There are so many more stories I could tell, but I promised my sister I wouldn't preach for two hours this morning. We spend our professional lives building community, and then we leave those communities with the same intentionality. Perhaps it is a rehearsal for death itself. 'Little deaths,' we call them. This is a little death, a loss, and I will miss you all very much. It's good for us to acknowledge that, and I am grateful to have had you in my life. What's next? It's a mystery.