Good morning!

I am Urban Larson and if I had known that I was going to be doing this the first day of Daylight Savings Time I would have thought twice before I agreed to give a testimonial.

I have been coming to FUSN for two and a half years and during that time I have made it a point NEVER to stand up here and speak in front of the congregation, so I would like to begin by thanking the lay ministers for all of the candles they have lit on behalf of the joys and sorrows I have held in my heart.

Like some of you I was raised as a Unitarian Universalist. My experience was very different from FUSN, though. We were just a small congregation in Wisconsin, started by my parents and a dozen or so other families in the early 60s. We didn’t have a minister, let alone a director of religious education, and the members did everything themselves, with the parents taking turns to teach religious education. We didn’t even have a building of our own and we moved around time from place to place, going wherever we could afford to pay the rent. One of the places we rented belonged to a religious organization called The King’s Daughters. The sweet old ladies who ran it thought we were very cute: a little religious group just starting out, on the way to getting its own church. They didn’t know that the first thing we did when we got there on Sunday morning was take down the portrait of Jesus and put it in the corner, facing the wall.

Even as a child I could tell that there was something special about Unitarian Universalism. Our little Fellowship was an island of freethinking in sea of Lutheran conformity. If I ever tried to describe what went on in our Sunday school to friends’ parents or neighbors the response would be “Well… that’s different”, which is Midwestern for “You’re weird and it’s making me uncomfortable.” My parents, in addition to teaching us to be respectful of other people’s religious beliefs would remind us to be discreet about our own and I remember my father saying: “We’re very lucky that the Christians leave us alone!” I used to be afraid that one day the Lutherans would break down the doors – ever so politely – and force us to put portraits of Jesus on the walls and recite the Lord’s Prayer while they fed us casseroles made with cream of mushroom soup.

I was reminded of this years later when I was an exchange student in Mexico at a very Catholic university. I happened to be looking through the university’s monthly magazine and stumbled across an article about religious cults, how rapidly they were spreading in the US and what a danger they posed to Mexico, with all of the American tourists coming to visit the country. The article went on to say that one of the most dangerous and fastest growing of all of the cults was something called la Asociación Unitariana Universalista. I knew then that I needed to keep a low profile. When asked I just said I was “Protestant”, only to be confronted with “Why don’t YOU PEOPLE believe in the Virgin Mary???” There was no good answer to that question.

Being a Unitarian Universalist has always been a central part of my identity but our little group didn’t have a Coming of Age program or a youth group and eventually I stopped going and became a lapsed Unitarian. Still, I treasured my UU religious education and tried to live up to it.

I have always tried to live by two core UU principals: that there are many places in which to find wisdom and understanding, even if we can never know for certain what the truth is, and that we must treat all people, no matter who they are, with respect for their inherent worth and dignity. We sometimes forget how powerful these principles are, not just ethically and morally but as practical guides to living in a diverse society.

On the walls of the Lutheran churches of my childhood are carved or painted the words: “Ye shall know the Truth and the Truth shall set you free” but we learned as young UUs that we should always SEEK the truth, we will never find it but the SEARCH will set us free. For me this is the core of Unitarian Universalism.

Over the years I only occasionally attended UU services – except for a brief time when I was a regular at the First Unitarian Society of Chicago – but I kept enough of a connection to have a UU wedding at Arlington Street Church in Boston. When we had a son of our own I knew I wanted him to have the kind of UU religious education that I had had and that is what brought us to FUSN.

FUSN can be an intimidating place for a Unitarian from the provinces: a big beautiful church with stained glass and all, lots of people in the congregation and JESUS in the big window behind me. It can feel like a place full of friendly, interesting people who have all known each other for decades. As a fellow newcomer described the atmosphere: this is a congregation of open arms but those arms seem already to be hugging each other. Still, I loved the services from the beginning with the wonderful music and the thought provoking sermons and was immediately impressed by how many things are going on here and by the RE program, especially the coming of age program and the youth group. I find the coming of age service incredibly moving. And being among others who are also seeking wisdom and understanding from many sources, yet knowing that we will never find the Truth, is a precious break from the mundane concerns of daily life.

Over time I have become more connected, by joining the Finance Committee, going to Ferry Beach and simply by attending regular services. Community is not something that you acquire overnight; it has to be built.

As I have become part of this community I’ve become aware that there are dozens of volunteers doing all kinds of different things around FUSN. Without them this community would be unable to function and in fact it wouldn’t even exist. I am especially grateful to the RE teachers who have been patiently teaching my son for the last two years. He can be difficult and I am sure they are happy that he has become a fanatical skier and so hasn’t been attending Sunday school much this winter.

But even with all of the work done by volunteers it costs money to keep this congregation going. As a member of the Finance Committee I see the numbers every month and I know that there is no fat in the budget. This community is entirely self-funding: there is no golden treasure buried underneath the old UUA headquarters on Beacon Hill. In fact we pay dues to the UUA. We have a very small endowment. Most of our income – almost three quarters – comes from the annual pledge drive. If we don’t pay for FUSN, no one else will.

When I was asked to help lead this year’s budget drive my first reaction was to say “Why me? I’m new and I don’t know anyone! And I don’t have time.” But I understood how important it is for us to raise the money to keep this community going, to keep funding our exciting services, our amazing RE program and all of the work this congregation does to further social justice in the wider world.

I hope that all of you will join me in increasing your pledges this year to help sustain this congregation.

Thank you.