

“Moving with Purpose”

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First Church in Boston

January 4, 2026

My life has not turned out how I expected it to. Has yours?

In some ways, my life has exceeded the expectations I had for myself as a young woman. I have experienced international travel as well as the inside of prisons. I have eaten extraordinary meals and witnessed overwhelming beauty. Others have nurtured me with abundant generosity, and I have been able to significantly help others.

But I have also had to learn to live with unchangeable loss and heartbreak. Sometimes choices or circumstances closed off certain directions. Divorce disrupted the dream of a life-long partnership and a traditional family. Moving out-of-state greatly diminished how frequently I could attend family gatherings with my parents and siblings. After two decades of living in Boston, this still makes me sad.

Sometimes that path we follow leads us to beauty, sometimes the path also leads to loss. It can be difficult to know what to expect. Nonetheless, we face choices day after day about where to go next and what to do. So how do you choose which way to move? When faced with the proverbial forks in the road, why choose this way or that? Do you know where you are going and why?

Our January theme picks up these questions by exploring the theme of “quests.” Stories about *quests* explore what it means to pursue something, to have a purpose that determines your direction and orients you along the way.

Do you have a favorite *quest* story? Perhaps you love epic stories like Homer’s *Odysseus* or Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*. Or maybe you’re a fan of classic movies like the *Wizard of Oz* with Dorothy and her friends each seeking a particular gift from the Wizard or of *Shrek*, the ogre, who strives to get his piece of swamp back. Whether in a book, on screen, or in our own life, quest stories depict journeys with a purpose that helps people choose what to do next.

Sometimes choices are clear. If you are on a quest to eat healthier, you should probably choose the apple over the cookie. But sometimes it’s not so clear, is it? We may want to eat healthier, but the “experts” give conflicting advice. Or our emotional attachment to certain foods or habits of eating can make change difficult. Or our access to “healthier” foods is limited by cost or availability. Indeed, pursuing a personal purpose can quickly lead to confronting larger social systems that impact our individual choices.

Whether the path forward is simple or more complicated, what makes discerning a path even *harder* is uncertainty about your purpose. A purpose acts as a rubric for decision making—a tool by which the options can be measured. Without a clarity of purpose, how to choose next steps can be confusing or more difficult.

It's also important to note that we can have multiple purposes for different aspects of our lives. And the nature of a purpose can vary.

A purpose may be the pursuit of a particular achievement. As our Intern Ministers Ebonié and John can tell you, pursuing ordination and fellowship as a Unitarian Universalist minister can be a long and arduous journey. So also, starting a family can be a long and arduous process—as can fighting cancer or rehabilitating from a fall.

But sometimes the purpose we pursue is not a singular, concrete achievement. Rather, we may quest towards a particular vision—even though the vision may never be fully “achieved” or “completed.” We may pursue a more peaceful society, making progress with certain gun safety laws, but fall short of eradicating all school shootings. Or we may pursue connection and find a sense of belonging here at church but still feel like an outsider at work or in your family of origin. Not all quests have finish lines. Rather, sometimes our purpose may be a tool that orients us in the ongoing journey of life and its choices.

Native American poet Joy Harjo describes using Audre Lourde's poems this way, writing:

“I had been using her poems as maps, the way some of our indigenous peoples used songs for star maps. They told me how to get from here to there, in a land of beautiful diversity as it existed within that perverted reality of racial and gender hate. ...[Her poems] tell me to this day that there is no end to the quest for justice, for knowledge, and remind me to make poems to hold everything that slips past the failure of memory, of love.” (Poet Warrior)

For Harjo, both reading and writing poems help to map the way through a landscape of beauty and hardship, reminding her of the ongoing quest for justice, for knowledge, for holding fast to what she loves.

On the cusp of this new year, what helps to map your way through the choices you make? Who or what reminds you of your purpose? Of the importance of your quest? Perhaps your quest is simply to make it through the shadows of pain that press upon you this day. Or maybe you are questing with others to protect democracy and the rule of law. Perhaps you are seeking to make peace with your aging body, the slow loss of your beloved spouse. Or maybe you are striving to raise ethical, compassionate kids while also managing to hold on to meaningful adult

relationships. As individuals and as a community, I feel we are all looking for maps to help us navigate our lives in this moment.

Taking a cue from Harjo's use of poetry, our reading today from poet Doug Crews is a map. Depicting the fragile blooming of an orchid in winter, he lauds the orchids patient growth, even in a season of cold and less light. As Crews writes,

*These blooms
stir something too long asleep in me,
proving with stillness and slow growth
what I haven't been able to trust
these past few months—that hope
and grace still reign in certain sectors
of the living world, that there are laws
which can never be overturned
by hateful words or the wishes
of power-hungry men.*

“Hope and grace still reign in certain sectors.” They reign in poems like those by Crews, Harjo, and Lourde. And they reign, I think, in places like this.

I believe that providing hope and grace is part of our purpose as a church. In a life riddled with disappointment and losses of what we expected of life, we need help finding our way forward through the pain. Sometimes that help comes in the form of grace—in an acceptance that tells us we still belong even if we've screwed up and feel broken. And sometimes that help comes in the form of hope—an assurance that the path does continue somewhere, somehow, even if to an unexpected, new place.

In every worship service I lead, I strive to include a message of hope. But I also believe that hope that is not grounded in an honest account of life risks devolving into a saccharin message of “toxic positivity.” No, all is *not* well—not with a world gripped by wars and climate change, not with a nation rife with *hateful words* and directed by *the wishes of power-hungry men*. Nor is all well in our city as our history of fighting *for* freedom wrestles with a long legacy of racial injustice. Still, there is hope. As Crews writes, the orchid blooms, slowly, patiently, “*even in the middle of winter, even in the darkness before the coming dawn.*”

Hope, I believe, emerges in the context of a living, connected community. Standing in a crowd of protestors on the Common yesterday reminded me anew of this truth as we chanted: “faced with tyranny, what do we do? We organize.” Hope is something we co-create by organizing around

tha shared vision that we pursue together. What is that *vision* for us as a religious community? What is *our purpose* as a church? What is our *quest* as a congregation?

Since arriving here two and half years ago, I have wondered how we might more clearly identify and name the purpose of First Church in Boston. Several sources of possibility currently co-exist. There is our history as the *first* church in Boston—but I fear too heavy of an emphasis on the past may undermine our engagement in the needs of the present and the future. There is also our affirmation that we recite weekly. However, I wonder if it effectively represents all of you as it was chosen by a small team of worship leaders some years ago, not created and affirmed by the whole body.

Another source resides in our membership book which lists both the 1630 Covenant and a 1909 Preamble affirming the 1630 Covenant’s “spirit” if not its theology. As we explored last year in our “Re-Imagining the Covenant” theme, the underlying questions of the Covenant continue to have resonance, but as a historic, Christian text, the plain meaning of the words do not represent most of us. Finally, Article 1 of our bylaws states our purpose as providing for “liberal Unitarian Universalist worship” as well as “to deepen the fellowship of the congregation, and to increase the service of the Church to its congregation and members and to the community.”

While there is clear overlap in some of these various sources, I believe we would benefit from further conversation and clarity about our shared understanding of the purpose of First Church Boston.

As we enter 2026, this clarity of purpose is no small matter. Not only do we live within a context of a society in need of hope and grace, as an institution we are facing critical budgetary questions in the face of dwindling cash reserves and a budget deficit. Clarity of purpose, I believe, will help us to navigate the landscape of choices within and beyond the walls of our congregation.

Clarifying our shared purpose and naming our “quest” as a congregation is something we do together. Perhaps it can start with each of you taking time to consider why *you* are engaged here—or, if you are a visitor, what brought you here today or why you are engaged in your home congregation? I would suggest thinking of this question in at least two parts—why are you engaged in religious community generally and why are you engaged in this particular congregation? We all face choices about what to do on a Sunday morning—and what church or temple or mosque or meditation center to attend (or not). So why show up here?

After answering these questions for yourself, I invite you in coffee hour, small group discussions, or in other conversations, to share your “why” with one another, with me, and the Standing Committee. I know this place, this community, matters to you. I ask for your help to more clearly name who and why we are so that we might move together *with purpose*. My hope

is that this will not only help us discuss and make decisions about our future, but also that a shared sense of quest might deepen our connections to one another and to the world around us. Perhaps then we might also help to co-create a bit more hope in the world.

Blessed Be. Ashe. Amen.