

AFFIRMATION – JULI CICARELLI
APRIL 3, 2011

Good morning. I'm here to tell you a bit about myself, my family, and why I have come to value Countryside Church.

My family was Irish Catholic, and even though my parents didn't attend church, they sent my sister Rose Elizabeth and me to the neighborhood Catholic Church. Even as a young child, I didn't like being there, I didn't like being sermonized at, made to sit still and listen to the priest tell me what to do. Some of the beliefs seemed weird to me, like sending babies to limbo because they were not baptized.

During high school, I stopped going to church. I went to the University of Connecticut, where I met and then married my husband Jim. We had two children, Jill and David, and Jim and I never considered sending them to church, and Jim and I never considered sending them to church. A neighbor invited David to attend his Fundamentalist Christian Church. David liked going to the Church, and we got to know and like the minister. He was just out of seminary, full of life, enthusiastic, and open-minded, so of course the church fired him after his first year.

Every time we moved, David wanted to go to church. In Fredonia, New York, he somehow ended up going to the Christian Harvest Bible Church. The people there were very kind to him, but they worried about us because we did not go to church services. Later on, we found out that they were all praying for us, thinking that we needed salvation. David seemed to like all this attention. Once he told people that we were getting a divorce, and sometimes told them we were ill, just so they would pray for us.

When we moved to Youngstown, Ohio, David and I visited all kinds of churches, some of which I couldn't get out of fast enough. When we visited the First Unitarian Church of Youngstown, I told the minister I didn't like churches. He said that was fine and welcomed me to the church. Karen, the RE director said that while David was in RE, I would have to be at church.

So I spent every Sunday wandering about the church and getting to know the parishioners. I went to the Forum, helped out with RE and social action, and sometimes even went to services. When I was asked, I took over leadership of the Forum. I was comfortable at the church, felt I fit in, loved the RE program, and made good friends. I became a Unitarian.

When we moved here fifteen years ago, I missed my Youngstown Church, but I looked forward to finding a new Unitarian home. I know I would find like-minded people and make good friends. The people in this church have helped David and me in countless ways. I can assure any of you, old or new members alike, that if you have a problem, need help or advice, just ask and someone here will help you.

From my experiences with churches, I've developed beliefs that help me live with my life with value and integrity. No worshipping a male supreme white-haired patriarch who controls me and everyone else, no religion that excludes and devalues women, and certainly no religion that stigmatizes nonbelievers. My beliefs are grounded in

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mythologies that existed millennium before Christianity, when women were valued. Christianity has not been kind to women. Through reading, discussions, women's programs like Cakes for the Queen of Heaven, and Woman Spirit retreats, I have come to honor women's knowledge and wisdom. I have also learned from Native American spirituality, Buddhism, and spiritual practices like Yoga.

At home, guided by the cycles of nature, I tend to my plants, work in my garden, and spend time with my dog and my cat, beautiful and loving companions. I foster rescued cats and I have watched them, who have come from all sorts of neglect, adjust to new circumstances, heal and grow.

I believe in a life force in and from the earth, space, and the stars. I don't care where it comes from, how it came to be, or what it is called. But I do know life in all its forms – plant, animal, and human – is to be nourished, taken care of, and honored. So, in ending, I say thank you all for being a part of my life's journey and helping me along the way. Amen, and Namaste, I honor the light in all of you.