Rev's Reflections

Preserving and Protecting

People often ask me how I spent my "week off" each month. With my 3/4 time schedule, I don't think of those fourth weeks as time off so much as furloughs: periods when I am not paid to be here at UUCSC. They are times I can devote to other projects like research, making clothes, helping friends with their needs, or things around my own home that need doing.

Last week found me painting the outside of my house. Not the whole exterior, just the large porch that wraps around the south and west sides of the house. We recently had the whole porch roof replaced, including the rafters, overhangs, gutters and a few courses of siding above the roofline. There were a lot of raw materials to protect before winter.

You know how that goes. One thing led to another: fresh paint on the overhangs made the mildew on the columns stand out, then I could see how much the walls above the new siding were fading and chalky, even peeling in places.

Seven days later, the house looks almost new again. At least on those two sides. Now I know how I will be spending a couple furlough weeks next spring.

The funny thing is that the casual observer would probably never notice the house got painted. It's still the same color it's been for two and half decades, a soft, warm, neutral color scheme chosen by the interior architect who bought the house in 2001. I would never have chosen two off-whites, but they work because they're sensitive to the neighborhood and true to the Greek revival style. It's a study in subtle elegance. My personal style has never been described as subtle.

While I worked in silence, I thought about how my role as steward for the house is a lot like my role as steward of the congregation. In both of these realms, my job isn't to assert my taste as a way of validating my presence. My job is to respect what's there, and to let the place be what it wants to be, what it has been its whole life.

I chuckled out loud at how conservative that sounds, as if my only responsibility is to protect the past, unchanged. But it's more than that. It's about honoring the identity of the place, while really loving the ways in which our needs and offerings intersect. We both become stronger in caring for each other. The house provides shelter, warmth and beauty, while I return the favor. You and I do something similar for each other.

When I first became a UU minister, it felt like one of the most radical, countercultural things I could do, requiring me to live intentionally, to call out injustice, and to be present with people often considered disposable. Those are still radical things to do, especially now. But as I do the work of stewarding this congregation, letting it be what it is by preserving its past and protecting its future, it looks conservative.

But I know better.

In Peace,
Rev Denis