



**Hold Your Own**  
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**Sunday 22 November 2020**

I chose today's story, Quaky Cat by Diana Noonan, for the children because that's how I've felt about 2020. There have been times this year when I've felt that the ground under my feet wasn't as solid as I'd thought. There have been seismic shifts in what I thought I could take for granted:

- going to the supermarket, to the rugby or a concert
- travelling overseas (my daughter and I had planned a trip to visit family in Sweden for the first time)
- hugging my friends
- shaking hands at work
- ...democracy?

I received my annual alumni newsletter from NYU Law School recently. One of the articles was a research report from the constitutional law professors there, Richard Pildes and Samuel Issacharoff. It started by saying that 20 years ago, their research concentrated on what led democracy to fail or flourish in countries that had emerged from autocratic rule or conflict in the 1990s and early 2000s. They formulated their research question about the health and stability of a country's democracy as whether you could have confidence that one fairly contested election would be followed by another.

The article says that 20 years ago that question seemed less relevant in discussions of government in the US and other long-established

democracies. Now, however, they say it's different. They have to ask this question again in the US.

The Brennan Center for Justice, a non-partisan law and policy institute with links to NYU Law and that focusses on research and advocacy into elections and voting rights, had as its mission statement in early 2019 that "at this critical moment" it was "dedicated to protecting the rule of law and the values of constitutional democracy". By the end of 2019, that language had been updated to read "Today, we are in a great fight for the future of constitutional democracy in the United States".

Professor Pildes says in the article I was reading that now: "there's a much greater sense of politics as existential, that everything is at stake, that losing an election is catastrophic and irreversible, rather than part of the routine alternation of power that happens in a pluralistic democratic society". The NYU article was written earlier this year in the context of the Black Lives Matter protests and the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then we've had the two elections in New Zealand and the United States. I don't know about you but to me the stakes really did feel high this time, higher than in past elections, and I feel like I've been left reeling and gasping for breath now that they're over.

How does all this relate to us at the Unitarian Church in Auckland? You may remember that earlier this year Clay asked a couple of us to think together about the future of this church. I'm afraid it's proved to be a "slow burn project" - other things have gotten in the way this year. And I also have a concern about what right I have, as a relatively new member of this church, to presume to address these issues.

But it's got me thinking about what this church is and reading about our history. What is this place we have here? Who are we? (Oh, that little question, right?)

I've been thinking about a story (a parable, really) I read in a Mitch Albom book about a little girl whose father, a soldier, was being moved to a distant post. She was sitting at the airport among her family's meagre possessions. The girl was sleepy and leaning against the packs and duffel bags. A lady came by and patted her on the head. "Poor child", she said, "you haven't got a home". The child looked up in surprise. "But we *do* have a home. We just don't have a house to put it in." (And you can see the parallels with Quaky Cat, right?)

A home is a place where you belong, where you fit (or to quote Robert Frost, "the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in"). It's much more than a physical building, although the physical building can be a big part of it. It's something you can rely on. That's solid beneath your feet, when everything else is shifting.

So what is it that makes this place "home" for you? Or if it's not yet "home", what might make it "home"?

Is it the UU tradition that we're part of? Being part of a faith tradition is one of the things that we can hold on to in our lives. It can be something larger than us, something that will survive us, and that connects us, including to those who have gone before us and those who will come after us. A related idea is whakapapa: it's our genealogy, lines of connection.

Is it our history? I've been reading (and enjoying) John Maindonald's history of the Unitarian church in NZ. Here are a couple of vignettes that have stood out for me so far:

In April 1909 the Evening Post reported on the opening of a new church building in Wellington:

"Dr Tudor Jones, at the morning service, traced the rise and progress of the Unitarian Church in Wellington. It had started from

small beginnings until to-day it comprised over 200 members. . . . The only authority before which its supporters bowed was not that of any priest or tradition, but the authority of conscience. . . . It was through grasping the principles of freedom and truth and goodness in their direct bearing on their lives and the light of the world that they could solve, so far as it could be solved at all, the riddle of existence.”

Another one: In August 1913 the Christchurch Star reported a Unitarian church sermon in Christchurch:

“On Sunday night at the Alexandra Hall the Rev J. H. Chapple delivered a lecture on “Unitarian Aims and Ideals.” . . . The movement aimed at establishing a congregation of tolerant and enlightened thinkers. Another aim was to teach kinder and more modern thoughts of God. . . . [A] fellowship was found that was not based on a common creed, [b]ut upon common aims, common ideals and a common spirit. Each member was allowed to think freely his own thoughts. The mind of each and all was thus kept open to fresh and new ideas, recognising there could be no finality or fixity in an evolving universe.”

There is a history here that we’re part of.

Is “home” the people, us, our community here? We all have very different lives outside of here. We’re divided by our backgrounds, our day jobs, age, gender, ethnicity, geography (especially our online community). Like all communities, we have tendrils and roots sometimes pulling us in different directions. But I suggest we also have a core tangle of togetherness that somehow, in its messiness and its ambiguity, creates a shared identity.

And we've got our seven principles up on the wall, right? I have to confess, sometimes I look at them and think "they're so obvious". How could anyone disagree with them? They're pretty inoffensive, maybe even so broad as to be meaningless?

But I wonder if that's right. If this year has taught me anything, it's not to take this stuff for granted. The inherent worth and dignity of every person. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations. And so on. See what I mean?

This year has taught me to think carefully about what I can rely on. And also what I will choose to rely on.

Abraham Lincoln said: "Make sure your feet are in the right place then stand firm." I'd like to see us articulate where we put our feet, then stand firm. We don't have a big glossy church with a congregation of thousands and a live band. Sometimes it feels pretty modest - there aren't always that many of us, right? But it's very special. And it's strong. And - despite Clay's encouragement last week to be humble- I think we can be very proud of it.

I'd like to see us feel confident we are putting our feet in the right place and then radiate a quiet, strong, calm, golden warm, kind pride that can stand firm and reach out and generously welcome anyone else who might also find a spiritual home here.

I'm not saying we have all the answers - look at UU principle #4 after all - and don't worry, I'm not proposing we get evangelical. But let's not underestimate what we have here either.

There are lots of ways one might describe it, and it may be - it's likely to be - different for each of us. And that's OK. It might just be a tentative,

emerging thing, especially for those who are new here (or joining on Zoom from outside Auckland).

I'm going to ask you to have a go at articulating your view of it in conversation time. The best way I could think of to phrase the question was "what makes this church feel like "home" for you?" It could also be: "what might make this church feel like "home" for you?" Something solid you can rely on, when everything else is shifting.

If you are willing, take a pencil and paper to your groups when we break out, jot down your ideas and place them in the green box here. For now, I'd like to end with the poem by Kate Tempest called "Hold your own". You'll see it was the inspiration for my title today.