

“Finding Home”
22 January 2006
Unity Church–Unitarian

Worship Leader: Katie Lawson
Worship Associate: Drew Danielson

READING: A Walk – Ranier Marie Rilke

My eyes already touch the sunny hill,
going far ahead of the road I have begun.
So we are grasped by what we cannot grasp;
It has its inner light, even from a distance –
and changes us, even if we do not reach it,
into something else, which hardly sensing, we already are;
a gesture waves us on, answering our own wave ...
but what we feel is the wind in our faces.

Translated by Robert Bly

READING: *from* “Song of the Open Road” – Walt Whitman

READING: “Angel Within” – kedar apsu (hickman)

[For text of this oral poem, please contact Katie at the Church Office.]

SERMON:

About five years ago now, I was trying to figure out whether to stay in Duluth. There, I had a close circle of friends, solid if not brilliant professional possibilities and a home that I loved. However, I was nagged by this growing stack of materials from seminaries that I had begun requesting five years prior, and I suspected that something important might open up for me if I left my cozy little niche even if it

wasn't to go to seminary. But then I thought, "How many people can say that they have what I have here? Is this just a grass is always greener sort of angst?"

Back and forth I went for easily a year. Then, one night a friend and I went for dinner and had as our waiter an old friend who had recently returned to his hometown after three years in Oregon. In catching up, I mentioned my thoughts about maybe leaving. His response is why I am here today. He said, "I think if you get to the point where you are deciding whether to stay in a place you clearly love or go, you should always go." And so I went.

Now then, I'm not sure that I totally buy his premise. I'm a big fan of the "staying put movement", in which we hold our restless American natures at bay and dig deeply into *one* place. However, taken in a less literal sense, his message is not about being fickle and dissatisfied with what you have but about being open to *becoming* and listening for what life wants *for* you and *from* you next. This can happen over and over again in the same geographic location.

Process theologians call that nagging - that invitation into the next place - "God." One of my favorite descriptions of God comes from process theologian, John Cobb, who expresses God as "the call forward." Sometimes I'm not sure it is forward, as much as "deeper" or "outward" or "inward". I'm not even sure I'm ready to call it God, but I hear it. It's the something that moves us towards a more authentic experience of ourselves as a part of the whole. I don't always sense it as clearly in my day-to-day life as when I'm embroiled in making a major league life decision, but I do hear it, especially when I've done my work to stay awake to life. Then I sense that the road leads to more than just what I already know and have experienced. In the poem Drew read this morning Rilke writes:

*My eyes already touch the sunny hill,
going far ahead of the road I have begun.*

Like patient restorers of frescos, we work tentatively to clean away the layers that lay between us and the experience of our “angel within”, working in small areas at a time, but bringing vibrancy to the whole with each minute of effort. According to the “experts”, the progress we make with this work is manifested in sequential stages of “faith development.” I’ve got to tell you, part of me really resists the idea that some of us are further up some rigid spiritual ladder than others. I tend to think it happens more like the melting of the snow – that its patchy and gradual – making these small inroads towards our self that is connected and free. Regardless, it is clear that the same angel we are excavating is simultaneously instructing us to keep digging, keep developing our capacity to hear it as individuals, as institutions, as nations, as a world.

The most commonly cited model of faith development was created by James Fowler in the 70s and emerged out of his study of developmental theorists like Erikson, Piaget and Kohlberg and of around 350 individuals from a variety of religious backgrounds. Consequently, other writers have explored faith development, but seem mostly to parallel Fowler. Fowler describes six discreet and sequential stages of faith development, others condense the same progression into four stages, none of which we are guaranteed to leave. In fact, in Fowler’s research, three quarters of the population resides in stage four or lower. So these stages are associated with different age brackets, but turning that age does not at all mean that we will move along spiritually.

Now, having just departed young adulthood according to the Unitarian Universalist Association, I, of course was curious about what was supposed to have happened to me by now, spiritually speaking. What I learned is that Unitarian Universalism and I have a lot in common, developmentally speaking.

In 80% of the cases, late adolescence or early adulthood is an important threshold spiritually due to what is prompted by the experience of “leaving home” either physically or emotionally or both.

*Afoot and light-hearted, I take to the open road,
healthy, free, the world before me.*

I don't think it is any coincidence that I fell in love with this poem when I was 18. I copied it onto the back cover of a copy of Winnie the Pooh I carried with me everywhere. “Onward! To that which is endless, As it was beginningless.” This is how I felt so palpably then, like life was constantly becoming, like I was constantly becoming, like many of the rules and conventions that bind the world were meaningless contrivances meant to keep certain people comfortable.

The experience of leaving home launches the stage called “Individuative-Reflective” by inviting clashes between the values that supported us in childhood and our experiences and our encounters with new respected authorities. We begin a critical reflection on our beliefs and values and how they are relative to the one particular group to which we have belonged. This stage is characterized by a self-defined faith that is differentiated from that of the significant others from our childhoods. In this stage, Fowler says, we tend towards an excessive confidence in reason and regard religious symbols as abstract concepts. We take the authority we used to give our parents or scripture or creed and relocate it in ourselves.

*Henceforth I ask not good Fortune –
I myself am good-fortune*

As a parent, Cynthia Voigt describes this experience as going from living with dogs to living with cats. This period is often described as the stage of the “skeptic or the seeker”. Though marked by

individualism, often this stage features a deep commitment to social causes.¹

Sometimes I think of Unitarian Universalism as a being – an organism – that exists because of and beyond its parts. And just as we are growing spiritually, this religion that we create and animate is growing. Because of the conservative nature of institutions, it may lag behind us a bit, but it changes as we change. It has to or it won't survive. And, I am convinced that if Unitarian Universalism were a person in Fowler's study, he would have judged it to be in this "Individuative," "Demythologizing," or "Skeptic" state that is associated with setting out as a young adult.

It would make sense. Unitarianism and Universalism were both birthed out of a leave-taking from their theological homes and is entangled with the founding of dominant American culture, which is often described as bearing the qualities of a young adult. Like a young adult setting out on the open road, early American Unitarians and Universalists departed from the prescribed belief system of their parent religion. Unitarianism, in particular, eventually sought to shift the locus of authority from the church and the minister to the individual. Transcendentalism took this even further, saying that revelation was on going in each of our experiences of the world and that in fact, we held the holy within us.

In an address to the annual General Assembly of Unitarian Universalists, sociologist Dr. Robert Bellah said, "Beneath the surface glitter of American culture there is a deep inner core, which, I have argued is ultimately religious: the sacredness of the conscience of every single individual." This is one of the essential values that Unitarian

¹ Peck, M. Scott. "The Stages of Spiritual Growth".

<http://www.escapefromwatchtower.com/stages.html>. accessed 12/16/05, p. 4.

Universalism has historically emboldened. It is no wonder that this faith has been such a welcome home for those who have left the traditions of their childhoods in order to find their own way.

Those who write about faith development agree that while this stage is an important one and dynamic one it also has its pitfalls, especially for those who linger. The danger of staying in this stage is that when religion is too abstracted and too entrusted to reason, it can lose its personal resonance and become flat to the ear and to the spirit. Those for whom this is the last stop, will often drift away from religion all together as it loses its heart beat and begins to feel, in Emerson's words, "corpse cold."

Recently, some lifelong Unitarian Universalists also write that we need to move on from a theology of leaving home that it is preventing the religion from being a home for those who long for something that *is*, more than something that *isn't*. Robert Bellah explains that the problematic side of individuality is everywhere in our culture, leading to the impression that humans are nothing but self-interested, narcissistic maximizers. I hear liberal religious people all over the country rumbling for motion, responding synchronistically to a call forward. What is next for us? What do we need from liberal religion? Who would each of us and all of us together like to be for and in the world?

Let's talk about what might come next according to our experts – the next stage of development for a minute, the one that's called Conjunctive faith or Mystic or Communal. In Fowler's model, it is the second to last stop on the line; in other models, it is the last. People seldom reach it before middle age, and in Fowler's research only 20% of the sample ever reached this stage. *This* stage is alive to paradox and ambiguity. It maintains an openness to the possibilities in the unfamiliar truths of the "other." This is the second naïveté that Janne spoke about a few weeks ago. Here we can be deeply religious, while

also desiring to enter into the mystery of uncertainty. The strength of this stage is in the ability to find power and meaning in one's own group and self while also recognizing that they are partial and integral to the whole.

I'd like to suggest for the sake of argument that, as a denomination, we have been trying to transition from the skeptic to the mystic, from the Individuative to the Communal for a while now and that the seedlings of a truly more universalist religion are pushing through the fertile soil of individual truth and reason. Bellah goes on in his address to say:

I don't think we can challenge that [shadow version of individuation] until we come to see that the sacredness of the individual depends ultimately on our solidarity with all being, not on the vicissitudes of our private selves. You face in your very denomination the most basic conundrum of American life. If you can solve it you may help lead the larger society out of the wilderness into which it has wandered.

We are poised to do this. The experts warn us that the challenge is to resist the natural temptation to be threatened by those who are a voice for the next stage and resist it. Just as it is common for those in the Conventional stage individuals to call Skeptic-Searchers sinners, it is easy for Skeptics-Searchers to relate to the curiosity and openness of the Mystics but be threatened by their belief in things like God and the oneness of the universe.

Our country is ripe for a shift; the urgency for change is building. My hope is that it can make the shift before too long. Fowler says that it is uncommon for people to move on to the more "communal" faith stance without experiencing some significant disillusionment, tragedy or failure. People that live with the grinding daily reality of oppression tend to move on more easily than the privileged. This nation is very privileged, by and large Unitarian Universalists are privileged, but we have had glimpses of tragedy lately.

Certainly, growing numbers of us have come to question the right of our might. We are beginning to feel the impact of our failures. We have known failure as a nation — failure to realize the American dream of real democracy and equality.

“Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed!” sings Langston Hughes. We have known the tragedy of lives lost to uncertain causes, to punishing malice, to natural wrath. We are shaken and we may be ready. We may be ready for liberal religion to hear its own call forward and invite people into the next America.

Yes, let us keep on with our becoming; let us listen to the angel inside of us beseeching us to grow. And in our becoming, as we go, let us be mindful of what we worship because “what we worship, we will become.”

Let us be guided by that inner light. We have been served well by the democracy of our faith that gave us back our agency, that said you do not need to be told what is holy... you *know* what is holy, it is in you. But now, now let us live closer to that inner light, let us be changed, even if we do not reach it, into something else, which hardly sensing we already are.