

# White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Sunday 15 November 2009

## Map of the Journey in Progress

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## READING #1

*When the English novelist D.H. Lawrence left home for school, his mother, Mrs. Lawrence, worried about the state of his soul, and prevailed upon her pastor to send her son a selection of his sermons. The author's response to one of these survives. It was, apparently, a sermon on the necessity of conversion to salvation, and young Lawrence had his own opinion.*

I believe that one is first converted when first one hears the low, vast murmur of life, of human life, troubling one's hitherto unconscious self. I believe one is born first unto oneself- for the happy developing of oneself, while the world is still a nursery, and the pretty things are to be snatched for, and the pleasant things tasted; some people seem to exist thus right to the end. But most are *born again* on entering into maturity; then they are born to *humanity*, to a consciousness of all the laughing, and the never-ceasing murmur of pain and sorrow, that comes from the terrible, beautiful multitude of brothers and sisters. Then, it appears to me, one gradually formulates one's religion, be it what it may. A person has no religion who has not slowly and painfully gathered one together, adding to it, shaping it; and one's religion is never complete and final, it seems, but must always be undergoing modification.

## READING #2

*The second reading is a poem from William Stafford.*

### The Way It Is

There's a thread you follow. It goes among  
things that change. But it doesn't change.  
People wonder about what you are pursuing.  
You have to explain about the thread.  
But it is hard for others to see.  
While you hold it you can't get lost.  
Tragedies happen; people get hurt  
or die; and you suffer and get old.  
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.  
You don't ever let go of the thread.

## Map of the Journey in Progress

From words sung by the choir just now:

*My good Lord's done been here, blessed my soul and gone...*

That is a beautiful idea. I hear that old song, that old spiritual, and I think of a person waking in the morning, shaking off the cobwebs of sleep and realizing suddenly as the mind comes clear that something has shifted in the night, something has changed: *my good Lord's done been here, blessed my soul and gone...* The language may be strange to us; even though the choir sang in English, the theological language may be foreign, but the idea is one that maybe we can grasp, that image of awakening with gratitude or wonder, or with some new understanding that came to you somehow, in spite of yourself, maybe while you were sleeping, or maybe you were awake and just not noticing. Every once in a while, you realize that somehow some wisdom has crept in under the threshold. How does it happen that we become wise? “Knowledgeable” is one thing, but I’m not talking about knowledge, not stuff you know, information you accumulate. I’m talking about wisdom, and compassion, reverence and gratitude, ways of seeing, ways of being, and becoming, a person.

I’ve been teaching a class this fall at United Theological Seminary, called “Preaching in a Unitarian Universalist Voice” for eleven wonderful UU students. Last week one of them showed us an assignment he’d done for another class, a visual map of Unitarian Universalist history which he’d laid out on a scroll. He made two wooden spindles with big handles, so it rolled up like the Torah; it’s bound with a leather cord. When he opened it for us, the paper stretched over ten or twelve feet wide, and on it, in different fonts, in different colors, in chronological order from pre-Semitic ancient Egypt to the very present, he’d arranged all the mile markers he knew, landmarks of Universalist, Unitarian, Transcendentalist, humanist thought, from Akhenaton to Abraham to Jesus to Calvin, to Emerson and Margaret Fuller, from Athanasius and the Nicene creed to the Humanist Manifesto, from abolition to the civil rights movement, from the burning of women as witches in the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the founding of the UU pagans in the 20<sup>th</sup>, all these things in tiny type, the gospel according to this one guy, our family story cast as sacred text.

What if you could lay out your own life like that, unwind the sacred scroll of all your years so far? Would you be able to mark the places where “the good Lord had been there, blessed your soul and gone,” or however you would say that in your own language – the places where something good, maybe inexplicably, had happened, and maybe changed the course of everything to follow? Can you see those moments shining? And in another color, maybe, another font, could you identify the places, the moments, the years where disaster struck, or disappointment, and changed the course again; and also all the many, many days that at the time seemed not significant at all, but now as you look back, you see that they were hinges, turning points, the end of one era in your life, for better or worse, the beginning of another? All your choices would be noted, all your decisions made foolishly or wisely, selfishly or lovingly. And running through all of this, could you trace a thread of your identity, your character, the original self that’s survived pretty much intact through all the chapters of your living, some shadow of the child you once were, some evidence of essence through and through: something you’ve always believed about the world or God, something you’ve always hoped for, or wondered or felt accountable to? Would people who knew you back in the day recognize you now, the central core of you, if not the exterior casing? How do you make a long string of random incidents and years into the coherent story of your life? What actually happened may be a matter of record, but how you choose to tell it, how you’ve chosen to respond, is a matter of character or spirit or faith, or all three. This is where the answer lies to the seemingly simple question, “What religion are you?” For Unitarian Universalists, I think, lacking a central creed, that can never be a short answer, and never boilerplate. You have to tell your story and it must be spoken in the singular.

A poet, Charles Olson, says,

*Whatever you have to say, leave  
the roots on, let them  
dangle  
and the dirt  
Just to make clear  
where they came from.*

“Whatever you have to say, leave the roots on,” like a bunch of onions or late carrots dug from a November garden. Your testimony has a deep history attached.

Another student in the class showed us a rock that she has had in her possession, always with her, since she was eleven years old -- a little stone that came into her

hand when she was a girl and she's held it now for decades. I'm not sure why I was so moved by this – it's something about how she has changed and grown and changed some more, but the stone that's journeyed with her has stayed the same as it was before she found it, and as it will be when she's gone. It could last another thousand years or more, after this brief sojourn of a lifetime in her pocket, in her dresser drawer. It reminded me of how I sometimes think of the soul, when I think of it at all – the thing in you that may grow and ripen, but somehow also stays solidly the same.

It reminded me, too, of a chunk of cement a friend gave me 20 years ago – a fragment of the Berlin Wall she'd just brought back from Germany. She wrote a single line on a card with it: *stone erodes, but truth endures*. What's stayed the same through the story of your life? What's eroded, changed, because of or in spite of your best efforts? The poet William Stafford says this, and I wonder if it's true:

*There's a thread you follow. It goes among  
things that change. But it doesn't change.  
People wonder about what you are pursuing.  
You have to explain about the thread.  
But it is hard for others to see.  
While you hold it you can't get lost.  
Tragedies happen; people get hurt  
or die; and you suffer and get old.  
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.  
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Is there a thread you can trace, as durable as stone, through all the eras of your life, a way of seeing maybe, a question that you've always carried in your pocket, a way of caring about things, a spiritual orientation? “Stone erodes, but truth endures.” What's yours? [I'll pass this bit of Cold War concrete among you, so you can meditate on history and memory, and transience and permanence.]

I've been thinking of members of our congregation who have died in recent weeks, one after 86 years of good life well-lived. Murray Olyphant was absolutely a character, absolutely himself, creative, quirky, kind, child-like, even till the very end, as the fiery force of him quietly damped down to embers. Murray was tired, and I think he was ready to lay down the effort of living, even if we who loved him were not ready yet to let him go – but Murray was Murray to the end. Char Menzel died all of a sudden at age 68 of a heart attack, and yet she too was

consistently herself every day of her life, it seems, including her last day, so that even those blinking back tears in the shock of her loss said afterwards, smiling, that she could never have been more perfected than she was. Char was younger than Murray and had much more living left in her to do, but there was something fully realized in her also. She knew what she loved and she knew what she wanted to be, knew who and how she wanted to be. Here were two who never let go of the essential thread of their story. Over time, by grace and will, they became more and more completely who they essentially were. If someone were to ask you, out of the blue, what kind of person you are, what you love, who and what you mean to be, what you believe and believe in, what your spiritual orientation is, what religion are you?- would you be prepared right in this moment to testify? Could you look back through the scroll of your life, all the stories there, your decisions and choices, victories and tragedies, the evidence that's in so far, and say with conviction, "This is who I am, and this is why?"

For a long, long time, for as long as I've been doing this work, whenever I've had to go out and make a speech, or go to a press conference or a demonstration, or teach a class, and almost always on Sunday mornings, Ross will say, just as I'm leaving the house, "Remember who you are." He knows me pretty well, and he knows that after all this time I'm still caught up short, as an introvert, by the horror of public speaking, so he offers this blessing. I remember one time, many years ago, when we still lived out east, I walked out and he called "goodbye," and then this little toddler voice called out, a little three year-old voice, "Bye Mama! Remember who you are!" I know that little children just mimic everything they hear, and that's all that was, but there was something in that charge, that admonition, *coming from her*, that gave it all the more weight and urgency. Sometimes we don't remember, can't remember, who we are, what we stand for, where we come from, where we mean to go, why we're here at all. But in this little benediction from them, then and still, I sometimes hear not only "remember who you are," but also *Remember whom we love. Remember what you love. Be singing the song of your soul, the original song you know by heart, to which you've been adding verses and harmonies all your life.* And then I can trace it back.

I love the story of D.H. Lawrence writing to his mother's minister. Mrs. Lawrence had asked him to send some sermons to strengthen the moral backbone of her young son away from home for the first time. (Maybe she had an inkling that D.H. was already conceiving in his mind the plot to *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and other shocking things.) Lawrence was young, but he wrote back, a beautiful reflection on his own understanding of how a soul is grown, how a moral person, a spiritual

person, over time is formed (and it had nothing to do, apparently, with whatever orthodoxy that minister was preaching).

*I believe that one is first converted when first one hears the low, vast murmur of life, of human life, troubling one's hitherto unconscious self. I believe one is born first unto oneself- for the happy developing of oneself, while the world is still a nursery, and the pretty things are to be snatched for, and the pleasant things tasted;[the simple life of childhood-] some people seem to exist thus right to the end. But most are born again on entering into maturity; then they are born to humanity, to a consciousness of all the laughing, and the never-ceasing murmur of pain and sorrow, that comes from the terrible, beautiful multitude of brothers and sisters. Then, it appears to me, one gradually formulates one's religion, be it what it may. A person has no religion who has not slowly and painfully gathered one together, adding to it, shaping it; and one's religion is never complete and final, it seems, but must always be undergoing modification.*

For him, religion was not something you convert to, a pre-existing set of exterior creeds and rituals and teachings, the wholesale acceptance of which results in salvation. For him, religion was something you glean over time, out of relationships with other people and the world, out of sorrow and delight, lived stories, adventures survived and scraps of real experience, everything you see and hear through the senses, everything you read, and music and art, everything your heart responds to and your mind and conscience try to understand. It's never complete and final, but always deepening and broadening, unfolding, widening, coming into focus. This is a very Unitarian Universalist idea, though Lawrence, of course, was not a Unitarian. It's the foundation of our religious education program for children and teenagers, that their faith will arise from the core of their being, and be shaped by their responses to the world; it cannot be instilled in them by others, cannot be indoctrinated. It's why the tradition of "This I Believe" is so important here each year, for us to hear others testify about what matters and what doesn't to them, and how they got that way, to be the way they are and see the way they do. There's been a lot of talk in our movement lately about "elevator speeches," about the importance of having readily available a concise articulate statement of faith, a sound-bite you could speak with confidence if someone asked you, between the ground floor and the 10<sup>th</sup> floor, what Unitarian Universalism is and what you yourself believe. I love that assignment, I think we all should do it, but I think it's equally important to know how you've gotten to your statement, to remember all that ground you've travelled. There are times – perhaps not in an elevator, but other times – when you need more than a sound-bite to go on. You

need to save your work, and show your work, as the math teachers used to insist. You need to remember who you are.

*Whatever you have to say, leave  
the roots on, let them  
dangle  
and the dirt  
Just to make clear  
where they came from.*

*-- silence--*

This meditation, written some years ago, is called “Map of the Journey in Progress.” Perhaps you’ll recall your own landmarks:

*Here is where I found my voice and chose to be brave.*

*Here's a place where I forgave someone, against my better judgment, and I survived that, and unexpectedly, amazingly, I became wiser.*

*Here's where I was once forgiven, was ready for once in my life to receive forgiveness and to be transformed. And I survived that also. I lived to tell the tale.*

*This is the place where I said no, more loudly than I'd thought I ever could, and everybody stared, but I said no loudly anyway, because I knew it must be said, and those staring settled down into harmless, ineffective grumbling, and over me they had no power anymore.*

*Here's a time, and here's another, when I laid down my fear and walked right on into it, right up to my neck into that roiling water.*

*Here's where cruelty taught me something. And here's where I was first astonished by gratuitous compassion and knew it for the miracle it was, the requirement it is. It was a trembling time.*

*And here, much later, is where I returned the blessing, clumsily. It wasn't hard, but I was unaccustomed. It cycled round, and as best I could I sent it back on out, passed the gift along. This circular motion, around and around, has no apparent end.*

*Here's a place, a murky puddle, where I have stumbled more than once and fallen.  
I don't know yet what to learn there.*

*On this site I was outraged and the rage sustains me still; it clarifies my seeing.*

*And here's where something caught me - a warm breeze in late winter, birdsong in  
late summer.*

*Here's where I was told that something was wrong with my eyes, that I see the  
world strangely, and here's where I said, "Yes, I know, I walk in beauty."*

*Here is where I began to look with my own eyes and listen with my ears and sing  
my own song, shaky as it is.*

*Here is where, as if by surgeon's knife, my heart was opened up - and here, and  
here, and here, and here. These are the landmarks of conversion.*

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