

Julie Stoneberg: Walking this Path Together  
Sermon delivered at Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship  
Thunder Bay, Ontario, June 12, 2005

Reading 1:

Walking, by Henry David Thoreau (excerpts)

I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks, who had a genius, so to speak, for sauntering; which word is beautifully derived "from idle people who roved about the country, in the middle ages, and asked charity, under pretence of going á la sainte terre" - to the holy land, till the children exclaimed, "There goes a sainte-terror", a saunterer - a holy-lander. They who never go to the holy land in their walks, as they pretend, are indeed mere idlers and vagabonds, but they who do go there are saunterers in the good sense, such as I mean. ...the Saunterer, in the good sense, is no more vagrant than the meandering river, which is all the while sedulously seeking the shortest course to the sea. For every walk is a sort of crusade...

We had a remarkable sunset one day last November. I was walking in a meadow the source of a small brook, when the sun at last, just before setting, after a cold grey day, reached a clear stratum in the horizon, and the softest brightest morning sun-light fell on the dry grass and on the stems of the trees in the opposite horizon, and on the leaves of the shrub-oaks on the hill-side, while our shadows stretched long over the meadow eastward, as if we were the only motes in its beams. It was such a light as we could not have imagined a moment before, and the air also was so warm and serene that nothing was wanting to make a paradise of that meadow....

We walked in so pure and bright a light, gilding the withered grass and leaves, so softly and serenely bright - I thought I had never bathed in such a golden flood, without a ripple or a murmur to it. ...the sun on our backs seemed like a gentle herdsman, driving us home at evening.

So we saunter toward the Holy Land; till one day the sun shall shine more brightly than ever he has done, shall perchance shine into our minds and hearts, and light up our whole lives with a great awakening light, so warm and serene and golden as on a bank-side in Autumn.

Reading #2:

A passage from "Travels in Alaska" by John Muir

Standing here, with facts so fresh and telling and held up here so vividly before us, every seeing observer, not to say geologist, must readily apprehend the earth-sculpturing, landscape-making action of flowing ice. And here, too, one learns that the world, though made, is yet being made; that this is still the morning of creation; that mountains long conceived are now being born, channels traced for coming rivers, basins hollowed for lakes; that moraine soil is being ground and outspread for coming plants, --coarse

boulders and gravel for forests, finer soil for grasses and flowers, --while the finest part of the grist, seen hastening out to see in the draining streams, is being stored away in darkness and built particle on particle, cementing and crystallizing, to make the mountains and valleys and plains of other predestined landscapes, to be followed by still others in endless rhythm and beauty.

Message:

As recently as within the last two weeks, I again had one of those conversations... you know it, I'm sure. I was at lunch at a friend's house where I met someone new, and it naturally came up in the conversation that I was a Unitarian Universalist. Then came that predictable awkward pause. "Oh, I know several people who are Unitarian," he stumbled, "but..." Another pause. "You can believe anything you want, right?" And so we had 'that talk'...the one I imagine most of you have had at some point...the one where I try to explain Unitarian Universalism to someone who is curious but guarded, polite but skeptical. It took several volleys before he was willing to make it more personal, but then he surprised me by saying something that isn't normally part of this conversation. "Oh, I get the search and the questioning part," he said. "I believe that's important. But what I don't understand is the community piece. Why do you have to be in a group to do that?" Good question. Why do you have to be in a group to do that? In western individualistic society, many have been trained, or have learned by hard knocks, to be distrustful of group energy. Why would you bother with the messiness of community when you could search and question on your own? This is a good question for me because it is one that I have struggled with in my lifetime. I'm one of the thousands who have come to Unitarian Universalism out of a religious context, a community, that did me wrong, that wounded me. I, like perhaps millions of others, chose to walk away from religious community and the harm it can do. But this was a mistake. It's true, I needed to walk away from a harmful situation, but I did not need to abandon community. Many years after leaving a path where I might engage with and be supported by others, I found my way back. In fact, I now believe that community, that is, our engagement with others, is imperative for growth and wholeness. We are always just a part of the whole, and as such, we need others to complete the picture. We need the truths that others have found in order to test out our own. We need the mirror that others provide in order to see ourselves and our beliefs in a true light. We need to be part of the whole, not with harmful group energy, but in a collective that breaks down the dualism of individual vs. community to embrace the symbiotic relationship between the two...where an individual is made whole by connections with others, where a community is made vital, made beloved, precisely because of the non-homogeny of the individuals it embraces.

Not only that, but I believe that we, as Unitarian Universalists, are uniquely poised to create such a 'beloved community', if you will. Our principles and purposes call us, on the one hand, to have deep respect for every individual entity, while at the same time to acknowledge the connections that exist everywhere in the web of our existence. We have an important contribution to make.

About a month ago, I had the opportunity to attend a service and workshop at a Wisconsin fellowship where the Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker spoke. (She is the president of

Starr King School for the Ministry and is considered one of the foremost UU theologians working today.) Dr. Parker had some insightful and informative things to say about Unitarian Universalist theologies and the unique perspective that we can offer the world. And this got me thinking about the future of Unitarian Universalism. If we are to have a future, it is dependent upon us. We need to believe, really believe, that there is 'good news' in this religion, that there is something that we have to offer the world, that there is to be found here, especially in this particular fellowship, reason to hope for a better future. I'd like to list here just a few of the many things that we have to offer to the world, and do so recognizing that each item on this list is worthy of a whole lot more attention than I can give today: First, as I've already implied, I believe that our contribution is important because of our commitment to unity in diversity. We are a people willing to do the hard work of finding the natural balance between the unique and the common. As Gordon McKeeman once said, since Universalists believe that everyone is going to end up together in heaven, we might as well start figuring out how to get along now. We are willing to intentionally come together in a community of diverse individuals, simultaneously acknowledging all that connects us...that is, that we are all saunterers, walking the holy ground of the journey.

- Our contribution is important precisely because of our commitment to supporting one another on our individual journeys. Not only do we acknowledge that each person is on zir own path, but we're committed to supporting that person on zir journey. We may not always agree, we may have differing goals and destinations, but we are committed to accompanying one another in the common search.
- Our contribution is important because of our insistence on asking the hard questions. We are a community of people who do not shirk from examining those things that may be challenging or upsetting to the status quo. Change, and with it reason to hope, only happens in conjunction with a releasing or letting go of something that no longer serves us. Our continued questioning provides the wisdom necessary to make this happen.
- Our contribution is important because of our willingness to ethically critique traditional religions and/or god-language. While we draw upon the traditions and wisdom of the past, we must constantly question the authority of tradition because we believe that revelation is not sealed. As said so beautifully by John Muir, the world is made, yet being made. But to stand without creed is to be willing to stand in a stream of evolving thought and belief. This is a sometimes risky position that requires courage and stamina.
- Our contribution is important because of our acceptance of the human condition as our starting point. In the context of life on earth, we hold an ideology of connectedness which instructs us in the consequences of our actions...every action, large and small. We are unwilling to close our eyes to the daily and individual responsibility such an ideology requires.
- Our contribution is important because we believe that paradise is here and now. We understand that whatever may come in an afterlife, what we have today is this world, in all its glory and its brokenness. We require a reverence for this life evidenced by our

conscientious attendance upon the present, by our respect for our planet, and by our search for what we can do to both honor and improve this life.

□ Our contribution is important because of our commitment to breaking the oppressive systems that are working to destroy the earth. All of the above contributions are worthless without our taking action to bring about change. We are a people dedicated to social action.

□ Finally, our contribution is important because we believe that salvation is to be found in love, our attraction to the beautiful, our connections with all that is, and in a confidence in the promise of restoration. All of our questions, all of our ideology, all of our social action is empty without hope. We are a people of relentless hope in the face of sometimes overwhelming odds. Our resilience is perhaps our greatest gift to the world.

□ Now, this is undoubtedly an incomplete list, one that each of us can add to or subtract from, but I hope that you can see in this list some of the reasons why you are part of this community, why you choose to show up here. My point is simply to remind us that we DO have an important contribution to make to the future, not only to this faith tradition, but also to our world. Bringing all of this to fruition might be seen as our destination, the reason why we're on this path. So how shall we go forward?

I return to the theology workshop I attended last month. Dr. Parker is one of my heroes, and I was blessed to be able to take a class from her when I was in seminary. It was like a refreshing drink of water to hear her speak again, but what was alarming to me was the attendance at this event. She spoke at a fellowship that is exploding in numbers... now well over 400 members. Dr. Parker is an excellent speaker and traveled a great distance to be there... the topic was compelling (at least to me)... even the weather, cool and rainy, was conducive for an indoor event. Maybe I'm a theology-nerd, but I expected standing room only. As it turns out, fewer than 150 people were in attendance. I mean no offense, but I do intend a critique when I say that this is not the way we learn and not the way we grow and not the way we make a difference. Getting the work done requires us to show up.

So this is the first thing we need to do in order to move forward. We need to show up. We can learn much about this from other faith traditions. We don't really ask much of ourselves. We don't require much of our members. I don't know how it is here, but my experience with UU congregations has been that new members are welcomed without question and without requirement. We are, perhaps, resistant to any requirements because of the potential for guilt when we don't follow through. I've heard more than one UU say that they like belonging to this church because it doesn't require them to come every week. Now, I'm certainly in favor of getting rid of guilt, but I'm not sure what it means to belong in a place that requires nothing of us. There must be a way for us to find a balance between expectations and pressure, between guilt and commitment.

Second, we need to truly believe that we can make a difference. The thing I love about the quote from John Muir that was read earlier is its big picture perspective. Now maybe

that's not helpful to those of you who need immediate results, but it is comforting to me to know that even the slowest progress makes a difference and that nature and the universe have a way of putting to good use all of our efforts...there is a place and a purpose for both the gravel and the silt. Put into the context of our work as Unitarian Universalists, I then can trust that the most important thing is to keep the faith, to keep doing the hard work, to be persistent, to keep walking the walk.

I once read a beautiful story (in a book that is packed away deeper than I could dig)...a story about the road to a family cottage. In the middle of the country path to that beloved cottage was a large, mostly buried boulder that continually reeked havoc on car bottoms and mufflers. It was much too big to move or to dig out, and there was no other way around. So, the wise old owner began pouring water over the surface of the rock on evenings when a frost was predicted. The water seeped into the cracks in the surface, and over time, the ice pushed and chiseled away the top of the rock until it was even with the ground level. Small, consistent efforts pay off. We are only a handful, but a few can do great things. George Enyedi, who was superintendent of the Transylvanian Unitarians in the late 1500's, said: "Sisters and brothers, we are a tiny flock, yet quality cannot be replaced by quantity. A handful of quality people represent greater value than an entire army of faint hearts."

Third, as we share the path, we must also take up our share of the burden. The term "shared ministry" has become popular in modern UU culture, but what does it really mean? To me, it means that we must own our individual and common ministries. It means that we see all of our work that supports the mission of Unitarian Universalism and all of the ways that we go about living our daily lives as manifestations of ministry. Ministry is the care and tending of our faith and our fellow saunterers, and this work belongs to all of us. Dick Gilbert, a UU minister who has written prolifically and whose words appear in many places in our hymnal said it this way... "Blessed are they who minister and blessed are they who are ministered unto. Blessed be the task of the minister. Blessed be the task of the congregation - for ultimately, they are one and the same."

You are now considering inviting a paid minister into your midst... to fill a space that maybe hasn't been empty, a space that you have lovingly filled with your own ministries. Like any change, this will upset the current balance of things. Like any new relationship, there is here the opportunity for exchange, for growth, and for learning. Perhaps having me here will give your worship committee a much-needed sabbatical. I know that being here can teach me many things about working with a dedicated band of travelers such as you are. Perhaps you will find that there is a desirable benefit in sharing your work with a minister, capital M. I know I can offer the perspective of an outsider as you continue your discernment about the future of this fellowship. Whatever may come of this, we can trust that we are in this together, that there is reciprocal blessing in the sharing, and that we each have the loving support of this community as we journey. This is shared ministry.

Finally, in order to move into the future and to grow, we must reach out to others. I have recently returned to Minneapolis after being away from my house for almost five years.

As you can imagine, there is much work to be done in deferred maintenance, particularly in the gardens. When I first moved into this house in the mid-80's, one small corner garden bed was filled with a bed of lush green ground cover. Finding it pretty, I proceeded to move some of it into every new garden I began. Well, it has become the bane of my gardening existence. I can't get rid of it...it spreads prolifically and takes over. When I returned to my house, there was little left in any bed except this green spreader that sends out long horizontal shoots. I have spent hours and hours digging...trying to get out every root and sucker, but even as I've pried and raked, I had to admire its virulence and its evangelizing capacity.

So too with us. We must spread our gaze and our arms horizontally...wide and open in every direction...spreading the good news of Unitarian Universalism in our communities. Here again, we can learn from the religious right and the fundamentalists, who find no shame in sharing their faith and their viewpoints. We have something of great value to share, and should feel no repugnance for visibly, loudly, living our values out into the world. How else are we to educate and inspire others?

During my move back to Minneapolis from Wausau, driving a bouncy UHaul truck, I listened to an old James Taylor tape, one I hadn't heard in years. I was struck by these words...

- I'm gonna pack up my bags, gonna go out on a piece of land, gonna build myself a cabin back in the woods. And it's there I'm gonna stay until there comes a day, when this old world starts a-changin' for the good.

There was a time in my life, not that long ago, when this image was quite appealing to me...romantic, even. If the world, if the questions of life, if the process of being human, were all too much to handle, I would just abandon it and move to a personal Eden. A cabin back in the woods where I could just avoid all contact with this messed-up world.

This reeks of escapism and such an action does nothing to contribute to a better future. Jack Mendolsohn, in his book *Why I am a Unitarian Universalist*, says that if we are to be true to conscience and reason, we must be content with the hard fact that we, individually and collectively, create by our own practices the kind of world in which we live and suffer or rejoice. Whenever religion fails, he says, it is not because of an internal defect, but because religion is lived by people. Profession of belief is never a substitute for responsibility. It is up to us. This old world will not be a-changin' for the good without our participation.

I admire these words of Rev. Hilary Landau Krivchenia, and I will end with them. She says, (quote) "What is our future? It lives in our efforts in the present. The finest inheritance of UUism is a historic, though sometimes forgotten, commitment to the full question, the deep search, and the complex answer that honors the complexity of the human soul - of the power of human hands to make real both dreams and nightmares. The future of UUism is to honor the wholeness of this world and of the wholeness and strength in the souls of persons. In each one of you is the soul of greatness. May we strengthen one another to stand together - not indivisible but collective and

interdependent - and meet our times with discernment, courage, justice, and love. For this is the time given to us and we are the leaders given to this time." (unquote)

It is up to us. May we be up to the challenge. Amen.