

Crossing the Border
September 18, 2005
Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship
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I casually mentioned to someone this summer that I was going to be out of the country for the next year. His voice perked up, his eyes widened, “Wow, exciting. Where are you going?” ... “Canada,” I replied, and his interest in the conversation flickered and died. Apparently he didn’t see anything exotic about going to Canada. I sensed he felt a little betrayed, or at least suckered. Well, I hadn’t lied, had I? Canada is “out of the country”. There was indeed a border to cross.

When it was first suggested to me that I approach you about a ministry here, I experienced a sort of hesitation. Why hadn’t I considered Canada when I was sending out inquires? That fact alone was indication enough that there is something different here, a border to cross, and in the case of the UU ministry, a border made more apparent by the recent split between the Unitarian Universalist Association and the Canadian Unitarian Council. But I do like an adventure, and I’m usually game for a challenge, so I dashed off a letter to Pyteke, and the rest is history. That said, Canada is not completely foreign to me. Living in the upper Midwest of the United States for most of my life, Canada seems more like a distant cousin...not well-known yet somehow trusted as part of the family. I didn’t really give the border much thought.

As the time got closer to my departure, I got a bit more concerned. Would I have the right documentation to be allowed in? Would they question my credentials as a religious worker? All of my experience with Canada/US crossings was before 9/11, and I didn’t know how much it might have changed since then. One night during the weeks before my trip north, I had a nightmare about long lines and customs agents and being sent from window to window... Obviously somewhere in my subconscious I was very aware of the fact that I was to be crossing a border...into another country...into an unknown. I don’t doubt that my fears went beyond the literal border crossing to the crossing into this ministry with you. Would the passport I hold, my credentials and my skills, be recognized by the foreign government of this fellowship?

Perhaps you had similar nightmares about inviting a ministerial consultant into your midst. Some of you probably feared that this would change, challenge or even threaten to obliterate the existing identity of this church. Maybe it called up memories of other trips you’ve taken into minister territory. Would it be like that, or different? In such moments of fear and hesitation, it is difficult for us to see what might call us forward, what might draw us toward an unfamiliar border and then encourage us to cross it.

Peggy, unknowingly but with great generosity, provided an important insight for today’s message. When we met early this week and began to brainstorm on this service, I gave her a long list of words that were percolating in me about the subject of crossing borders...concepts like bridge, “the other,” division, interaction, abyss, links, unknown. Peggy came with just one word, and it was perfect...risk. Risk. This one word gave me a fresh starting point, a focus. Our meeting, across a table, from differing perspectives, resulted in a change in my thinking, one that greatly enriched what I have to say today.

Had I resisted our meeting, insisted on doing it my own way perhaps without a service leader, I think we would all have been the poorer.

For me, the concept of risk contains just the right connotations for today's message...we are willing to take risks when it seems that the potential gain is worth the chance, yet to view something as a risk is also to acknowledge the potential danger and our own fear in taking that risk. Thinking about 'crossing a border' as a risk led me to Sharon Welch. In her book "A Feminist Ethic of Risk," she critiques any ethics done from a position of comfort. A comfort zone is a place where we have the illusion of being in command... something like a favorite well-worn chair...in this chair we feel safe and have within our reach everything we need...the lamp, the remote control, a fuzzy blanket, a treasured book or periodical, a cold beer. It's often a hard chair to get out of; we'd rather stay nestled there than get up to answer the phone or even to go to bed, let alone to travel to someplace unfamiliar. The world feels safe and completely manageable from this position. Here we don't have to listen to the voices of others...if we don't like the content, we can put the book down or switch channels.

An ethic of risk, on the other hand, is to choose, which is not easy task, to choose to move outside of our own communities, to experience other sets of socially shared values and behaviors. An ethic of risk is to live accepting that we can never know the difference between that which we can change and that which we cannot. Its challenge, rather, is to live creatively, responsibly, and compassionately in the present, continually learning from the past. And, at its heart is a deep sense of community. Alice Walker speaks about this kind of ethic when she suggests "an engagement with the messiness of experience and all the connectedness of that messiness to things that are also grand and glorious."

Grand and glorious things. This is indeed the lure – a hope of a better life, a grand and glorious world for all. But are such treasures, often buried and out of sight, enough motivation to get out of the seductively comfortable place? I don't know, but marketers seem to think we can be motivated. Even in that easy chair, we are constantly being bombarded with cultural messages that encourage us to take a leap, to try something new, or to push beyond the limit. For the most part, this is a psychology used to sell new products and to market extreme sports, yet this marketing works because it appeals to that part of us that imagines ourselves to be risk-takers and adventurers. What should we make of this siren call?

If you want the ripest fruit, relinquish safety.

One of our jobs as a religious community is to continually hold out the hope that the ripest fruit is within reach. (And I say that knowing it's not going to be the same fruit for everyone.) What are we reaching for, and how can we support each other in our mutual reaching? What religious value might be found in crossing a border, in reaching outside of our comfort zone?

Lest that language trip you up, let me suggest a few working definitions of religion. Forrest Church names religion as "our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die." Using his definition, crossing a border might give us new insights into what it means to be temporary, just a passing presence in the cycle of life. Another definition of religion, as put forth by the American Heritage Dictionary, is "a personal or institutional system grounded in beliefs." Might crossing a border affect what

we believe and subsequently also affect our system, our way of being in the world? I daresay it will.

Religion, or personal ethics, or how we do our lives, done from a place of comfort and familiarity can be done without critique, and without critique, we can believe that our way is right. If there is no dissenting voice, if there is no alternative viewpoint, the status quo is more easily maintained...it becomes less and less likely that anyone will question or critique our position. And so, from a position of comfort and control, we are blinded from seeing the impartiality or even the immorality of our values and behaviors. Hey, nobody's questioning it, right? Must be the thing to do.

Living in such a way as to control everything around us, keeping everything the same, gives us the illusion that our way is the only way, the way of the (T)ruth. Throughout history, having the (T)ruth has been used to justify all manner of oppression and injustice, so maybe it would be advisable to stop trying to find it or own it. Instead, we should go in search of the pieces of truth that others hold. Just so, this ethic of risk has grown out of Welch's work with feminist and womanist communities, people who experience colonialism, racism and sexism on a daily basis. These individuals and communities have given her the gift of a new perspective, allowing her to see the ways in which she, as a white woman, participates in and even perpetuates an unjust status quo. This new perspective could only be gained by crossing a border, by getting out of her comfort zone, and by hearing the stories of those communities. No doubt, awareness of her responsibility was a painful border to cross. To choose an ethic of risk is hard work.

Welch believes that moving outside of a comfort zone and toward an ethic of risk, is only possible through a personal conversion that begins with an acknowledgement of the past, an awareness of how an ethic of control has been harmful, and an acceptance of responsibility, along with a commitment to turning away from behaviors that contribute to injustice. While Welch is addressing huge social issues, I believe that conversions are also necessary in the most mundane aspects of our daily lives. When we open our eyes to the "sin" of our control and myopic perspectives, only then can we move out of the comfort zone and into the risk zone. If you want the ripest fruit, relinquish safety.

I hope that you can think about this with an eye to the tiniest action, the merest of movements. I experience conversion when I am willing to see a different way of doing things, and to accept that my usual practice might not only not be the best way, it might be harmful to someone. This doesn't mean that I have to change how I'm doing it; but it offers me a way to critique my usual practice and to change it if it needs changing. This could apply to our ideas of what constitutes a "usual" order of service, or the ways/materials we recycle, or maybe even to allow another driver the right of way when we think they have the wrong of way...it's an attitude that embraces the fact that each of us holds only a partial understanding of the whole. There is always more to learn.

A big barrier to this conversion, Welch says, is the equation of change with loss. We are afraid of losing things, afraid that what we hold in our hands will disappear, and so change is often met with fear. Moving out of the comfortable requires us to have a counterintuitive response to fear, a response instead that opens us to new possibilities. Why should we do this? It's true, when anything changes, there is loss, and it is always important to acknowledge what is being lost. But change is not to be equated only with loss. It is to be equated with loss AND gain. When something changes, there is also

always something new. Some new adventure, some fresh idea, some perspective that enriches us.

You and I have had to cross many borders, literally and metaphorically, to get to this place, this day. Long before we had any knowledge of each other, we each made a decision to cross a border into a willingness to confront something new and different. I made a decision to let go of my comfortable and predictable life in Minneapolis to go to seminary to pursue an unknown future, a decision which later brought me to a new brink...a place where I had to either jump or retreat. Jump into ministry or retreat to my comfortable, if boring, chair. And I know that you have continually crossed borders in your ongoing drive to keep Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship a vital and growing community, continually looking for inspiration and renewed direction. In these crossings, we've had to acknowledge the truth about our positions...my life was comfortable but meaningless; this fellowship, dearly loved, sometimes fell victim to stagnation and flagging commitment. Opening our eyes to these less than desirable situations, seeing that new input was needed, was what motivated us to make changes, to turn away from the known toward something new, something unknown, to live an ethic of risk.

Last week we talked about our differences dissolving in the combined sea of our gathering and this week I want to tell you that there are ways in which the metaphor of the sea breaks down. I would not want to give the impression that to lose ourselves in the whole, that a blended homogeneity, is the goal, because it's not. At the time of my divorce way back in the early 80's, I began to see a therapist. At first, though I longed for something to soothe my broken heart, I was very resistant to the therapeutic process. This puzzled me, and I beat myself up about it...why was I resistant to a process that I was not only choosing but also paying for? My astute therapist helped me to see that shells, bark, and quills serve a purpose in nature...we cannot exist without the edges, the boundaries and borders that define and protect us. I am not suggesting that we do not need borders. We are each concrete and separate beings.

Rather, our goal should be solidarity, unity in diversity, a pluralistic community. Welch describes two components necessary to solidarity: first, solidarity exists where each grants the other sufficient respect to listen to and be challenged by their stories; and second, solidarity exists where all recognize that our lives are so intertwined that accountability to each other is a necessity. Seeing the world in this way, an epistemology of solidarity, posits the permanent partiality of all views... we can never own the (T)ruth because each of us holds a piece of it. We then can see that change is inevitable, is desirable even, and this insight invites us to cross more borders, and to be accepting of more difference.

Unitarian Universalism lends itself perfectly to this possibility...a beloved community grounded in solidarity, but we still have some obstacles. In a recent issue of the UU World, UUA President Bill Sinkford addressed the concern that many feel about the slow numerical growth in our congregations. Believing that there are tens of thousands of persons "out there" who yearn for what we can offer, he wondered if one issue is that we mistake friendliness for true welcome. Rev. Rob Eller-Isaacs indirectly addressed Sinkford's questions in a later issue of that same magazine. Eller-Isaacs challenges us by claiming that we stand in a theological tradition that calls us to welcome every stranger. But like all humans, he says, we tend instead toward tribalism...we want

to be with people who look and think and act the way we do...another manifestation of that dangerously seductive Lazyboy.

If we care about this faith, if we are truly committed to the possibility of a better world, we need outside perspectives in order to engage in an ongoing challenge and critique of our values. We need a variety of worldviews in order to be better prepared, as a faith community, to respond to the needs of an ever changing world. If we are to transcend the blinders of our own narrow social location, I believe that we could benefit from working to create that 'solidarity' of which Sharon Welch speaks. Could this be a place where we really listen to one another's stories, including the stories of strangers and newcomers? (By the way, joining a Chalice Circle is a beautiful way to choose to listen to one another.) Could this be a place where we live the belief that our lives are intertwined, an interconnected web, and also respond to the responsibility such a belief requires? Do we really welcome diversity, or just believe that we should? Our willingness to first cross a border is directly proportional to another's willingness to cross a border toward us.

This is a new type of universalism...a universalism of universal particularity and accountability. Universal particularity means that we understand that each and every person is a concrete other who has a unique contribution and perspective. And, universal accountability means that we take seriously our responsibility to each other and to the creation of the beloved community. We get closer to this ideal in as much as we are willing to challenge our status quo and to welcome 'otherness' into our lives. We will be saved by walking together.

I suppose that many of you expected today to hear about my own border crossing; maybe what I was learning about being Canadian, or to tell again about the rainbow that welcomed me into your country. In truth, the actual crossing was almost effortless. We had all done our homework. The committee on ministry here at LUF did research, made calls and laid out the welcome mat. I had put my papers in order and called the Canadian Consulate to be sure I had everything I needed. The CUC had prepared an extensive booklet on information for ministers coming to Canada, and we consulted that. Carol Ann and Greg drove down to Grand Portage on a rainy afternoon to escort me safely across the border. I am grateful for all of these efforts to embrace the risk of our relationship.

What I really want to say today is that I hope that this border crossing, and the many crossings we will take as we work together, will bring mutual and reciprocal transformation. We are all trying something new, and this brings us into contact with something foreign... and in this meeting we grow. We are challenged. We gain a perspective on our own behaviors and values which would be impossible to gain without that contact. I encourage us all to truly welcome it.

Put your hand in the thorns, says Lynn Ungar...reach gently...and remember that the sweetest berries, the berries of transformation, hide toward the inside.

Blessed be.