

“The Search Process“

Some say Unitarian Universalism is a religion, in the same way that, say, Islam and Christianity are “religions.” This may be true in some sense, but I think of Unitarian Universalism primarily as an orientation, rather than as a religion. We are seekers of truth - folks who look for firsthand knowledge, rather than hand-me-down dogma. Whether we are Jews, atheists, Buddhists, pagans, on the fence or floating somewhere up in the New Age clouds, I believe what unites us as Unitarian Universalists is our dedication to discovering meaning for ourselves and our commitment to the right and responsibility of every person to seek his or her own first hand truth - even when that person’s truth doesn’t gel so easily with our own. The answers we discover are subject to revision in the light of experience and the lessons we learn from one another. We’re always on the move. As you know, this way of being in the world does not carry with it the comforts of certainty, but it is both interesting and honest for those of us who are natural questioners. We UUs come together as seekers sharing the road, supporting each other through ups and downs, enjoying the give and take of each other’s company, working and witnessing together for causes we care deeply about, discovering the sacred element in life as it surfaces and blossoms in community.

Franz Kafka wrote:

...We are on a road that only leads to a second one and then to a third one and so forth. And the real highway will not be sighted for a long, long time, perhaps never. So we drift in doubt. But also in an unbelievable beautiful diversity. Thus the accomplishment of hopes remains an always unexpected miracle. But in compensation, the miracle remains forever possible.

[Words I Wish I Wrote, Robert Fulghum Harper Collins, 1997 p. 26]

My being here with you today as your new Assistant Minister is for me, in Kafka’s phrase, the accomplishment of a hope. I believe I can say my coming here also signifies an accomplishment for your dedicated Search Committee, if the amount of celebration and relief the members of the Committee apparently enjoyed upon my hiring is a valid measure. The warm welcome many of you have already extended to me is a hopeful affirmation as well, and I thank you for your graciousness and confidence. When I set out to seek a new church after a ministry of almost 10 years in a place dearly I loved, I was really heading out on an unfamiliar road without any map. I wanted a more committed ministry, a deeper involvement, more resources, more people, more challenge. I was looking for a church where I could give what I know I can give, and discover what I have to give that I don’t yet know. I was seeking a viable income. I knew I had already experienced deep and beautiful moments in ministry - being with folks through the changes of life and death, celebrating the sacred turns of the seasons, standing with parishioners in witness and in protest, facilitating their involvement in service to others. The work of being a minister is a privilege to me, and I love it. But I had come to the end of the road in Ashby. Within my soul, there was an insistent voice that said it was time to seek the exit marked “The Next Place.” No further direction was provided.

I am sure that many of you have heard a similar voice telling you it's time to make a change. It's possible, sometimes, to ignore the voice. We go along on our various roads, content with our familiar ways. There is always something more to be seen and appreciated, no matter how many times we have travelled a path. Being in one place for a long time provides us the opportunity to cultivate deep and loving connections. It's very hard to break or strain those connections and move on. And, often, inertia keeps us from heading in a new direction. Sometimes laziness kicks in and the road we're on turns into a comfortable, if confining, rut. It's scary to leave the homes and lives we create for ourselves.

But eventually, it seems to me, one way or another - either gently or forcefully, gradually or suddenly - life poses questions, challenges and lessons which impel us to search deeply for a response; with this search and response, we may discover and grow into a more more complete expression of who we really are in ourselves. When all that is certain is thrown into doubt, it is possible to discern what is real, and what is merely window dressing or baggage weighing us down. When you can only retain what is essential, what is essential comes to light.

Several members of your Search Committee told me that one of the reasons they hired me - perhaps the main reason, for all I know - is that they thought I would be myself in this job. As if I could be anyone else! "You seemed real" one person said. "You weren't trying to be anyone you were not." "You told us what you could do, and what you couldn't - we knew what we were getting." Similarly, in my dealings with them, I felt each person on the Committee brought a genuine and heartfelt presence to the work of seeking a new minister for this congregation. There is a quality of authenticity which obtains when folks are dealing with issues that really matter to them, and your Search Committee functioned at that level. They were truly searching at a deep level on your behalf. We recognized each other there. I came away from my interview with them knowing that no matter how it turned out, I had been respected, and even loved. This was a good path and place - whether it turned out to be my path or not.

On the day of my interview during the ministerial search process, after my long meeting with your Committee, I had yet another hill to climb, and that was having dinner with Gary. By this time, I was wiped out. It's hard for me to be meaningful and articulate for more than a few hours at a time, and I must admit I was somewhat intimidated by Gary. He has a very piercing, if kind, gaze. And as you know, he's the author of a number of insightful and poetic books and is semi-famous; it can be disconcerting at first to be with someone who is so obviously brilliant. The fact that I am not a vegetarian came out in the first few minutes of our conversation, and I felt I had fallen into a kind of barbecue pit on that account. However, before too long, I was given what seemed to me to be a sign that this minister could be a companion on my road, and I share it with you with Gary's permission.

Gary and I are both native Oklahomans. I was born about 50 miles north of Tulsa, Oklahoma and about 4 years later than Gary. When I mentioned that my father had worked as a professional photographer back in Oklahoma, Gary looked at me rather

sharply, and told me that his mother and grandmother ran a photography studio - Gates Photography Studio - in Tulsa. When I was growing up, we went down to Tulsa often. Dad had his own darkroom, and he would pick up supplies there; he was always eager, too, to see exhibitions of art and photographs. It is very likely that my Dad knew Gary's mother and grandmother, and their establishment.

It is possible that it is only chance that the Unitarian Universalists in Burlington, Vermont would be drawn to two ministers from northeastern Oklahoma whose parents were associated with photography. But for me, this fluke was what my mother used to call a "ringer." A ringer occurs when the Universe presents you with an event or circumstance that can be interpreted as either a coincidence or a sign. Often the ringer is something arbitrary - even silly; ringers, in my experience, are always unexpected. But somehow, they bring home the uncanny feeling that there is an order and a sense to what is happening. Someone beyond ourselves is aware of events, and there may even be a plan. Ringers often reveal that this Someone has a whimsical sense of humor. Sometimes ringers come as signs or affirmations, sometimes they come as a comfort, such as hearing an obscure song played on the radio that was the favorite of a loved-one who has recently passed away.

For me, in the midst of my own Search, this Oklahoma photographic ringer served as an affirmation that I was at least on a real road - one that had been mapped out by some kind of consciousness. Wherever that road led, whether to Burlington or elsewhere, a voice from left field was telling me "Yes, there is symmetry and design, whether or not you can discern it. Keep going!"

Happily, Burlington has turned out to be my destination. As a coda to this anecdote, I will just mention that as we were loading up the truck I rented in Massachusetts to move my things up here one week ago, my daughter Johanna Hope pointed out to me that the truck sported Oklahoma plates.

As I imagine most of you have experienced, whatever we may be searching for at any given time, much work must be done in order to identify likely directions and clarify goals. We have to take stock of ourselves, muster our courage, sum ourselves up and present ourselves to the world in a genuine way, whether we seek a new job, or a partner, or a new place in a community. There are active steps to be taken in any search. We have to seek in order to find, knock in order to have the door opened once we've found the door, knock upon the next door if we're turned away from the first or don't find ourselves at home once we've been admitted. And perhaps most difficult of all, because it means we have to admit we are incomplete (though every one of us is incomplete), we have to ask in order to receive.

On the other hand, when we are really seeking, and not just going from a known Point A to a known Point B, I believe the direction we take and the goals we identify cannot be set in stone. In addition to active pursuit of our intentions, a genuine search also involves allowing ourselves to be "found" by the ringers and intuitions of direction which may present themselves. Insights we could not have anticipated - sometimes

ridiculous, sometimes sublime - may surface when we are open and our intentions - though clear - are permeable to the transcendent. The 15th-century German mystic Nicholas of Cusa phrased it this way: "Finding is one with being found."

I noticed there is a Small Group here in the church which is studying mysticism. Perhaps participants in this group have read Nicholas of Cusa. I first read a selection of his writing a number of years ago when I lived in New York City and was studying at New York University. The professor of the course in western mysticism I was enrolled in said at the beginning of the term, "Let the books find you." Because, he explained, when you are looking for something - anything - it must be specific and finite to the degree that you have a clear idea of it. In this respect, you are looking for something less than God, who is infinite.

The gnostic Gospel of Thomas includes this passage spoken by the rabbi Jesus: "If your leaders say to you, 'Look, the [kingdom of God] is in the sky,' then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, 'It is in the sea,' then the fish will precede you. Rather, the [kingdom of God] is within you and it is outside you. When you know yourselves then you will be known."

[Gospel of Thomas 3.1-4]

Mystics seek God, or Truth, not in any one thing or locale. They delve into the heart of their longing and love, and thus they seek to be found by the infinite, who dissolves their finitude in experiences of boundless illumination. Nicholas of Cusa said those who long to be united with the infinite creator who transcends rationality must seek God in a "fog of coincidence." This is the territory of paradox, koans and ringers.

I was captivated by the mystical tradition I studied at NYU. I thought a lot about the phrase - "Let the books find you." I lived in Brooklyn at that time, and early one morning, as I left my building on my way to work, I came down the front steps and noticed a small blue book lying on the bottom step. I picked it up and read the title on the spine: English Poetry from Dryden to Wordsworth. I lived in an apartment on Atlantic Avenue above a Middle Eastern grocery store. There were some old guys who liked to sit on that stoop and watch the happenings on the street; none of them were fond of English poetry, to my knowledge - but you never know what hidden interests folks may have. I thought someone may have dropped it. Then I opened the book and found a name written in an old-fashioned hand on the inside cover - "Pinner." My great grandmother's name was Pinner. I realized that the book had not been lost, I had been found.

Here are words from Judith Gass, a long-time facilitator of "Opening the Heart" workshops which originated at the Spring Hill community in Ashby:

"Why are you waiting
to begin your life?...
Listen to the knocking
at the door of your own

heart
It is only faint because
 you have not answered...
When you finally dare open
 the door
 your life will begin arriving
Cautiously at first
 unbelieving that the gate
So long locked against the tide
 has finally been opened
Then with swells
 of neglected dreams
Then with waves of joyful
 revelation
 the sea will follow
You will be swept by the full
 and magnificent tides
 of your own longing
That no one else can give you
 That no one else can claim”

[Life Prayers, Elizabeth Roberts & Elias Amidon, Editors, Harper Collins 1996, p. 291]

As we carry out our individual and collective searches for meaning, let us also be willing to be found - by unexpected beauties, disconcerting depths of compassion, by whimsical ringers, and insights which find free access to our open minds.

When life knocks at the door with challenges and lessons, may we have the confidence to answer, and the willingness to grow into our most loving and creative selves.

And when we are asked to open our hearts, as we are asked every day and in every encounter, may the love come a tumblin' down.

Blessed Be