

This Journey We Share
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Unitarian Universalist
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Who would you like to be? Who do you think yourself to be?

Who are you in your own estimation?

Let me ask you again, who would you like to be?

One must make a choice, for one cannot be everything.

--Rev. Howard Yergin

(Ken Read-Brown's grandfather)

*I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along...
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.*

from "To Be of Use" by Marge Piercy

Readings

from Matthew, chapter 6

Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?

from "The Oversoul" by Ralph Waldo Emerson

In all conversation between two persons tacit reference is made, as to a third party, to a common nature. That third party or common nature is not social; it is impersonal; is God. And so in groups where debate is earnest, and especially on high questions, the company become aware that the thought rises to an equal level in all bosoms, that all have a spiritual property in what was said, as well as the sayer. They all become wiser than they were. It arches over them like a temple, this unity of thought in which every heart beats with nobler sense of power and duty... All are conscious of attaining to a higher self possession. It shines for all.

Sermon

Thirty years ago, as I began my ministry among you, Ronald Reagan was president...

There was still a nation called the Soviet Union, and near that nation there were two other nations divided by a wall and barbed wire, East and West Germany...

The Twin Towers anchored lower Manhattan...

Gay marriage was only a dream...

"Global warming" was on the lips of only a few...

And we did not carry in our pockets phones that were also cameras nor did we wear GPS systems on our wrists. Most of us had not heard of something called the internet, much less could have imagined how our daily lives would be changed by it, if not run by it for better or worse.

Hingham was a slightly smaller town, but with significantly less traffic on Main Street.

Susan and I only had two children, and were a long way from grandchildren.

As for me... thirty-*one* years ago, I was, to use Dante's metaphor, mid-way through my life's journey and in a bit of a dark wood – though not so dark as Dante's.

I had been working at the UU social justice broadcasting ministry called Cambridge Forum at First Parish in Cambridge for four years, the last two as associate director. Funding was getting uncertain, to say the least; and my need for a more secure income was growing as our little family had grown from three to four.

What to do?

Well, I had at the same time also come realize that though I had found my work at Cambridge Forum to be satisfying, interesting, rewarding in many ways, it was not something I wanted to do forever even had the funding been secure.

Parish ministry, for which I had after all trained, beckoned.

And so the search began.

Among the congregations looking for a minister that year was a place called Old Ship Church. Well, that's an intriguing name!

I threw my hat in the proverbial ring.

I met with the Search Committee in the parlor, a fine group of folks only one of whom is still an active member: Fan Leonard of course. Some of you will remember the others: Jim Conroy, Bob Devore, George Frode, Henry Krebs, Ted Moskal, Nancy Orton, Joan Ramsay, and Jane Zimmermann.

They had created a beautiful packet of materials – typewritten (remember typewriters?), with photos of the buildings and activities. I learned that the Sunday school had about 27 children (which was a sign of great growth at the time), and that there were about sixty pledging members.

But back to the parlor conversation

These good and kind and thoughtful, interesting folks asked me plenty of good and interesting and hard questions. Such as:

“How would you define your theology?”

“Mystical humanist,” I responded.

“What's that mean?” they asked.

Doing my best to be concise, I said something like this: We begin with the human, what we know most immediately. Then we may have an experience, or intimation of “something more” or “something else”. Then we “return to the most human” trying to give life to that experience.

There were other questions of course.

And on two additional occasions they listened to me preach – at two different “neutral pulpits” as they are called, other nearby congregations.

And in spite of everything, they invited me to be your candidate, the one “pre-candidate” from however long the list had been who would be presented to the

congregation for a week of meetings sandwiched by preaching on two successive Sundays.

And at the end of that week you voted to call me as your twentieth settled minister.

No spoiler alert that thirty years ago last spring, I accepted.

So I began preaching as your twentieth minister on Sunday, September 13 (turned out to be good luck) of 1987. My sermon was titled, oh so creatively: “Beginnings.”

In any case, to put it another way, that month we began our now thirty years of shared ministry.

When the Search Committee had asked me, by the way, how long I thought I might stay if the congregation were to call me, I hesitated a moment and then said, well I suppose eight or ten years. I didn’t want to assume too much, nor did I want anyone to have the impression I viewed this as a stepping stone to something bigger or better – and as it has turned out (certainly from my perspective!), what could be better?

I’ve never looked back and, in case any of you has ever wondered, I’ve never looked elsewhere. Why would I want to do that?

Now, people come and go, ministers come and go, even buildings come and go (this is, after all, our second Meeting House, and across the street is our second Parish House), but the congregation endures.

In other words, our *congregation* by whatever name – Old Ship Church or First Parish in Hingham – is not a building, nor is it a fixed group of people over time.

Yet somehow, sort of mysteriously actually, it is identifiable as at heart the same entity over time.

Though “entity” may be the wrong way of putting it, since that too implies something fixed.

Maybe it would be more accurate to say that a congregation is an ever unfolding event, or a journey. Or maybe it’s like a ship on a journey, with people getting on and off along the way, varied ports and routes along the way, with the ship itself from time to time getting a new mast, new sails, replaced deck, and so on, and as it sails trimming and tacking as necessary to meet the conditions at hand.

Not a bad metaphor as metaphors go. For so it has been for this First Parish since its gathering in 1635, trimming our sails and tacking as necessary, sometimes on a reach or before the wind, now and then becalmed for awhile. But keeping on, journeying on, this journey we share.

In any case, for this recent thirty-year portion of this much longer journey we can note a variety of outward accomplishments of various kinds: Growth in numbers and programs, including enriched programming for youth and adults; building projects – from restoration to accessibility, playground, Memorial Garden, labyrinth; deepened mutual caring and sharing through personal times of trial and loss; enhanced social outreach, including becoming a Welcoming Congregation and then being among those leading the fight for equal marriage, hosting and leading 350 South Shore and their (our!) Green Sanctuary work for climate justice, and in general in recent years learning to more effectively coordinate our social service and social justice work.

All this, all this and much much more, I remind you has been *shared* ministry. I can hardly take much credit. Mostly I marvel and try to support... you... so many dedicated, devoted, energetic, creative volunteers. Just as I am also abidingly grateful for

fine and dedicated staff over these years, some with us longer than others, but all, along with you, helping to give life to our five Old Ship ministries in service of our Unitarian Universalist faith and principles.

Perfect this journey we share? Of course not.

But good and important, this work we do together as we strive to nourish our spirits, nurture community, educate hearts and minds, serve life, and steward the resources that make it all possible.

Again, why would I want to be anywhere else in this work of ministry but here with you, with us?

Now, a good deal of what I have only begun to outline can be measured and easily named: numbers, completed projects, programs.

Left out is much that is less visible, the richness of caring and sharing that goes on all the time – you with each other, you with me...

Sharing joys and sorrows on a Sunday morning, conversation during coffee hour which may begin as casual, but becomes something closer to the heart, getting to know each other working on a fundraiser or service project, conversation in a class.

For me, such rich conversation has also taken place in the context of hundreds (yes, hundreds!) of child dedications, weddings, and memorial services at which I've had the privilege to officiate.

I look around today and I see parents of children I've dedicated – some of those children now quite grown themselves. I see couples at whose weddings I've officiated. I see you with whom I've shared mourning and celebration at memorial services; and I see the many, many pews where beloved parishioners who have passed from among us used to routinely sit.

Now, the words of Jesus we heard earlier encourage us to lay up our treasure in heaven. That may or may not be our usual language. But for me it means that though, yes, we have certain survival needs for food and shelter, these don't matter much in the end if we don't have love and kindness in our lives and in our hearts. This is why Jesus admonished his listeners (now including us two thousand years later) to worry less about things that don't actually matter as much as we may have been led to believe, and to be more concerned with the things, the realities, that we all know matter most.

This is what I'm talking about this morning, these things, realities, experiences, conversations that have been the deepest, most enduring riches for me, and I hope for you, during these years we share and continue to share.

As for the words we heard from Emerson: He was suggesting that in the course of our conversations we might notice a third presence, the larger life in which we live and move and have our being. Emerson called this larger life or reality the "oversoul"; he was saying that if we pay attention we may notice that we sometimes *experience* this "third party or common nature" in the midst of conversation, that is when the conversation is, to use his word, truly "earnest" – from the heart. I've long called this sort of conversation "conversation about things that matter" – whether those "things" are pressing social issues, philosophical conundrums or personal challenges, life questions in the midst of grief or transition or challenge or opportunity, and whether the conversation is at the door as you leave on a Sunday, during a class in the parlor, or wherever it may be.

In short, where and what is our treasure? And how do we keep it alive?

One way: Through engagement, through ongoing conversation (real conversation)... as together we care for each other, share with each other, serve others, serve life, with each other. And awaken to the treasure which is love, beauty, kindness.

What I'm describing is at the heart of how I see and experience my ministry among you. For in all that I have done and continue to do, I am intending to awaken each and all of us (me too!) to who we most truly are – not essentially separate bags of bones, but part and parcel of one another and the larger life we share with all life. And I am convinced that the more we awaken in this way to who we truly are, the more compassionate, kind, and loving we will be – in a world much in need of our compassion, kindness, and love.

Further, I can only hope, and I expect it is a hope you share, that what we do together in this spirit, from shared meditation and prayer and reflection and exploration here in this room, to conversation about things that matter wherever it takes place, to our caring for each other, to our acting together for peace and justice.... I can only hope, because we can rarely know with a certainty... that what we do together really does and might continue to make a difference in this hurting, yet oh so beautiful world.

Well, finally for this morning: I want to re-affirm to you how grateful, grateful beyond words, I am for these thirty years of ministry among you – and for your support of me and devotion to this Old Ship community – and for being on this journey with you still, for however many years to come.

And I must affirm, too, that none of this would have been possible without the love and support, often, especially these days, behind the scenes, of my wife Susan above all and of our three wonderful now grown children. Nor would it have been possible without the love, support, inspiration, and example of my parents now of blessed memory.

One more thing: for me, the richness and preciousness of this work for me becomes ever deeper for having been here so long, known you over time, some of you for all of these thirty years, grown older together, celebrated together great joys and suffered together through personal trials or national tribulations.

So... this journey we share continues, as we trim and tack, sometimes with clearer direction than at other times, newcomers joining in the journey, others leaving... yet the journey begun hundreds of years ago, and this portion I've shared with you for thirty years and share with you still, continues.

So may it be.