

**New Horizons**  
Rev. Ken Read-Brown  
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)  
Unitarian Universalist  
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**Story for All Ages** “The Arkansas Traveler”

A city slicker is lost on an old dirt road in the rain, and stops by a run-down cabin. On the porch a fellow is playing the first part of an old tune (“The Arkansas Traveler”).

They have a conversation:

*Traveler:* How do you do stranger?

*Banjo player:* I do pretty much as I please, sir. *He plays the tune.*

Say, I’m a little bit lost. Where does this road go to?

It’s not gone anywhere since I’ve been here – stayed right here. *He plays the tune again.*

Well, it’s getting late and it’s raining. Can I stay here tonight?

You can stay out on that road as long as you like. *He plays the tune.*

Anyway, why don’t you put a new roof on your house?

Because it’s raining and I can’t.

Why don’t you do it when it’s not raining?

It doesn’t leak then! *He plays the tune.*

Say, there not much between you and a fool, is there?

Just about the distance between this yard and that fence.

I’m just saying you’re not very smart are you.

Well... I ain’t lost... *He plays the tune yet again.*

And hey, why do you keep playing just the first part of that tune?

Well, that’s the only part I know.

Here, can I play the rest for you?

You play the banjo?

Well then, sure enough, play the rest of the tune and show me how it’s done;  
then you can stay for supper, stay all night, stay as long as you want....

*Traveler joins the fellow on the porch and plays the whole tune.*

## Readings

Three passages from the “Conclusion” chapter of *Walden*, by Henry David Thoreau:

I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one. It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves. I had not lived there a week before my feet wore a path from my door to the pond-side; and though it is five or six years since I trod it, it is still quite distinct...

I learned this, at least, by my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours...

If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.

From the newsletter of singer/songwriter Mark Erelli:

Biologist Edmund O. Wilson died at the very end of 2021, and in pondering his many accomplishments, it got me thinking about what happens when the old titans finally succumb. Who will fill the shoes of influential scientists like Stephen Jay Gould or Richard Lewontin? Who steps up to assume the mantle of a Joan Didion or Toni Morrison? When they eventually pass, who might become the next Joni Mitchell, Bob Dylan, or Bruce Springsteen?

I push against the notion that our art has already gotten as good as it will ever get—that sort of thinking leads to myopic nostalgia, and doesn't speak to the historic racism and misogyny that has dictated which voices are elevated and celebrated. The challenges that lie ahead demand not just better science, but new art to help inspire and sustain us. The newer generation's story is still being told, and they're just starting to write it.

## Sermon

I've always appreciated the Arkansas Traveler repartee that I shared earlier. Given the folk process, the back and forth conversation takes many forms, but I especially like two things in this version.

First, the local guy's sharp response when the traveler suggests he isn't very smart: “Well, I ain't lost.”

And then after all that, I love that the music brings them together! Didn't matter how different they were. Didn't matter the aspersions they had cast on one another. When it came to sharing music, teaching and learning a new lick on the fiddle or banjo, all was – well, if not forgiven then certainly forgotten in the pleasure, even joy of sharing music.

It's a hopeful thought during this time when we need plenty of hopeful thoughts – not to mention sharing and joy... and music.

I'm not sure how this connects to the rest of what I have to say this morning, but maybe we'll see...

So... shifting gears to someone who, when it came to traveling, once wrote: "I have travelled a good deal in Concord." Henry David Thoreau of course.

As many of you know, Thoreau's *Walden* has been one of my touchstone books for a long time – I guess about fifty years. And even though Henry was about forty years younger than I am now when he wrote *Walden*, he had plenty to say that stands the test of time: for all of us now, well over a century and a half since he spent those two years at Walden Pond certainly for me, all the years since since I first read the book.

Among his literary skills, Thoreau had the knack of turning a seemingly mundane observation into a life lesson.

Noticing, in the instance he remarks upon in this morning's reading, how quickly he had worn a path from his little cabin down to the pond, noticing additionally how long that "beaten track" lasted, well beyond his sojourn at Walden.

Then, as we heard, suggesting how easily we all can fall into habits of living that may serve us well for a time (as his path did for two years)... and then no longer. And, as he wrote of himself, we would do well to notice when that is the case... and move on. As he wrote:

I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one.

Yes, even when a path is a perfectly good one, the time may come when we are walking it only by habit and no longer because it is the best one. Or sometimes, simply, it is time for a new path.

As you know, I've discerned that after thirty-five years on the Old Ship path, that time has come for me. I think for Old Ship too.

Not that we've been stagnant or in a path that has become a rut, not at all. But new paths, "New Horizons" to quote the theme of this year's Stewardship Drive, beckon for Old Ship.

Just as they do, I believe, for our nation and for the world.

I'll start there: To offer the most pressing, even alarming, example when it comes to the larger world in which we all live, the world of nation and planet. We have for far too long been on the path of powering our economy and our very lives utterly unsustainably and dangerously and unjustly with fossil fuels. We must, as you all know, get off that path. Yes, it was a path which served humanity well for a long time, but now it is a deep and dangerous rut. We must change paths as quickly as we possibly can... instead move toward new horizons of ecologically sustainable sources of energy and ways of living.

To switch metaphors (as Thoreau did) there are in fact plenty of ingenious folks who have built the castles in the air of what an ecologically sustainable way of life for all life would look like. We just need to be, each in our own way – as individuals, as a congregation, as a community, as a nation – to be building the foundations under those castles. How? It takes

money donated to organizations working in this sustainable and just direction; it takes votes and political support for politicians who are on the green path and for policies, local to national, that are part of that green path; and it takes our own personal and congregational choices to be as green as we can be.

All with the additional faith – which by no means applies only to the climate crisis – that those of us who are the older folks don't have to have all the answers! As we heard from Mark Erelli in that second reading, the “titans” are dying: from environmentalists and scientists like E.O. Wilson to artists like Toni Morrison and, we might add, to activists and spiritual leaders like Desmond Tutu. So... with faith that new voices will arise, *are* arising, we older ones need to make supportive room for “young ones stronger,” to use a line from Pete Seeger's “Quite Early Morning.”

When it comes to climate, to racial justice, to saving our democracy, and much else.

Look, there is no going back to an old normal in our nation, in the world, in our congregation for that matter.

The world is changing too fast for that.

But the future has not yet been written! It is, as I wrote in my Musing this week (nothing original to me) it is we who will write the future – ecologically, politically, culturally – as it unfolds in ways we surely cannot predict.

Which is indeed as true of our Old Ship congregation as it is of anything else. Who will be your next minister? Who will be the next director of religious education? Will we be able to attract more young families once again? Will we be able to sell the parish house enabling us to build a new very green one? Will we be able to grow in our work for justice?

Well... no one can give a definitive answer to any of those questions! But it is not about going back to some golden age of Old Ship as we might think of it once having been. There is only going forward.

Which we can do by engaging in the life of our congregation *now* in ways that will help us to continue in whatever fresh ways to be a vibrant, healthy congregation, a congregation that helps us all to grow in love and kindness, a congregation that contributes to the larger good of our nation and of the planet. We do all this with our hands and hearts...

...and, yes, with our pocket books.

(Were you wondering when I would get to that?)

As you know, our annual Stewardship Campaign is just getting underway, with the theme “New Horizons.” Everyone in the congregation will be asked to make a good faith pledge of financial support to ensure that whatever new paths, new horizons, beckon, Old Ship will have the resources to travel those paths in the direction of those horizons. We will be given guidelines to help us decide what measure of support is possible for each of us. And I say “we” since Susan and I have for thirty-five years joined with the rest of you in pledging and giving as much as we can, as generously as we can.

This year perhaps more than ever, with so many changes at hand, so many challenges before us, so many opportunities we can seize... we need all the generosity we can muster.

Let's, together, do this!

“New Horizons.” A few more words about horizons:

My mother and I, during the last years of her journey with Alzheimer’s Disease, would from time to time drive out to Nantasket Beach and sit on one of the benches along the boardwalk, sometimes with a sandwich. Mom had always loved the beach, going back to the days of our family’s life on Long Island where we lived about twenty minutes or so from Jones Beach. So Mom and I would sit at Nantasket, so pleasant. Eventually, as we gazed out to the distant horizon, she would ask me something like: How far is that? I was never sure if she meant the length of the beach or the distance to the horizon. I could give her a pretty good answer when it came to the length of the beach, but not so much when it came to the horizon. In any case... as the old line goes, “You can’t get there from here,” since, as we know, the horizon recedes as we travel towards it... always beckoning... even as always receding.

So yes, we know we will never reach a horizon. But we also know we won’t eventually fall off the face of a flat earth. And just like those European explorers centuries ago we just might along the way discover a new land (new to us anyway)... a new land that we could not have predicted we would find as the horizon of an ever-more welcoming, more inclusive, more loving congregation – and world, how about that too – beckons.

And... I expect it goes without saying that unlike too many of those European explorers, we must bring our better selves to whatever new land, new ways of living, we discover. This, after all, is what church is for, to help us grow our better selves, the better – as I often say – to help and heal, to be among those who create more justice, more peace, and ways of living that support the flourishing of life... all life.

Further, in a way all this is not so much about the so-called “future” anyway – since that horizon indeed always recedes. It is about how we live in the present. There’s a wonderful passage in Wendell Berry’s beautiful novel *Hannah Coulter* in which the narrator describes the Branch family. The Branches, we are told, really know how to live sustainably on the land, no hankering always after bigger and better, after some imagined better future. The narrator says, “If I had ‘venture’ capital to invest, I think I would invest it in the Branches.”

So... what will we invest in our First Parish Old Ship Church, Unitarian Universalist – in time, talent, *and* treasure? How much is Old Ship worth to each of us, to our community, and as part of the wider global community seeking to find ways to ensure or at least make more likely the flourishing of life?

It is... of course... up to us as we travel together toward new horizons. Good news here: traveling together *we* will not get lost.

May it always be so.