

“To Wander and to Find”  
March 28, 2010  
Rev. Heather Janules  
Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church  
Bethesda Maryland

*And Moses said to the people, “Remember this day, on which you went free from Egypt, the house of bondage, how the Lord freed you from it with a mighty hand...So, when the Lord has brought you into the land of [Canaan] which he swore to your fathers to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, you shall observe in this month the following practice: Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a festival of the Lord... And you shall explain to your son on that day, ‘It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt.’...You shall keep this institution at its set time from year to year.”*

This passage from the Book of Exodus illustrates the creation of the Passover holiday. In this yearly festival, people gather in their homes and retell the story of the Jewish people suffering as slaves in Egypt, God commanding Moses to lead them to freedom and Pharaoh refusing to let them go, even in the face of nine devastating plagues. But the last plague changes things. The last plague is the immediate death of the firstborn in every house but, as the Jews marked their doors, God “passes over” them and spares them this tragedy. Pharaoh’s heart finally weakens and he sets the Jewish people free. And, so, they leave immediately, so quickly that there was no time for bread to rise, and follow Moses, their reluctant leader, towards the promised land.

I once heard a sermon preached by the Rev. Meg Barnhouse, whom many of you will remember from our Celebration Sunday, in which she named this story, the Exodus story, as an archetypal narrative, a story whose themes appear again and again in human life. Rev. Barnhouse affirms that one does not need to look far to find an example of suffering, wandering and arriving home. Like infomercials, for example: “My hair was so dry. I tried everything; I put egg on it. I put beer on it. But nothing worked. But then I found ‘Wonder Shine.’ My hair is now glossy and radiant. I will never go back.”

While late-night television is one example of these eternal themes of wandering and finding, this morning – on the threshold of this year’s Passover celebrations – I tell two stories of leaving home and wandering, two stories that remind us that we all have seasons of leave-taking in life that remind us of the spiritual value of creating a home for those who walk in the desert.

One Sunday morning this past November I drove to southern Maryland to serve as a guest preacher for the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Chesapeake. The congregation is small, fewer than 100 adult members, but great in spirit. They do not have their own building so they rent space and worship in an adult education center.

When you step inside the building, it looks very much like a Unitarian Universalist church, a modern design with neutral colors, angled windows and soft light filling the hallway. Yet there are also the hallmarks of an educational institution: the computer lab, the cafeteria, a soda machine. The Unitarian Universalist congregation is just one of a number of small churches that worship there on Sunday morning, the lobby full of signs directing visitors to different rooms

and their correlating faith traditions. When one walks in, it feels a little like an airport, with each classroom a different runway to transcendence.

After church, leaders decorated the classroom furniture with fabric and brought out their chalice, making it a much more worshipful space, others began to gather, hang their coats, find their seats. Then the clock struck ten and it was time to begin. A Board member welcomed the community, introduced me to the congregation and then sat down, inviting me to stand before the lectern and lead the service.

It wasn't very long into the service when she appeared in the doorway. Looking to the back of the room, I suddenly saw a middle-aged woman with a full head of curly red hair, holding on to the door jam and leaning inside. Through her stance, she seemed to say so much with her body language. Her face suggested that she was curious and drawn to what was happening in the room yet most of her body was still in the hallway, the clutch on the door jam a firm boundary between the neutral outside and the worship service inside. Standing there as she did, she seemed to be saying "I want to come in...but I am not sure."

The presence of this visitor reminded me of a story that a church friend once shared about his first visit to a Unitarian Universalist congregation. In that church's worship service, they ring a Tibetan singing bowl to create a meditative sound during a time of centering. That first morning, George was so wary of this new place and this room of strangers that he assumed that there were subliminal messages in the sound of the singing bowl, trying to penetrate his mind. Those of us who are long-time church members or have been Unitarian Universalists for years may not be aware of the courage and vulnerability it can take to come to a worship service for the first time.

Seeing this woman stop on the edge of entering the sacred space we created that morning, I wanted to help her, to welcome her in. Yet, I knew that if I stopped the service to welcome her, the extra attention might frighten her away. Thankfully, another church member saw her too, rose from her seat, greeted the woman and welcomed her inside.

When the service was done, I made a point of seeking out the visiting woman. We introduced ourselves – let's call her "Donna" – and I asked her if she had been to a Unitarian Universalist church before. As I had assumed, she told me that this was her first time. I mentioned that I was not the congregation's regular minister but hoped that she would come again. "I have visited this place a few times myself," I said, "and have always found the people here to be wonderful."

This congregation has a tradition of going out to lunch after the service and the guest minister is always invited. So, after a number of other coffee hour conversations, as people began to clean up the refreshments I headed for my car so I could meet up with the group going to the restaurant.

Driving down the long stretch of Airport Road towards the shopping center, I saw a figure in the distance. As I came closer, I realized that it was Donna, the woman I had met at coffee hour. I slowed down next to her and asked if I could give her a ride. She was going to work, just a half mile away, and would love one, she said. I told Donna that we should go to the restaurant first so I could let the group know where I was going.

In the brief time it took us to reach the Irish pub, Donna told me her story, a story that is both hers alone and a story I have heard many times before: Donna grew up in a Jewish family that was not religiously observant. When she became an adult, she began wanting to join a faith community. As she held a number of eclectic spiritual ideas, she was seeking a faith with an open mind. As she is an avid reader and thinker, she wanted to be part of a tradition that did not ask her to believe the impossible. Donna had tried a number of churches before, but many of her friends encouraged her to try the Unitarian Universalists. Donna is vivacious, an intellectual, an artist, a listener of NPR. Culturally and philosophically, from what I could tell, Donna was one of those people who is “Unitarian Universalist without knowing it.”

Pulling into the parking lot, I lowered my window to tell my host, Yvonne, that I was taking Donna to work. “What time does your shift begin?” Yvonne asked Donna. There was still another hour until she had to be there. “Why don’t you join us for lunch?” Yvonne said, “I’ll make sure you get to work on time.”

Altogether, there were about eight of us at lunch. At some point in the conversation, we got to talking about where we grew up and where we live now and the life events that have brought us from place to place. Donna didn’t say much. Then, in a pause in the conversation, Donna spoke, “As I was telling Anne,” the woman sitting to her left, “actually, right now, I am homeless.”

After Donna spoke these words, I sensed a shift in the energy at the table. In an instant, we went from being together in a distant and casual way to suddenly being present to what I anticipated would be an important story to hear.

Donna and her three cats had been living rent free at a friend’s empty house but they eventually had to leave. She could have gone to a shelter but she didn’t think she would feel safe there. Donna had nowhere to go. Her cats moved into the yard of the house where Donna used to live and she ended up sleeping in her car; the reason she was at the higher education center that morning was that she parked in the lot the night before. In the midst of all these challenges, her car registration expired so she couldn’t legally drive anywhere. “It has been very hard,” she said. “It is not for the faint of heart. I wouldn’t wish this on anyone.”

Yet Donna also revealed a remarkable resilience as she shared her experience. She spoke of wanting to write a book about what she was going through so more could know what it is like to live without a permanent home.

Bearing witness to Donna’s story, I appreciated how those around the table seemed to listen with care and respect. In that circle, I had a sense that we all knew that her story could be our story; there was nothing exotic or romantic about being homeless. It was just one way that life can be very, very difficult.

As the conversation went on, I observed people around the table reaching out to Donna in subtle ways. “May I pay for your lunch?” Linda asked, quietly. “If you want to,” Donna replied. Through a side conversation Anne began telling Donna about a local housing opportunity.

As I drove back to Montgomery County, I thought about my experience with this congregation. While the service went well, in the end Donna's visit – the grace and courage with which she wandered and the warmth she found among these people – was the spiritual lesson, was the shared expression of faith that reminded me of how often we are in the desert and how important it is to be welcomed home. That Sunday I was reminded that opening our doors to the homeless – physically homeless, spiritually homeless or both – is, at the heart of it all, what church is for as, at some point, we all know what it is like to live without a center. Or, as written in Leviticus (19:34) “the stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love them as yourself for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

The second story of wandering is yet to be lived, yet to be written. As I shared in the church newsletter about a month ago, starting next Sunday, I will begin a four-month sabbatical. In my time away from life at Cedar Lane I will spend some time at home, I will spend some time traveling and visiting loved ones, I will spend some time writing and I will spend some time resting. In short, I will spend some time exploring life in a way that I have never been able to do since I left my childhood home and began supporting myself.

It is a failure of metaphor to draw a parallel between someone going on sabbatical – getting paid full-time for not doing the work one is called to do – and the courage it takes to live as a homeless person. It is also a failure of metaphor to compare leaving Cedar Lane to the Jews' exodus as it suggests that serving this congregation is like living in slavery. Yet, there is a reason why the archetypal narrative of the Passover story and the journey I am about to take are deeply entwined in my heart.

For the past four-and-a-half years, this has been my spiritual community, you have been my spiritual home. While my need for rest and my hunger for time to try new things inspire me to take this season apart, through making this choice I know I am unmooring myself from the people, the place, that has become so important in my life. As I imagine the Jews “packing nothing” and following Moses out of Egypt, I also imagine that, even though they were walking out of bondage and towards the “land of milk and honey” the change was not easy, the path before them unclear.

Another sermon on the Exodus story offers an insight into what happens to us when we wander. Long before Barack Obama's presidential campaign, when I was living in Chicago, I had the good fortune to hear the Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright preach a homily. Rev. Wright proposes that the reason why it took the Jews forty years to leave Egypt and to reach the Promised Land is that it took them forty years for the experience of Egypt to leave them. One part of physical wandering is engaging in a spiritual process, making greater sense and meaning of the past, of the footsteps behind us.

Since I was called to be your Assistant Minister in 2005, the Bookkeeper, the Administrator, the Religious Education Administrator, the Administrative Assistant, the Membership Coordinator, the Coordinator of Youth Ministries, the Organist and the Music Director have all changed - sometimes more than once - and we have welcomed and said good-bye to two Intern Ministers. My colleagues Roger and Susan have each gone on sabbatical. The office was renovated, the Gift Corner closed and we celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the building. Since I was called

to be your Assistant Minister, I have officiated at thirty weddings, thirty-three memorial services and have lost track of the number of committee meetings I have attended. There could be more weddings and memorials but the loss of my calendar when my laptop was stolen from my office two years ago obscures the data. In my personal life, many good things have happened – I bought my own home, I went on my first trip to Europe to visit our partner church in Transylvania – and became inspired to begin the humbling work of learning Hungarian – and I went back to Europe to visit the Baltic States, where my ancestors once wandered from. And yet, an important relationship and friendship ended and five members of my family died, plus an elderly friend and mentor who was very much a mother to me. In brief, there are many memories and experiences from these past few years to hold and live with for awhile.

I anticipate that when I return in August, it will be with greater understanding of who I am, who we are and how we are together. I pray that when I return, it will be with greater energy and insight in service to what I understand church is for, opening our doors and our hearts to those who wander in all ways.

All of us have seasons of leave-taking in life, experiences that remind us of the spiritual value of creating a home for those who walk in the desert. Wherever you are today, comfortably at home in your heart or on one of the wide, hot plains of life's deserts, I pray that we all find the blessings of welcome when we pause at the next doorway. May it be so.