

“To Explore the Eternal”
The Rev. Heather Janules
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Last weekend, this sacred space was home to a silent retreat. Almost twenty members and friends of Cedar Lane gathered on Friday night, in comfortable clothes and thick, warm socks on their feet. We gathered for an informal worship service and walk on our canvass labyrinth. That evening, many stayed over, sleeping in the chapel or walking the labyrinth in the middle of the night. In silence, as the spirit moved them, they read and wrote in journals and drank hot tea and walked the labyrinth throughout the next day. Anyone who has been on retreat knows the renewal that can come by taking sanctuary from the many sounds and conversations of modern life.

Yet, I have learned that one can say a lot without using words. Human need – for directions, for a restroom, for help opening a door – inspires many conversations through body language. Even without words, we humans can talk about things of great importance.

Perhaps you have heard the story of two men talking without words, Moishe and the Pope? It is an old story that has been told and retold throughout the years, a story I found recently in a collection of Jewish humor on the internet:

About a century or two ago, the Pope decreed that all Jews had to leave Vatican City. Naturally there was a big uproar. So the Pope made a deal. He would have a religious debate with a member of the Jewish community. If the Jewish person won, the Jews could stay. If the Pope won, the Jews would leave.

The Jewish community realized they had no choice. So they picked a... man named Moishe to represent them. Moishe asked for one

addition to the debate. To make it more interesting, neither side would be allowed to talk. The pope agreed.

The day of the great debate came. Moishe and the Pope sat opposite each other for a full minute before the Pope raised his hand and showed three fingers. Moishe looked back at him and raised one finger.

The Pope waved his fingers in a circle around his head. Moishe pointed to the ground where he sat.

The Pope pulled out a wafer and a glass of wine. Moishe pulled out an apple. The Pope stood up and said, "I give up. This man is too good. The Jews can stay."

An hour later, the cardinals were all around the Pope asking him what happened. The Pope said:

"First I held up three fingers to represent the Trinity. He responded by holding up one finger to remind me that there was still one God common to both our religions. Then I waved my finger around me to show him that God was all around us. He responded by pointing to the ground and showing that God was also right here with us. I pulled out the wine and the wafer to show that God absolves us from our sins. He pulled out an apple to remind me of original sin. He had an answer for everything. What could I do?"

Meanwhile, the Jewish community had crowded around Moishe. "What happened?" they asked.

"Well...First he said to me that the Jews had three days to get out of here. I told him that not one of us was leaving.

Then he told me that this whole city would be cleared of Jews. I let him know that we were staying right here."

"And then?" asked a woman.

"I don't know," said Moishe. "He took out his lunch and I took out mine."

This story reminds us that understanding the most essential elements of life is not an exact science. Two may come together and witness the same thing and have wildly different experiences of that moment. Perhaps this diversity of experience is one reason why the world we share is so rich with different religious traditions.

The Rev. Forrest Church offers an image for understanding the world's religions: Human religion is like stepping into a great cathedral. Within that sacred space, there are large windows and small windows, clear windows and windows with intricate stained glass, windows with abstract designs and windows illustrating the great stories from sacred texts. Yet there is only one light, the same light, that shines through all these windows. That light is too great to fit through just one pane of glass.

As Unitarian Universalists have no central, unifying creed, our faith embraces this understanding of religion. Unitarian Universalists understand that we are each like one of those cathedral windows, receiving the light of all that is greater than human life in different ways.

As we profess a faith without a creed, on our worst days Unitarian Universalists are accused of believing everything and nothing at the same time or, reflecting American consumer culture, believing whatever we want. Yet, at our best, Unitarian Universalists are revered

for humility, for recognizing that all that exists beyond our individual egos is too great and mysterious to be domesticated into a narrow statement on paper. The silent retreats at Cedar Lane remind me that experiencing the sacred does not depend on human language.

This great humility in Unitarian Universalism inspires us to cherish religious freedom, the ability to wander through the cathedral of world religions without losing our place of belonging. Our congregations can be spiritual homes to Christians and Pagans, atheists and agnostics, and can also be unified in affection and purpose.

Then it is no surprise that one third of this Unitarian Universalist congregation's mission statement – the leading third - is “to explore the eternal.” With just a few words, this piece of Cedar Lane's mission statement affirms the sacred individuality of the human conscience and the freedom to experience and learn about all that is greater than ourselves. This affirmation stands in defiance of spiritual orthodoxy and the human tendency to seek religious assimilation through brutal force. The story of “Moishe and the Pope” came from a collection of jokes but the story behind it – one of banishment and the threat of death – is all too true for many people of faith around the world and is anything but funny.

“To explore the eternal” is an expression of religious curiosity and tolerance. “To explore the eternal” echoes one of the great sacraments of our tradition, the use of reason, to conclude what is true for each heart and mind in religious belief, each window of the cathedral.

Yet, my vision for Cedar Lane – and any Unitarian Universalist congregation I serve or belong to – is that “exploring the eternal” is practiced so that it is the beginning of spiritual life and not its conclusion.

I remember the afternoon when a rough draft of Cedar Lane's mission statement landed in my email in-box. We ministers were invited to give initial feedback on this revised, succinct statement of our congregation's reason for being. In my reply, I expressed my genuine appreciation for their good work but raised a question. "What about 'to explore *and know* the eternal?'"

We should cherish the freedom to wander through the theological landscape but there is something to be said for setting up camp somewhere, for finding a well of water that satisfies our soul's thirst and drinking deeply. There is something to be said for taking a religious stand – I am a humanist. I am a theist. I am a Christian. I am a Buddhist. There is something to be said for conviction.

As I am devoted to Unitarian Universalist principles, I find greater value in members of our community taking different stances and being in rich dialogue with one another than all of us making – or pretending to make – the same affirmation. Theological diversity nuances and strengthens all of our spiritual lives. But I also want to be part of a community where we are unafraid to come to religious conclusions and live our lives with that faith as our center.

I know that real estate in a mission statement is especially dear. Perhaps that is why the Breakthrough Task Force did not include my suggestion. But in thinking about our mission statement, I encourage us to understand "exploring the eternal" as not just a sign of spiritual welcome and tolerance but also as an invitation to stop exploring when our communion with the eternal has led us to a truth we cannot deny.

Spiritual discovery and conviction often comes through spiritual experience. There are no better words to describe it; spiritual discovery often comes through moments of grace. While my mission, as a religious person and a religious leader, is "to explore the eternal" in

hopes of coming to know “the eternal,” my prayer for all of us is somewhat different. My prayer – for you, for me, for Cedar Lane, for all of us – is to, one day, be known.

Moments of grace often come without warning or explanation. They are sometimes quiet, sometimes subtle. One such moment in my life took place just a few days after my mother’s death.

When I got the call from my father, telling me about my mother’s sudden but somewhat anticipated death, I was serving as a housesitter for a wealthy man and his little dog, a day’s drive from where I grew up. I know that, with some phone calls, I could have been released from my obligations. But my father had tended to all that needed to be done and my mother’s memorial was scheduled for a few weeks in the future. It made more sense for me to keep my commitments until I could be free to travel home.

I had taken care of Sophie and her house many times before and had come to look forward to visiting this gracious home. But anyone who has lost a loved one knows the kind of grief that sets your soul adrift into uncharted waters. This time, with my heart broken, I felt like an intruder in Sophie’s house, someone without a place to belong. Had I driven to my family’s home, that wouldn’t have felt right either. I had never been in my parent’s house without my mother in it.

It was Summer. In the midst of that confusing and incredibly painful time, I remember stepping out on the cobblestone patio, from the cool living room into the thick, humid night. I sat on a wrought iron chair, just staring at the rows of manicured flowers and shrubs visible in the arc of the back porch light. I don’t know how long I sat there. I could have been a few minutes, it could have been an hour.

Then, without warning, it began to rain, not in singular drops but as a synchronized curtain of water. The sudden sheet of rain rolled off the broad awning over the patio and formed a wall of water around me. In an instant, I went from feeling entirely alone, like a “motherless child” as the spiritual says, to being enveloped by the earth, returned to the womb. Held. In an instant, I had an experience of the words of the ancients, the “peace that passes all understanding.”

Somehow, this summer rainstorm reached through my sorrow and vulnerability and told me that I was not – and would not be – alone. The closest I come to putting words to this experience is through our meditation this morning: I was “only able to endure it by being no one and so specifically myself I thought I'd die from being loved like that.”

Sitting among the music of the falling water, I had a sense that this love was for me and my grief alone. I also had a sense that this unanticipated love is always among us and had nothing to do with me. My prayer is that all of us have a moment like this, a moment of being known by love, at some time in our lives.

A great privilege of ministry is bearing witness to people’s stories. When I think of not just exploring or knowing the eternal but being known, I think of an experience shared by a Cedar Lane member we will call Alice. Alice has had a difficult life, burdened by illness and isolation. Even though religion was a big part of her family – her father was a prominent minister – Alice did not have a rich spiritual life.

But there was one night, a night when the moon hung full and bright in a cloudless sky, that something stirred in Alice. There was something about the light and clarity of that great planet that pulled Alice out of the pain of her life and into something larger. The vision of that full moon connected Alice with, in her words, “the amazing, overwhelming wonder of the universe and the belief that there must be a God.”

Moments of grace do not just happen in quiet places. Sometimes being held by the sacred happens in times of dancing and celebration.

We who lead worship at Cedar Lane are sometimes moved to dance or clap our hands when the music is that alive. And sometimes you in the rows of chairs before us are moved too. (Just so you know, when we move our bodies and clap our hands, you are always welcome to join in.)

I remember a recent Sunday when our pulpit was graced by the Rev. Mark Kiyimba from Uganda, when I witnessed another moment of grace. We were listening to the spirited music of the choir. It wasn't a hymn, a time when we were supposed to participate, but the offertory, when a member of the congregation just stood and started dancing and clapping her hands. This inspired others to rise and sway too. When I thanked her later for stepping outside of our subdued status quo, she simply said, "This was a song that needed us to stand." It was as if she was held and known by something greater than herself.

Late Saturday afternoon, our silent retreat participants gathered for one more group walk of the labyrinth. As we gathered, the fading light of the day shown through the windows of this sacred space, these windows of different sizes and colors. I couldn't help but to think of Forrest Church's "cathedral of the world" as we each followed our own path across this ancient, meditative space.

After the walk, we gathered for a closing worship service. Sitting in a circle, we ended our silence by talking about our experience of the past day. For some, it was the first time they had walked the labyrinth; our retreat was a time for them to "explore the eternal." For others, they had walked the labyrinth and participated in the retreat many times before. This annual gathering has become a part of their regular

spiritual lives, a time to dwell upon the past and the future with intention.

And, woven into these newly-reclaimed words, were glimpses of being known. One participant acknowledged that she had a hard time being present to this year's retreat. "But then," she said, with tears resting behind her eyes, "in our last walk, for reasons I didn't understand, I kept feeling small bursts of joy."

I celebrate that Cedar Lane has created a congregation where all are welcome to explore the great texts, beliefs and traditions of our world. May this invitation bring us not only freedom but also the conviction born of faith that one cannot deny. And may we, in all the good work we do together, render our hearts open to being known, to that which is called by many names, the great creator and sustainer of life.