

PATHWAYS, TRAVEL and the JOURNEY part III

The Emotional and Psycho-Spiritual Journey

As I suggested in parts I & II the last two weeks, we each journey through life in our own time and at our own pace and there are many ways of telling our stories. This morning in part III I intend to address the psycho-spiritual and emotional aspects of the journey. As I was thinking about this sermon, two sets of stories happened to be in my thoughts. One was the set of stories about a life well lived by a former member of this congregation, who also happened to sell me her house, Maxine Bell Schwab. Some of you knew Maxine. Maxine was a creative dancing extrovert, a teacher, a romantic, a mother and grandmother, and just a nice person. For someone who died at 82, the service up in Fair Oaks was far better attended than many services for people much younger. Family came from all over the country, and friends from all over the region. It was a treat and a privilege to hear the stories of her life told by her brother, her children, and her friends. She didn't live a perfect life, she had her heartaches including the loss of her husband of 48 years several years ago, and her diagnosis of cancer, but she had a positive attitude and made the best of what she was given. Like many UUs and others, she had no expectation of anything beyond this life, so she lived her life fully each day. The number of people whose lives she touched tells me that she will long be remembered by children and grandchildren and friends. I'm not sure that any of us can ask for more!

The other set of stories in my mind, is that set of stories told about Hillary Rodham Clinton, former first Lady of Arkansas and the United States, Senator from New York, and Secretary of State. Hillary has been in the public eye for decades, as much for what she has been accused of or blamed for as for her accomplishments. As Facebook posts and favorable commentators have frequently mentioned, if she were guilty of just a few of the things for which she has been blamed, she would be in prison. Nonetheless, the stories and lies about her evil ways continue to be told.

Not so well known are her actual accomplishments for women and families, for children's health insurance, and for just making the world a better place! A large percentage of people say they don't trust her, and yet assessments of her truth-telling during the election so far put her far above other major candidates.

Perhaps it is just that she hasn't taken the time to call her critics liars every time they tell false stories about her. In any case, it will be an interesting election cycle between now and November! One other thought about Hillary and the election, the Democratic Convention has yielded some of the best and most hopeful speeches in recent years by such notables as Michelle and President Obama, Former President Bill Clinton, and by Bernie Sanders. As a Minister I cannot endorse a candidate from the pulpit, but I sure do like what Hillary's friends have to say about her and the future of our country!

My hope in this series of sermons has been to look at the stories of our journeys from a few different directions, limited of course by time each week, the number of weeks available, and the decisions I have made about which ways to look at our stories. Though this sermon could have been at least three separate sermons itself, I want to look briefly at the emotional and psycho-spiritual aspects of our stories, in other words the less quantifiable, but likely more meaningful, aspects of our journeys. I will again use parts of my own story as a way to hopefully help you each to think about, engage with, and feel deeply your own stories.

My family growing up was generally hopeful, encouraging, and held high expectations for using well my abilities, talents, and intellect. My family was generally warm and respectful, but not overly demonstrative. Mom expected my brother and me to get good grades in every subject, but especially in math and science. Mom and dad were both Civil Engineers and though they didn't expect us to be engineers, they would have been quite happy if we followed the family business! Mom and dad also liked to be out of doors, hiking and camping, and generally enjoyed travelling to see the world, or at least the US and Canada. They also were members and regular attendees at our local United Methodist Church, and they expected us to attend Sunday School until we were at least teenagers.

I'm sure I enjoyed church more than my brother, but we both were involved in the church youth groups even after we became teenagers. The church also sponsored our Cub Scout Pack and Boy Scout Troop. The family commitment to church involvement certainly set the stage for my search for meaning within the church and religion. Not that the church was the only place where my family would encourage the search for meaning, for the sciences and the natural world in many ways came first. For my parents, the church was hardly the only source of answers to the questions of life, but it was one center of meaning, and so it became for me. Several of my most important friends were also members of the church, and it was in the church youth group that I found emotional, psychological and spiritual support and encouragement. It was also at a church youth summer camp where we spent a lot of time talking about justice that I began to seriously consider entering the ministry.

Starry nights away from the city were and are the most spiritual cathedrals for me. I love to look up at the stars and wonder about the universe and our place in it. I remember starry nights above the dunes and beaches along Lake Michigan, and from several youth camps and retreats and scout campouts I attended away from the city. The best times were when it had become quiet and the fire had burned down to coals and the stars were filling an almost cloudless sky. Those were the times for philosophy and spirituality and so many questions about what other sentient beings might live somewhere out there! I still read with excitement articles about new discoveries of planets in the warm zone around their stars that might support life, and about black holes and previously unknown galaxies. The final frontier, the vast universe beyond what humans on Earth have so far been able to explore, still draws my attention. I would far sooner cut the military budget than that of NASA to make sure all earthlings are fed, if I had such authority! Space exploration provides opportunities and a sense of real hope for the future of humankind, though I can't deny our need to solve lots of difficult problems such as wars pollution and overpopulation and food shortages here on earth! I may never travel further from terra firma than an airplane may fly, but I agree with Mulder that the answers are out there! My mind and spirit often lead my eyes toward the heavens, and I still dream about journeying into the universe.

Now, with my scientific interests, you may well wonder how and why I ended up in ministry, I certainly ask myself that from time to time! In this age of specialization, young people are encouraged to plan their vocational pathways sooner and sooner as they go through the educational process. Even when I was young, it was difficult to enter college without some idea about where we were going. I mentioned previously the difficulty I had in moving from the College of Engineering to Liberal Arts. I was blessed or perhaps cursed, as many of us are, with aptitudes in many fields. Ministry, for the most part, remains an area requiring or benefitting from multiple aptitudes and interests such as psychology, history, sociology, anthropology, medical sciences, as well as Biblical and church studies, and ministers are often well served by organizational and business training as well as architecture and engineering. Ministers are perhaps the last vocational generalists, benefitting from training in a wide variety of fields! The variety of tasks within ministry has always appealed to me, even though the possibility for making society more just and compassionate was the first and most important draw for me.

In my church youth group, at camp, and in my reading of the Bible, I found a Jesus whom I could follow, a just and compassionate man, a wise prophet bringing a message of hope to a troubled world. I was never convinced by the miracles or the stories of a virgin birth or resurrection. Those ideas were nice but mostly were explainable or ruled out by modern science. It was the justice and compassion, the willingness to include the unwashed, the raising up of women and children that drew me to Jesus. I sometimes wish I had grown up a Unitarian Universalist, because though the United Methodists do much work for justice and compassion, they often get hung up on the miracles, birth and resurrection, the question of Jesus' divinity, and sin. I am far more comfortable theologically as a UU. I began seriously struggling with many of those spiritual questions in confirmation class when I was about 13, though I had always asked my Sunday School teachers troubling questions about lessons, teachings, and creeds! I had participated in youth services, scout services, and the children's choir as early as I can remember. I first preached my Sr. year of High School. In college I helped with youth groups and was active with young adult programs at local Wesley foundations.

In college, courses in Religion, History, Anthropology, and Philosophy helped me learn about and work through many of the areas where I found myself most skeptical. By the time I entered seminary, I had come to an accommodation of sorts with enough of my questions to move toward United Methodist Ministry. Had I known enough about Unitarian Universalism at any point, I might have found my way into UUism much sooner!

By the Fall of 1978, when I started seminary, I was pretty committed to Ministry. I considered staying in college another year or two to get a Masters in Psychology or Education, but I was ready to move on to the next stage. I found a part-time job as the Youth Director of 2700 member 1st United Methodist church in Elgin, Illinois, where I served for my first 2 years of seminary. The work and seminary challenged me to deal with my reasons for entering ministry, my sense of calling, and the questions about whether United Methodist ministry was a good fit for me. Some of those questions led me to take the intern year position in Riverton, Wyoming, which I have mentioned previously. My experience in Riverton helped me to believe that there was a place for me in United Methodist ministry and that Ministry was a good choice of vocation for me. As I mentioned previously, I also met and married Terri, my first wife, in Riverton and we moved back to Chicago to finish my last year of seminary. Not all questions had been answered and new ones grew out of our relationship, but I continued to prepare for ministry.

Upon graduation, I accepted the appointment to the North Park Community Church, UMC, in Walden, Colorado, a far more conservative church theologically than I was prepared to serve. I think the Bishop hoped I could bring the church back to being a more mainstream UMC church, but to stay there long would have been to give up on my marriage. I asked for a move and was appointed associate at 1st UMC, Great Falls, MT. This was a far better fit, but after another 2 years and our 2nd child, Terri and I decided to divorce. I had become active with youth and camping ministries and developed many friendships, but when Terri decided to move to Minnesota, I tried to arrange to move there as well, only deciding too late that I really needed my MT friends.

I returned to Montana after taking a few weeks back in Chicago with my kids, but ended up serving successively in 2-3 church parishes in which only one congregation was not conservative or reactionary! My last Montana UMC Parish, where I served as Associate Minister at the church in Havre and as pastor at the little church in Kremlin was generally a better fit, but after the Sr. Minister left, the new one and I did not work well together and I took a leave of absence from ministry to begin my career in Child Protective Services. A year later, I came to California to attend Matthew Fox's Institute of Culture and Creation Spirituality.

ICCS deserves several sermons itself, for my two semesters there provided both renewal and new perspectives as well as helping to push me toward Unitarian Universalism. Just a few thoughts for now. ICCS provided the kind of acceptance, love, nurture, and community that UU congregations at their best provide. It also provided opportunities for theological reflection based in the lesser known theology of blessing rather than that of sin. The opportunity for taking several Art as Meditation courses, is what I had hoped we might offer on UU Thursdays, and we have had some success in that area. The importance of community at ICCS is what I have tried to encourage all the congregations I have served since to build. Going to ICCS was like coming home, like discovering Unitarian Universalism, in offering an acceptance of people from whatever background, treating individuals with justice and compassion, encouraging everyone to use their gifts, talents and creativity to build up the community and shape a better world. The people who went to ICCS would all be comfortable with our UU principles, but they also would identify as Christian even if also influenced by Buddhism, Paganism or other traditions. After ICCS, I continued to identify as United Methodist for about 3 years before Jane and I began the credentialing process to be UU Ministers.

Over the last 20 or so years, I have identified as a web-force-religious humanist-UU, to indicate that I believe in the interconnected interdependent web of life and acknowledge that I feel that force, perhaps life-force in the universe through which we at times become aware of the web that connects us. I am a humanist to the extent that I understand all the good that we may do as a human effort.

Even though I am mostly agnostic in regard to God or the goddess, I remain a religious UU in that I believe in this community that we create together. When I feel the force and become conscious of the web that connects us, I am experiencing something spiritual, though that may not always happen on Sunday mornings or during prayers or meditations or services. It sometimes happens when I am singing with a choir or listening to music. It sometimes happens in conversations with one person, or in a class, or when I am alone. It sometimes happens while I am driving, or walking in a forest of big trees, or at the top of a mountain, or at the beach, or under the stars. It may be a large or small peak experience, but whenever it comes it reminds me of the connection we each have to all that is, and it is a gift, a blessing, a mystical moment of wholeness and transcendence.

These are the stories of the Starship Enterprise, or Voyager, or Bob... These are our stories..... These are some of the things we experience on the journey. Whether we travel the world, or venture out solely in our dreams, whether we spend days, weeks, years, or our lifetime on the journey, we each seek centers of meaning, we each ask questions, we each venture where nobody else has gone before to find whatever it is that we seek. And we each travel alone, and we each travel at times with companions who help us progress on our journeys. And for this season we meet here and we commit ourselves to this community, and all is well, and all manner of things is well!

So may it ever be! Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!