

“At Home”

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Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
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Homecoming Sunday

Every moment is distinct in my memory, though it happened many years ago, decades in fact, long before I knew Dan or my now daughter Lisa. It was a dark and stormy night in late July. I hurriedly gathered up my young daughters, sleepy and in their pajamas, with enough bags packed for the three of us to last who knew how long. Cozy but bewildered they settled into the back of our Datsun wagon as we headed south on the Jersey Turnpike toward Philadelphia. “Mommy, this is the best day of my life and the worst day of my life,” were the prophetic words voiced by my seven-year-old from the back seat. Yes, yes...

We were fleeing too many years of domestic violence. The coast was clear. I had had enough, humbled that I could not change another human being. We arrived to the welcoming arms of my brother and sister-in-law, Jeff and Donna. We awoke the next morning with my young niece and nephew surprised to see their aunt and cousins there and “moving in” for however long. Their home was our sanctuary.

It was the very next Sunday that we headed off to church, the Mainline Unitarian Church of Devon, Pennsylvania, with my brother and sister-in-law and their kids.

I owe you a bit more background. Nine years earlier I had graduated from Union Theological Seminary. During most of that time and throughout my life prior to Union, I had been Presbyterian—liberally so, but Presbyterian. Life kicked in and kicked hard. I had married another seminarian. We disagreed about the then raging War in Vietnam, but, in the spirit of those words of the 15th century Unitarian Francis David, we didn’t need to think alike to love alike. What David missed was how difficult it can be when we come from radically different vantage points on a matter as potent as war. What he fully understood was that love transcends it. In other words, if you’re looking for the rational, don’t turn to love.

During the Tet Offensive I became a young widow—along with thousands of other women in this country, in Vietnam, in Cambodia, in Thailand, and in Laos. Losing one you love is like riding the top of a rogue wave. Wise counsel would have been: go with the flow and don’t make any important decisions! Young as I was, ready as I was for children but not for remarriage, I fell for a man who was disarmingly charming. And against my instincts, I converted to Judaism. While I have immense respect for Judaism, it wasn’t me. Try as I might, it wasn’t me.

Return now to the scenario of my daughters and I heading off to church with my brother and his family. Believe it or not, I had never been to a Unitarian Universalist church. Union Theological Seminary now boasts scores of “UUs,” but not during the time I had been there. I was embarrassingly naïve about this faith that I now hold so dear.

Off went my little ones to religious ed classes, along with their cousins. With Jeff and Donna, I settled into the sanctuary—my second sanctuary of the week. A gifted string ensemble played a prelude. A lay leader offered a welcome, warm and inclusive. There was a silent meditation, an offering, and a prayer. Brad Greeley was the minister then. When Brad rose to speak, I already sensed that something was stirring inside me. I can't remember a word that he said now. I just remember how I felt as the entire service unfolded. I had come home! I had come home!

I don't wish my particular path on anyone. Trusting, hopeful, and stubborn as I am, I tend to take not just the "road less travelled," but the road for which the entrance holds signs with big bold letters that say "KEEP OUT! DANGER!" Setting forth on such a path is aptly known as stupidity.

Nonetheless, I have two wonderful daughters—and with my marriage to Dan, three wonderful daughters whom I adore and three amazing grandchildren on whom the sun rises and smiles.

As for an iffy path and more brambles ahead, I had nonetheless come home spiritually and religiously. Just a few months later, after my little ones and I had moved to Montclair, New Jersey where I had landed a job, I headed for the Montclair Unitarian Church. The impetus to attend on that long ago Sunday was two-fold. I had caught a glimpse of Unitarian Universalism thanks to my family, and Gloria Steinem was the featured pulpit guest. Gloria Steinem was exactly who I needed, and so was this faith! Home again! Home again!

What is your journey? Why are you here this morning? How might this be Homecoming Sunday in ways profound beyond the imagining of those on either side of you?

If you have been coming here Sunday after Sunday, year after year, if you remember what it was like for this congregation to be housed in "the stone church" downtown, if you no longer think twice about whether this is your religious home, I trust you have no doubt about "belonging," about being in the mode of "spiritual family." If you are relatively new, you hold a quite different history. Perhaps you have already become a member. Perhaps you're still sitting on the fencepost of such a decision. Yet your history here is dear, however recent. You came seeking something and found it.

Perhaps you are here for the first or second time, or maybe for the first time in a long time. What brought you through the door? What in the search witting or unwitting that describes each of our lives, suggested that on this particular Sunday, you would come to experience worship in this faith that is Unitarian Universalist in this church that is now on Paddock Avenue in the city of Meriden in this region of Connecticut so rich with natural beauty, including the beauty of women and men and children across the demographic spectrum. What brought you here? What were you seeking, hoping for, maybe even yearning for? If you're parents of little ones, what are you looking for, hoping for, yearning for on behalf of your children?

If you're among the newcomers, know that I am too. It's not yet a month since I've arrived as minister here and since my husband Dan and I moved into our home in nearby Middletown. I too was seeking, hoping, yearning for a religious and spiritual experience as a Unitarian Universalist minister. This past July I concluded a gratifying two-year interim

ministry in Kingston, New York. Early on, I realized that if at all possible my next ministry would be what we call “settled.” Now that doesn’t mean “settled” as in “root-bound,” but roots do figure in a ministry to which we are called, for roots are what we put down when we’re in search of a home. I am finding a home in your midst for which I am ever grateful.

For all here who are seasoned members, remember what it was like when you entered the doors of this congregation for the first time? Who welcomed you? How? What did you feel after your first worship experience? What was it that over time confirmed that you had “come home” and were “at home” in this faith and this church? How does your own experience feed your readiness to welcome newcomers? How can all of us who are in a position to do so welcome all of you who are newcomers in such a way that you can feel at home?

In “The Death of the Hired Man,” poet Robert Frost described the conversation between a farm couple, Warren and Mary, over the unexpected return of Silas, a “hired man,” one who traded chores for room and board and perhaps pocket change. Mary speaks of Silas as coming home. Warren all but mocks this notion. Mary responds:

“Yes, what else but home?
It all depends on what you mean by home.”

And then comes her less than hospitable sentiment:

“Of course he’s nothing to us, any more
Than was the hound that came a stranger to us
Out of the woods, worn out upon the trail.”

“Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
They have to take you in.”

“I should have called it
Something you somehow haven’t to deserve.”

This obligatory sense of home on the part of anyone in a position to welcome folks at the door, folks familiar or a long time away or marked as strangers, falls far short of what any of us need if we are to feel genuinely at home. I am forever thankful that my brother and his family didn’t regard my children and me as Mary and Warren regarded Silas. I know that those of you who already count this church as your spiritual home welcome those of us who enter for the first time or the first time in a long time from a place of *dignity* and *connection*. Our understanding that each of us matters and all life is connected is an understanding of mind AND heart.

We speak of being homesick. Sometimes this doesn’t mean that we long for the home in which we grew up or even the home where most of our belongings are. Sometimes it means that place of the heart where we can be wholly who we are. As Dwight Young observes:

“Home is much more than a building or a piece of ground. It’s an emotion, a deep-rooted sense of welcome and permanence and belonging. It’s the safe, intensely personal realm where you can permit yourself to throw off everything that isn’t fundamentally, essentially you.”

If you're at home here, you're likely to make a mess at some point. That's partly what is meant by "throwing off everything..." It's what we do when we're at home. If you're at home here, somebody is likely to ask you to clean it up. That's what it means to share a home. If you're at home here, you'll want to invite family and friends to stop by, stay for a while, a long visit even. If you're at home here, you will over the years be able to surface memories grounded in the heart of this family, memories of joy and laughter and memories of tears and grief, memories that make you laugh out loud, memories that bring you back again and again if you journey far away from this time and this place. If you're at home here, you'll want to observe milestones of the heart and share them—babies born, children dedicated, love affirmed and celebrated, achievements, struggles, and the grief that comes with loss.

The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden doesn't replace what you now call home, but this address of the heart and that address of the heart can take turns being your home away from home.

As in a family, one of our ever-present struggles is to know that even though you matter and I matter, the "we" matters most. That "we" stretches and expands as we grow into the layered love that grounds this faith.

How to experience "the interconnected web of all life" in something other than a runaway sense of the ideal? Allow it to become intimate, as intimate as functional family can be. Are there boundaries? Yes, there are. Do I need to feel that I inhabit "my skin" and not yours? Yes, I do. In the same spirit, I don't necessarily believe what you believe; nor do I necessarily NOT believe what you DON'T believe. This faith and this church are communities of individuals. As we experience a *community of individuals* rather than an assembly of individuals, you and you and you and I become more than we could possibly be if we attempted a solo flight into spiritual truth and meaning.

As we experience a *community of individuals* living a faith that is as emotive as it presumes to be reasonable, we open ourselves to transformation. As we experience a *community of individuals bound in covenant and grounded in the difficult stuff of love*, we plant the feet of our souls in the soil of Unitarian Universalism—Unitarianism with its focus on one God or one Love or at-oneness with Life, Universalism with its focus on redemption from our human foibles in the grace and compassion of caring inclusive community.

In those words of Richard Gilbert, words that we spoke antiphonally just moments ago:

"We bid you welcome, who come with hope in your heart...
 We bid you welcome who are seekers of a new faith...
 We bid you welcome, who enter this [place] as a homecoming.
 Who have found here room for your spirit.
 Who find in this people a family."

When I sat in that other church so many years ago, riding that rogue wave of uncertainty, yet welcomed by family, welcomed by a faith so new to me, I knew I had come home. In this world where so many are homeless in so many ways, may we grow our roots deep so that our branches might spread like welcoming arms as we join together in saying: "Welcome home!"

All: "Welcome home."

Amen.

Sources:

Robert Frost, “The Death of the Hired Man,” in *North of Boston*, 1914.

Richard Gilbert, “We Bid You Welcome,” in *Singing the Living Tradition*, Unitarian Universalist Association, 1993, 442.

Dwight Young, “Home is much more than . . .” Source unknown.