

“Meadows and Minefields”
Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
Meriden, CT

September 15, 2013

[Sing:]

*Over the meadows green and wide,
Blooming in the sunlight, blooming in the sunlight.
Over the meadows green and wide
Off we go a roaming side by side.*

*Streamlets down mountains go,
Pure from the winter snow,
Joining they swiftly flow,
Singing of life so free;
Streamlets down mountains go,
Pure from the winter snow,
Joining they swiftly flow,
Calling to me.*

I learned it in church camp when I was 12. I learned it and loved it. Seasonal it's not and seasonal it is. Spring has no monopoly on lyrics of the heart and images that call to mind a carefree “blooming in the sunlight,” a friend roaming with us across a meadow, a mountain stream singing and calling.

Not quite 30 years ago the son of a good friend was camping out with his college buddies in Israel's Golan Heights. The day was delicious—a warm breeze, a blue sky, wildflowers gracing the hillside meadow they were crossing. They missed the warning signs, and it happened. A landmine buried in the 1960s exploded directly under Jerry. He lost his right leg and almost, his life. Six months of surgery and painful rehab followed. Jerry White had all possible love, support, and medical care, but a land mine had set his life in a direction he had never dreamed.

There I sat across from Jerry in my ministerial study, hearing his story and what he had done with his life and what he hoped yet to accomplish. It was 25 years after the accident. Jerry had become an activist in the International Campaign to Ban Landmines and a co-recipient of the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize for doing so. He co-founded Survivor Corps, a non-profit that supported others downwind of disaster to move beyond victimhood. He wrote *I Will Not Be Broken*, a memoir inspired and inspiring. My good friend, Mimi White, had raised a resilient and compassionate spirit and a high-energy survivor.

How is it that meadows and minefields co-exist in the same life? How is it that our spirits can soar and sing and our bodies be ravaged by the ground beneath our feet? In God we trust? In Life we trust? I wonder how many of us need to move through a spiritual rehab to awaken a trust not in life's goodness, if by goodness we mean safety or assuredness that all will be well, but trust in the possibility of meaning and purpose no matter how badly we might be scarred by a landmine literally or metaphorically. Are we victim or survivor? Are we carrier of bitterness or agent of healing?

Every Sunday in the rite of community candles you share your hopes and your hurts, your joys and your sorrows. It is a mark of trust when you do. You trust that this gathered community can hear you if not heal you. As your minister I strive every day to be with you, not to fix your broken parts but to be with you.

As you share your joys, I wonder. What is the difference between joys experienced at the presumed hands of Mother Nature and joys experienced at the hands of loved ones or complete strangers? An “over-the-meadows-green-and-wide” day is cause perhaps for thanking Life itself, or God, or Mother Nature, or the amorphous entity of Joy. A blessing conferred by another human being is cause perhaps for gratitude directed interpersonally.

As you share your hurts and sorrows, I wonder. What is the difference between wounds experienced at the presumed hands of Mother Nature and wounds experienced at the hands of other human beings, some of them long dead, others in our immediate family or even in the family of this congregation?

Hold onto that question for a moment and consider that Jerry White’s leg was shattered at the hands of nature’s capacity to camouflage other hands that had long ago placed a landmine in a hillside meadow. They were the hands of one who was probably just following orders, given by another who was just following orders, given by another who chose this strategy for addressing a tenacious conflict. The consequences were wrenching. Should Jerry have blamed God or Mother Nature or that person who was just following orders or that official who decided that landmines were a viable strategy in the complexity of human conflict? Surely Jerry was not without anger, but he chose not to blame. He didn’t forget. Rather he subsumed that raw memory into an affirmation of survival and a commitment to prevent future atrocities and their shattering consequences. Jerry wasn’t Jesus; he wasn’t Buddha; he wasn’t Gandhi. He was and is an ordinary guy, who in the aftermath of crisis chose compassionate activism over bitterness and revenge.

Trust v. mistrust: it’s the earliest of the stances we learn and choose. Can we, should we, will we trust that no matter what happens, no matter what we do or is done to us, and no matter what words are spoken and however hurtfully or painfully they land, we can emerge not with naïve trust, but with the trust that there is meaning to be found, truth to be spoken, other truths to be discovered, and compassion to be activated?

A week ago, this country was on the brink of a military strike on Syria. Some of us thought that this was the only viable course of action in response to the atrocities visited upon innocent people. Some of us thought that this was a course of folly that could unleash far more suffering than that known by those on whose behalf our leaders presumably sought to act.

Hard lines are for bending. Red lines are for crossing. Who could have guessed what has transpired over the past few days? Threats still fly, but the arduous conversations of diplomacy from sources unanticipated are underway. Diplomacy in the form of listening, mindful imagination, and alternative strategies trumps violence toward X on behalf of Y and surely when “we” are neither X or Y. Blame morphs into revenge morphs into violence morphs into consequences intended and unintended morphs into the wounds that evoked the blame in the first place.

All the lives this place
has had, I have. I eat
my history day by day.
...By this earth's life, I have
its greed and innocence,
its violence, its peace.

echo the words of poet Wendell Berry.

Might we back up into our immediate time and the intimate space of this congregation? A few moments ago I posed a question and asked you to hold onto it for a moment. I know, it was a long moment, but let's return to that question: What is the difference between wounds experienced at the presumed hands of Mother Nature and wounds experienced at the hands of other human beings, some of them long dead, others in our immediate family or even in the family of this congregation?

Mother Nature and human nature sometimes conspire in producing floods that could have been prevented, fires that should never have surged, and hurricanes precipitated by climate change for which we're all accountable. Suffering follows. Often we as humans rally with checkbooks open and hands-on service. It is easier to do so when it's harder to aim our human tendency to blame.

But what of those wounds that we have suffered downwind from unintended but highly consequential acts and words of other humans—not necessarily strangers, but “friends,” and yes, members of the family that is this congregation? What of the conflicts that have arisen, some of them simmering from years ago, some of them recent and raw? What of the conflicts that may not even be clear to the presumed perpetrators? What of the conflicts whose story would be told through entirely different filters by those party to them? Some know up close and personally how painful this can be—a veritable minefield of soul and psyche. They do not define this congregation, but they do move stealthily through undercurrents of our life together.

Fight, flee, or freeze are the common reactions to such conflict. For some, whatever discord hums in our midst is traumatic; for others, it's upsetting; for others, it's annoying; for others, it's invisible. But conflict *is*. Without conflict, we would be dead. Conflict need not escalate into discord, which need not escalate into divisiveness, which need not escalate into fighting or fleeing or freezing. How? How do we reconcile the meadows and minefields in our midst?

If I had a definitive response, I would not be a minister, but a Messiah. There are no easy answers. In fact, there are no answers. But there are responses, and each healing response is a facet of the kaleidoscopic options of ears that open and minds that stretch.

The hardest thing to say and to say from the bones of our soul when we're hurting, especially when we feel we've been wronged, is: “It's not all about me.” Yet, when we begin to speak the truth, if we use anything other than “I language,” we succumb to blame. What a paradox. I'm not talking about: “I think you're a jerk!” Or “I can't believe you said what you said or did what you did!” but rather “I'm hurting after I read that e-mail.” or “I feel like my voice doesn't matter after that meeting.” Or “I don't understand how what I said ticked you off.”

A tad of humility is the first step on the path of speaking the truth in love. It's not easy. Humility hurts; truth hurts; love hurts.

Our recollections of who said what to whom, of what was and wasn't done, of what was said by X about Y about me or about my friend, and yes, of what we were in our earliest years rewarded for and punished for, how we were affirmed or otherwise, how we were encouraged or diminished all feed into any conflict that we have known and will know.

In the words of Margaret Wheatley:

We have the opportunity many times a day, everyday, to be the one who listens to others, curious rather than certain. ... It's not differences that divide us. It's our judgments about each other that do. Curiosity and good listening bring us back together.

Surely we Unitarian Universalists are curious. Sometimes we're downright nose-y. I speak for myself! It's a strength and a liability. The upside of such curiosity is uncertainty. I don't really know. I wonder what. I wonder if. Maybe even...there's a pearl here waiting to be discovered. I'm willing to listen and learn.

Meadows and minefields. We've sung our way across them and stumbled our way through them. We've created the conditions for their being part of this world we inhabit. We can contribute to the possibility that meadows might thrive and minefields might be no more.

In the words of 11-year-old Phoebe Ann Jones:

Whoever we are, we've come to walk the face of the Earth for a reason. We all do things that people consider bad or good; whatever quality they have, they still have a place in the circle that weaves around lessons.

...no matter how bad things are, they still are part of everyday life, and once they happen, you can't do anything about them.

Then again, maybe they teach us things.

...My prayer for the future is that we make better use of our time together on this Earth as united human beings.

We can do it; we can. Amen, Phoebe, Amen.

Sources:

Wendell Berry, Wendell Berry, from "History" (for Wallace Stegner), *Collected Poems: 1957-1982*, North Point Press; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1998, 175.

Phoebe Ann Jones, Age 11, Costa Rica, from *Prayers for a Thousand Years*, edited by Elizabeth Roberts & Elias Amidon, HarperSanFrancisco, 1999, 173.

"Over the meadows," Czech folk song, source unknown.

margaret j. wheatley, *turning to one another: simple conversations to restore hope to the future*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., San Francisco, 2002, 36-37.

Jerry White, *I Will Not Be Broke: Five Steps to Overcoming Life Crises*, St. Martin's Press, 2008.