

Sermon: Drink Your Fill
delivered Sept 9, 2007
UU Church of Ellsworth, ME
Ingathering Sunday

I've spent a lot of time traveling in the last six months. A few weeks ago I went to the high desert of California, the part that you don't usually see in travel brochures—the part that looks more like the wild west and less like vacation resort. I was there to do a wedding, but my partner Janine joined me for a mini-vacation in the last days of summer.

While we were there we indulged several of our shared passions: time outdoors, exploring new places...and photographing what we found.

On the advice of one of the brides we headed out to a place with the unspectacular name of “North Lake.” First we found the lake, small and placid, thick with reeds and fishermen in chest waders. When we turned around to park, though, we found the treasure. A little barely-there path led from the dusty mountain road to a little stream, not deep enough for boats or big fish, icy cold from glacial runoff, and clear as a bell. I could have spent all day there, feet in the water, watching the minnows and staring at the miracle of green trees against the red and tan mountains.

When we got home we emptied our camera onto the computer and forgot about it, caught up in the frenzy of preparation for September. A few days ago I finally took the time to sort through, look for a few good ones, share them with friends...and I noticed something interesting. We had gone to the desert; we took pictures of the desert. But at least a third of the images we returned with featured water.

How did that happen? We lived in Portland, Oregon for a whole year, an hour from the coast, and took more pictures of flowers and rocks and dried grasses than we ever did of the ocean. But in four days we managed to focus almost as much on the glaringly absent water as we did on the brilliantly present sun.

I think we focused on what was missing. The water got our attention because it stood out, wet and fluid against the rock, blue against brown, ice cold against searing heat. The water got our attention because it was what we needed...

And yes, it is very good to be back in New England. I have spent all of August looking around and taking deep breaths, staring at the trees, marveling at the stars, playing in the ocean...and listening to crickets. I am soaking it up, the familiar sights and sounds and smells, the pace of the year, the crisp nights and warm days—there is a rhythm to this world that I have not had in a very long time, and I am deep in gratitude every day just to be here.

Part of it is the beauty that brings millions of tourists to New England every year. But part of it is slipping into an old flannel shirt, the one you've had so long you can't remember how you got it—the one that's so soft and faded it's more of a grey-green-white-brown than any kind of plaid.

I grew up in Connecticut, but compared to the desert, this is very much my home.

Janine has been having a similar experience. She grew up in Duluth, Minnesota, far enough north and east to nestle into the banks of Lake Superior. Those banks are also rocky, those trees are also evergreen and wiry and strong. We'll be the first to tell you that lake is not the same as ocean, no matter how big, but she, too, is feeling like she's coming home again.

So it is with church. Some of us are old Unitarians or Universalists, families stretching back in a long line through the generations to our American roots, or even into Europe and the groups of freethinkers that began there. Some of us are Unitarian Universalists by several generations, one

or two or three sets of names and faces to connect us from there to here. Some came to us as children, and some as youth; some of us arrived here with our own children in tow, and some towed by our children, some pulled by some ineffable connection, or by a sermon title, or a listing in the phone book. Some of us arrived last month, and some last week. Some are sitting here for the very first time, in the company of friends, or curiosity, or doubt, or all three.

Religion can make some of us feel like Alice, knowing that something will happen if we drink, but not knowing what or how. Some of us have even learned that it *is* poison. What if we shrink? Worse, what if we grow? Will we find ourselves sending packages to our feet at Christmas, so separated from parts of ourselves that we no longer feel like a complete person? I won't lie—that *could* happen... if you stop paying attention.

It is an active spiritual life, this one—I love it, but it is effort. I hesitate to call it work, because it does not for me carry the unpleasantness that Bob mentioned last week, that pain or discomfort that implies *labor*. But it is work, and it is thirsty work, and that is why we need our congregations. That is why we come to church.

I have met any number of people who will tell me that they don't do church. When you tell people you're a minister, that's a common response.

“What do you do?”

“Oh I'm a minister.”

“Oh really?” There is an uncomfortable pause. “That's...lovely. Of course, I don't really *do* church...”

It's true, not everyone does. It's not even a good fit for everyone. But when we come here, when *we* Unitarian Universalists come here, we are gathered with people who are like-minded in their journeying, even if our paths and our eventual destinations are different. We come here to get help, help with our questions and help with our answers, support with living according to our beliefs...and we come to experience connection, that sacred space that Henry Nelson Weiman called “creative interchange”—the thing that happens when several people get together and are creative together, that magical flow of energy and ideas and brilliance that most of us struggle to reach without companions.

Many of us connect with people all day, but we do it in a bounded space, a place where we are working together on one particular task or activity. That kind of connection is different. What we have here is enough wiggle room that creativity can manifest in thousands of different ways each time we are together.

We come here because we are thirsty: thirsty for spirituality, thirsty for community, thirsty for a place to be ourselves. At youth conferences we used to tell people: this is a safe space. Check your masks at the door. We want to know who you *really* are. Wanting to really know and be known is a rare thing for adults. As we grow we often learn that who we think we are is not necessarily welcome. So we learn to adjust, and adjust some more. And pretty soon we wake up unsure of who we are, even in the quiet dark morning of our bedroom, wondering if trees falling in the forest make a sound.

That question used to annoy me to no end. Of course it makes a sound, logic says it makes a sound. the mechanics of producing sound are the same regardless of who hears it. But this is no question of physics. This is a question of interconnection and of relevance. If a tree could possibly fall without any being experiencing it, then the falling of the tree becomes immaterial. But we live in a fundamentally connected world. If there are no people present, there are birds and rodents and insects, there are other plants; there are mosses and molds and fungi.

So when our late-night ruminations turn to action, the resulting course-corrections often look abrupt: new job, return to school, following an old dream—but they are no more sudden than they have to be. We realize we're off course and we don't want to go where we're headed—so we fix it. Unfortunately, the adjustments also disrupt the lives around us. Family, friends, colleagues, communities have all arranged themselves with a space for who we were. When we change, they have to change, too.

Of course the tree makes a sound. It makes a sound because it impacts thousands of other lives, that in turn impact thousands of other lives. If a butterfly flapping its wings can change the weather halfway around the world, then a tree falling in any forest makes a racket...

We are living beings, and a central fact of living is change and growth. If our surroundings keep our outsides still as our insides change, eventually, like an earthquake fault, the stress overcomes the friction and we move. All at once. Because we must.

We come together in community to make it easier.

Church can certainly be part of the friction—part of what holds us in place. But it can also lubricate the gap, keep us moving, so the transition is smooth and continuous. Church is itself a liminal place—a between-place, neither work nor home, neither obligation nor option. It is a place where we come to know ourselves and to be known, so that our lives can be in the constant state of evolution that living itself calls for.

This is at once a place of comfort and challenge, a place like Alice's through the looking-glass where we have jam tomorrow and jam yesterday, but never jam today; where we can run in place for as long as necessary to get where we're going...and it is a place where we can come to know, with the help of those gathered with us, that the army we face is nothing but a pack of cards.

This clarity doesn't come free or even cheap. This is a place you can come to get filled up, but we're not going to prop your mouth open and pour the water down. You're going to have to get a glass, bring a cup, use your hands, stick your head under the tap...

We have to engage with the people around us, put in time and energy for our own spiritual growth at a time and place in history when we are taught to value those things in theory, but not in practice. We have to laugh and cry together and give lots of second chances. We have to dream big and take leaps of faith, make the appropriate calculations, and come back to build the bridge for others. We have to lift each other up—for real, not just if or when it makes us feel better.

Come home, then, come home and drink at the well of community. Let the waters fill your heart and fill your days, let them lift up your spirit and each moment of your living so that each moment is real, is precious, is really yours. In that lived instant you gift your experience to the world, and each of us becomes more than we could ever be alone.

What a gift. What a reservoir of strength. What a font of hope.

Come into the church. Drink your fill. Experience connection and community and that indescribable thing that happens when people come together with good and open hearts. Soak it up. Then go out into the world and live.

We are gathered.

We are gathered here.

Drink up. This is one adventure you won't want to miss.