

Home Again for the First Time

Delivered August 21, 2011

Thank you for inviting me to your Spiritual home this morning, thank you for your hospitality and the warm welcome I've received. Today begins a new journey. This particular journey will end next Sunday. Regardless of how this journey concludes, I am deeply honored to be here and sharing this time with you.

I am especially honored to be here for "Homecoming Sunday." It brings to mind my very first "Homecoming Sunday" at the Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation in California. It is the congregation I call my "Home Congregation, it is where I discovered Unitarian Universalism, it is where I found a home, where I discovered my life's calling, where I fell in love, where my son was dedicated, and it was where I was ordained.

Homecoming Sunday there is the Sunday after Labor Day. It's a congregation of about 150 members, or at least it was then and I was not ready for I experienced that day. Actually, I before I can go further with the story, I need to take a step backwards. I need to explain how it came to be that I was there that day.

The story begins a few months earlier, sometime in June. By the way, this was about 15 years ago when my beard was still mostly red and before my forehead started expanding. In June, I had read a story in the paper about the local UU minister, Ellen Livingston. It caught my attention because she described herself as humanist with Buddhist tendencies. I liked that. She talked about her congregation and Unitarian Universalism in a way that caught my attention. I don't recall exactly now what it was she said in the article, but I knew I was intrigued.

I wasn't looking for a church, let alone a whole new religion. I then, and still do to some degree, I then maintained a real love/hate relationship with religion. I loved to hate religion. I especially loved to blame religion for all the world's problems. But on the other hand, I sensed there was something inherent in religion, something about it, that speaks to the human condition, fills some deep, incessant need, and my curiosity about it ran deep.

I had taken several classes in anthropology and some classes on Native American literature, and I had a strong personal interest in the pre-Christian religions of Europe, especially of the Greeks and Celtic people of Gaul and the British Isles. There had to be a good reason that every culture,

in one form or another, has developed a recognizable spiritual tradition that we call religion. Religion, you may know, comes from the latin word meaning “to bind.” Oh sure, it can serve to bind a culture together, maintain order and serve as a social lubricant to solve problems, and to a large extent I agreed with Marx, that religion had become nothing more than an opiate of the masses, loaded down with millennia of social and political baggage. But I was convinced that there was a pony somewhere behind the pile of manure, and It seemed I wouldn’t be happy until I could find it.

Okay, back to the story. The newspaper article had piqued my curiosity. What would a congregation lead by a self-defined humanist Buddhist look like? What would it FEEL Like? I was skeptical, but I was curious. I drove by the building many times over the next several weeks. The first time, just so that I would know exactly where it was in case I decided to go sometime. The subsequent drive-by’s were almost compulsive. If I was anywhere in the general vicinity of the place, I would find some excuse to drive by it. Once, I even drove through the parking lot. I’m not sure what I was looking for, but it was clear that some subconscious desire or need was trying to get my attention but every time Sunday morning came around, I found some excuse to not go.

But fate would have the final say in all this as it would seem. That Summer I had started taking classes at the local community college. Having given up my pursuit of a degree in Fishery Biology, another story I will have to share sometime, having given up that that goal and spending a few years not knowing what to do with my life, I had started back to school to become an English teacher. To make registration in the Fall easier, I had enrolled in a few classes in the summer. One of them was “Introduction to Religion” The professor gave us an assignment in that class to attend a church, mosque, or Synagogue other than our own. Damn! No more excuses. And that first Sunday in August I dragged myself out of bed and went to the church.

I’ll be honest, I remember very little detail about the service. I remember the service was lead by the intern minister and it was a relatively small crowd, at least for the number of available seats. I also remember the topic was games and the congregation was invited to “play” during the service. Play during church? As a kid, I would get in trouble at church for playing and these people were inviting me to play? People were laughing, and a few cried from laughing so much. But it wasn’t all games. I was also invited to think! They didn’t try to tell me what to think or feel, they invited me to consider certain possibilities, they raised certain some important questions and invited me to draw my own conclusions based upon my own experience.

Every preconception about church, religion, spirituality had been torn down that day. I was not prepared for what I experienced. It was supposed to be serious. It was supposed to be boring! It is hard to describe how I felt that day but at some level I sensed that my life had taken some dramatic turn. I felt like I belonged there, a feeling that was, quite frankly, new to me. I didn't know enough to understand why I felt that way, but that was how I felt.

I returned the next few Sundays, even staying after the service to chat. I was immensely curious about this thing called Unitarian Universalism, but I was still skeptical. Each service was different from the last, but each made me think and each made me feel, well, each made me feel at home, like I belonged.

But. . . . But. . . . But. . . . But the minister would be retuning in September, that would be the true test. It will be more like a traditional church once the minister shows up, I was sure of it. I could picture it. Altar boys carrying censer and candles would lead the procession. The minister would follow, dressed in robes and other traditional paraphernalia. Of course, this was all fantasy. The minister arrived without fanfare, things were pretty much the same as they had been in August.

There were more people, of course. A lot more people. The place was packed. Again, I don't remember any details about the service, only how I felt. Imagine returning home after a very long trip. Imagine, after spending a long day on planes, trains and automobiles, pulling into your driveway, walking into the front with bags in hand. Imagine, the feeling you have as you drop the bags, take a deep breath, and as you breathe out, all that tension, like the weight of the world that you didn't even know you were carrying, suddenly falls away. That is what I felt that day. I felt like I had found a home. I was home again for the first time.

Which, of course, begs the question; what is home? We all know the cliches. Home is where the heart is. Home Sweet home. Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home. There's no place like home. There's no place like home. There's no place like home. Home. It's a word. A symbol. It most often refers to a physical place, where we live, where we sleep, where we spend most of our time, where we keep our stuff. Which implies a high level of comfort and familiarity.

What is home? Beyond the physical place we call home; beyond any rational, what is about home that evokes such powerful feelings in people?

Yes, it is sweet, yes it is where the heart is, there's no place like it. But why? Abraham Maslow's, the founder of what is called "humanistic psychology" proposed a hierarchy of needs that applies to all of us. It is most often portrayed in the shape of a pyramid, with the most fundamental levels of needs at the bottom, and the need for self-actualization at the top. The basic four layers of the pyramid contain what Maslow called "deficiency needs" esteem, friendship and love, security, and physical needs.

The theory suggests that the most basic level of needs must be met before we can even begin to consider secondary or higher level needs. At the top of the pyramid is "self-actualization" which Maslow suggests Includes such values as:

WHOLENESS (unity; integration; tendency to one-ness; interconnectedness; simplicity; organization; structure; dichotomy-transcendence; order);

JUSTICE (fairness; orderliness; lawfulness; "oughtness");

RICHNESS (differentiation, complexity; intricacy);

SIMPLICITY (honesty; nakedness; essentiality; abstract, essential, skeletal structure);

BEAUTY (rightness; form; aliveness; simplicity; richness; wholeness; perfection; completion; uniqueness; honesty);

GOODNESS (rightness; desirability; oughtness; justice; benevolence; honesty);

UNIQUENESS (idiosyncrasy; individuality; novelty);

PLAYFULNESS (fun; joy; amusement; humor; effortlessness);

TRUTH (honesty; reality; nakedness; simplicity; richness; oughtness; beauty; pure, clean and unadulterated; completeness; essentiality).

SELF-SUFFICIENCY (autonomy; independence; self-determining; transcendence; separateness; living by its own laws).

Consider Maslow's hierarchy of needs in the context of our discussion about home. What is home? Home is where our most basic needs are met. Home is

where we are sheltered, where we are fed, where we are safe, where we are loved and respected. Home is where we are safe and free to be ourselves, to be unique. Home is where we are safe to go beyond ourselves, to reach deep into the core of our being, the core of being itself, and realize the connection that has always been there; Realize and actualize the interdependent web of existence that is in us, around us, though we cannot see it.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are uniquely blessed, we are uniquely privileged. That we can ponder, discuss and argue the existence and nature of God; That we can explore the meaning and purpose of life through art and worship; That we can fight for equality and justice for all. We are blessed because we have found a home, we feel safe and we feel loved. But, you know this. I'm not telling you anything new.

I hope these words are familiar to you, it your statement of mission and covenant:

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Midland is an oasis of liberal religion empowering people to pursue spiritual growth and work toward a just, equitably, sustainable society.

As a congregation, we covenant together before the wonder and mystery of life to provide a welcoming, safe and tolerant religious community that both nurtures and challenges us in our diverse and yet shared journeys.

Striving together in the spirit of love, we will listen and respond to the ethical and spiritual concerns of one another, seeking to foster a deeper sense of fellowship that strengthens us each in service to life."

Our mission is create an oasis, a home, a place where we are safe to be ourselves, a place we are free to be more than we have yet imagined. Our mission is help others find the safety and freedom they need reach their own highest potential. It is my honor and pleasure to be standing here, to be welcomed into your home. I embrace this opportunity to serve thi community, to serve Unitarian Universalism, to serve the we of life of which we are all a part. I am privileged to be offered the opportunity to serve, to share, to give back what I have received. It is good to be home again, for the first time.

So Be it! Amen! Blessed Be!