

“Ask Not For Whom The Universe Calls ...”

Sermon for Sunday 4/3/11

When our girls were grade-schoolers, one of our favorite placemats was a plastic one that had our Unitarian Universalist Principles in the center and artfully grouped around that were the names of famous Unitarian Universalists:

- Writers and Poets such as Louisa May Alcott, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, e.e.cummings, Dickens, Thoreau, Emerson, May Sarton, Carl Sandberg, and Kurt Vonnegut;
- Musicians such as Bartok and Grieg, Pete Seeger and Malvina Reynolds;
- Humanitarians and Social Reformers such as Clara Barton, Susan B. Anthony, Albert Schweitzer, Dorothea Dix, and Whitney Young;
- Scientists and Physicians such as Alexander Graham Bell, Charles Darwin, Elizabeth Blackwell, Linus Pauling, Ashley Montague, and Lewis Latimer – the son of escaped slaves who became an engineer/draftsman and collaborated with Alexander Graham Bell and Thomas Edison;
- And almost more politicians than you can count.

I thought about those placemats when I read an article in the current UU World. It's the one written by Rev. Mark Harris, of the First Parish in Watertown, Mass., and titled, "A Faith For The Few?" Subtitle: "How Unitarian Universalists are torn between pride in our elite history and aspirations to be a religion for all" In his article he challenges us with the question of whether a liberal faith only appeals to a narrow segment of the population – a liberal, economically comfortable, well-educated elite? It's quite a thought-provoking and I would urge discussion-provoking article. Speaking about it would make a good sermon, I think.

But not today.

Today, I just want to zero in on one sentence from his article. Let me quote it exactly:

“... we are comforted by our litany of influential and prestigious forebears”

Really? Comforted?

Is that what we were doing, comforting ourselves and our kids, when we used the placemat to talk about some of those heroes of liberal faith and liberated thought?

Let me ask you, when I read that short list of notable Unitarian Universalists, what did it make you feel?

Going back to Rev. Harris for just a minute, let me say again that his article is genuinely thought-provoking. But I think in writing that sentence he’s creating a straw-man argument that really does beg the question.

Do you know what reading those lists do for me? They do just the opposite of comforting. They inspire me. Unitarian Universalism is a creedless religion. Our deeds speak louder than our words. It’s easier to understand what UUism stands for – and calls for -- as a living faith by telling the stories of our UU heroes. That’s what we were doing with our children every time we ate off those placemats.

Our UU hero-stories inspire. And I think they they should DIScomfort.

These are stories of UU men and women, passionately committed to truth – truth of the mind or truth of the heart – and who courageously followed their call and produced great things – things of inspiring beauty, things of transforming invention, things of progressive social change.

April is particularly generous in offering us UU hero stories for our edification and inspiration.

This coming Thursday, the 7th, is the birthday of William Ellery Channing (1780), Unitarian who believed all concepts of Deity to be aspects of the one Deity, and preached religious tolerance.

Later this month, on the 21st, we mark the birthday of John Muir, the great naturalist and conservationist, whose vision created Yosemite and after whom is named Muir Woods and its awe-inspiring redwood trees. It's not a coincidence that the very next day is Earth Day. John Muir, by the way, was not a book-signed member of a Unitarian or Universalist congregation. But he is one of those UU heroes whose writings mark him as philosophically and spiritually in sympathy with us. The same way we claim Ben Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln, for example..

A little bit later, on the 30th, comes the birthday of Hosea Ballou (1771), our Universalist forebear who preached from the pulpit of our own progenitor church on Lombard Street that all are Deity's beloved children.

And between Muir's and Ballou's birthdays, on the 27th, we celebrate the life and mark the death day of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1882), transcendentalist Unitarian who believed in equality, self reliance, and the immanence of Deity in humans and in all Nature.

These are among the heroes that inspire the few hundred thousand of us Unitarian Universalists here and around the world. But April also offers us the stories of two heroes that inspire almost 3 billion people, namely the world's Hindus and Christians.

We're all aware, of course, that April closes with the great Christian celebration of Easter on the last Sunday of the month. The life story of Jesus, great prophet -- and to some god incarnate-- is a hero story that has inspired Christians for a hundred generations.

But few of us here today are probably aware that tomorrow opens a week-long celebration of a life that has inspired twice that many generations, or more, of Hindus. Tomorrow begins the Ramanavami – the week long celebration of the birth and life of Lord Rama, avatar of *Vishnu*, protector of his beloved wife, Sita, avatar of *Lakshmi*, and vanquisher of evil in the guise of the demon, Ravana.

The main frame of the story of the **Ramayana** is exceedingly well-known in India, children beginning to learn it while at their mothers' breasts.

The **Koysala** country in the north of India, with Ayodhya as its capital, is presided over by **Dasaratha**. Though his eldest son Rama, and son of queen Kausalya, is entitled to the throne, and Dasaratha is himself keen that Rama should ascend to the kingship, Dasaratha's other queen **Kaikeyi** contrives to have Rama sent into a forest exile for fourteen years, as well as have her own son, **Bharatha**, installed as king.

Though Bharatha is not a party to the plot, and is devoted to his elder brother, Rama nonetheless proceeds to the forest, accompanied by his brother Lakshmana, as well as by his wife, Sita, renowned for her beauty and matchless virtue. In the forest, Rama and his party have numerous fantastic adventures, but it is the abduction of Sita by Ravana, the demon-king of Lanka, which sets the stage for the epic battle pitting Rama and the forces of good against Ravana, and the forces of evil. In his efforts to find Sita, whose whereabouts are unknown, Rama is aided by Hanuman, the monkey god or god of wind.

Eventually, Ravana, his kin, and his entire force is defeated by Rama and his military allies, and in triumph Rama returns to Ayodhya with Lakshmana and Sita and is crowned king.

The story of Rama is the story of the archetypal hero who lies within our own depths. His journey to the forest is the unique voyage all of us must make. It is an adventure into the mysterious and the unknown. According to Joseph Campbell:

The heroic life is living the individual adventure.
There is no security in following the call to adventure.
Nothing is exciting if you know what the outcome is going to be.
To refuse the call means stagnation.
You enter the forest at the darkest point, where there is no path.
Where there is a way or path, it is someone else's path.
You are not on your own path if you follow someone else's way;
you are not going to realize your potential.

The goal of the hero trip down to the jewel point is to find those levels in the psyche that open, open, open, and finally open to the mystery of your Self being. ... [you as] Buddha consciousness. Or [you as] the Christ.

That's the journey.

Whether you see Rama as exiled or freed, from Ayodhya, he is loosed from the burdens of the expectations and duties of being the crown prince. And though he doesn't yet know it, Rama has been delivered into the forest to begin the journey that will eventually bring him face to face with the crisis that will either destroy him or transform him from being Rama the righteous prince of Koysala into Rama the heroic avatar of Vishnu. For Rama that defining moment comes when his beloved Sita is attacked and captured by the forces of the evil Ravana. Only in that moment does Rama understand that his Karma was to bring to this

moment all the skills and wisdom collected in his lifetime and use those skills and that wisdom to rescue Sita and in rescuing her also free all the kingdoms of the predations of Ravana and all of his kind. Except for Rama's exile into the forest – that 'felix culpa' – there would have been no danger, no grief of loss and courageous rescue, no triumphant victory over evil, and Ravana and his demons would still torture the people of Koysala.

My friends, isn't that the story of all of us here? Aren't we all like Rama? Some few of us by birth, but by far most of us by choice or chance find ourselves in that forest of uncertainty and yet boundless possibility that is Unitarian Universalism. And more remarkably still we find ourselves together in that small forest corner that is Restoration.

With only the fewest exceptions, we have all been loosed from religions of simplistic righteousness – not necessarily easy, but simple: obey the rules ... follow the 10 commandments ... avoid the 7 deadly sins ... and if you're Catholic, go to Mass on the weekend, confession once a year, and take communion at Easter. Not so clearly marked is the path of Unitarian Universalism and our 7 Principles. Just exactly what does it look like to promote the worth and dignity of every person or to respect the interdependent web of all existence? Mind you, I'm not criticizing them or even questioning their value. I'm just saying that they lack the simple clarity of "Thou shalt not steal" or "go to mass on the weekend or you'll go to hell."

But I digress. The point is that the forest was not Rama's destination. A peaceful life in his forest glade of Panchvati astride the Godavari river was not his destiny. But his destiny, his purpose – his Karma -- would be found in that forest into which he brought nothing except his character, his life experience and the skills of a warrior learned as a youth. And all of those were called for and tested in overcoming Ravana and saving Sita and all of Koysala.

So too, all of us – you and I. Being here, together, at Restoration Unitarian Universalist Church is not our destiny. But it is the place where, if we are discerning enough and courageous enough, we might meet our destiny ... our purpose ... our Karma.

Around the age of 10, I felt – I believed – the call, the vocation, to ministry. And being a Catholic, that meant only one thing – becoming a priest. So, at 14 I stepped onto that path. Nine years later, convinced that the Catholic priesthood was not my true calling, I abandoned that path, and that faith, with these words of Sister Mary Adolf, my eighth grade teacher haunting me, “Don’t turn your back on your vocation, Jim, or you’ll never find happiness in your life.”

Over the next 20 years, I trod a zig-zag path of career and belief. From Catholic monk to Philly cop to anthropologist-ethnographer, from non-profit COO to security company VP, from hospital system executive and to entrepreneurial executive coach; from Catholic cleric to agnostic to atheist-humanist, I had plenty of reason to think there was much truth in her witch-like prophecy.

Eventually my zigging and zagging brought me and my family here to Restoration.. Arriving here I felt something like what Rama and his beloved Sita must have felt when they eventually found shelter in Panchvati – in this case the fresh air and refreshing water of liberal faith. But I didn’t know the Rama story back then. I didn’t yet know that year by year for 14 years, the forest of Panchvati would conjure up events that would call for Rama’s every skill – and sometimes, too, trials that would test Rama’s sincerity, loyalty, steadfastness and courage. And only by accepting his challenge did Rama become the avatar of Vishnu for which he has been revered over the millennia.

My story has none of that grandiosity -- trust me that I know that. But the years here at Restoration have conjured up events that have called upon all of my skills – and sometimes have tested my sincerity and steadfastness. But it has also been during my years here at Restoration that I have rediscovered my own call to ministry, namely providing guidance on the journey of deepening one’s personal depth of spirit and greater professional fulfillment and success. Though a ministry vastly different from what my 10 year old self imagined, my ears no longer toll Sr Mary Adolph’s foreboding.

Restoration is our forest of Panchvati, my friends. Here we are welcome to find companionship and refreshment in the fresh air of our shared liberal faith. But the universe has not called us to this place merely for our soul’s comfort. Rama was called to the loveliness of the Panchvati glade and the cool, cleansing waters of the Godavari river not just to refresh and invigorate himself, but to become ready to realize his Karma. So, too, your merely being here is not your Karma. You’re here to realize your Karma.

The Cosmos – God – has delivered you – with all of your talents and all of your life experience -- to this place, to this community of faith and support, at this time. For what purpose has the Cosmos delivered you here?

“Turning point” is one of the meanings of the Greek word Krisis, or as we say it “crisis.” In that sense I would say that Restoration is at krosis. Not in crisis, but at krosis. A turning point. You can all feel it, can’t you? Restoration’s energy is being restored. Optimism is building. It’s visible in small things, like the success at fundraising for first stage of the windows campaign. Like the new sign that will be erected sometime soon. And you can feel it in some big things, too. Like the rising number of Sunday guests. And our new minister, Rev. Ellis, who brings warmth and wisdom to our pastorate and restores deep thoughtfulness and spiritual power to our worship.

But my friends, a turning point is only that. A fragile point in time. A point in time where Restoration has been before. Will this time be different? Will this be the time of Restoration? This is the place and the moment to which the Cosmos has delivered you. This is your moment. Your moment of Karma. And so I ask you again. For what purpose has God delivered you to us now -- you with your unique gifts, talents and life experiences?

If you find discomfort in that question, it's the same discomfort -- along with inspiration -- that I feel reading the list of great Unitarian Universalists with which I began. We remember them because they felt passionately committed -- indeed duty-bound -- to follow the call of their truth and generously, and often courageously, served up their gifts to the world.

We -- you and I -- have no less a call to Restoration today. I recently heard it said of Restoration that we're a community of 100 very nice people and 100 years from now Restoration will still be a community of 100 very nice people.

Well, my friends, we have an opportunity -- no, I say a duty -- to serve up our gifts generously and change that trajectory. And so I say again, that it is to that purpose that you are delivered here ... now ... with your unique gifts, talents and life experiences. How will you serve them up here ... now ... to the great purpose of Restoration's restoration? What will you contribute to change history?

In a just a few years we will be celebrating Restoration's 200th anniversary. And we, you and I, are its 7th generation. Did you know that? And did you know that legend has long held that 7th sons and 7th daughters are gifted with special powers of healing and transformation?

So, we are Restoration's crisis generation. That is our Karma. This generation has this moment to change the course of Restoration's history and be remembered by generations to come. This is our opportunity. This is our duty. What will you do to be so remembered?

As I bring this meditation to a close, I invite you to ponder the words of two giants of liberal faith. Ponder and ask yourselves what are their meanings for you here with us. First, from the Indian poet, Rabindranath Tagore, who says

I slept and dreamed my life was joy.
I awoke and found my life was duty.
I acted and learned that in my duty was my joy.

And these words from Thoreau:

"If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.

In this upcoming week, I would ask that you reflect on two questions:

- What is your dream for Restoration's future?
- For what will you be remembered by Restoration's future generations?

We will revisit them.

Blessed and remembered be!