



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

### Into the Light

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I want to start with a pastiche – interestingly, as we approach Thanksgiving, a pastiche is a French word derived from an Italian word, and stemming from the same root as pasta. In another transformation, a pastiche becomes a pie. It also means a hodgepodge – a wonderful word in itself – a somewhat disconnected collections of things thrown together – like the fruit in a pie, or the tangle of pasta.

These are my thoughts, as I get ready to leave for my two month sabbatical, in December and January. You should have received a letter describing this already or you will soon. I plan on focusing on my prayer life, collecting the many hundreds of prayers I have written over the years, to see if some pattern might emerge, or if it is all just a hodgepodge, a ‘prayer pie.’ And I will take the results from the survey you all WILL fill out this week and spend time on developing my vision for our church for the next number of years. If you don’t fill out the survey, I won’t be able to come up with a vision and so, I suppose, can’t come back from my sabbatical .. so.....

But here are the thoughts struggling within me: last Tuesday the Commonwealth of Virginia executed John Allen Muhammad, known as the sniper killer. In the year following September 11, in the Washington, DC area, we lived with fear. The day and night of the attacks on New York and Washington were somber; I remember sitting in a darkened sanctuary, listening to Dawn Upshaw sing Penderecki’s Symphony of Sorrowful Songs. The sky was quiet – no commercial planes flew that night – but the quiet was interrupted as we heard the high roar of F-16 fighter jets, and a few commercial airplanes taking Saudi Arabians out of the country. Death seemed to be falling around us and we smelled of fear.

Soon after that, anthrax was sent through the mails in Washington, to the Senate Office building and other places. Two postal workers died. At the church I served, we received a fat envelope one day with our address in block printing. We called the police, and they opened it. Inside was a baggie with white powder – it turned out to be flour. It was not funny.

Soon after, a series of sniper shootings paralyzed the area. One man was killed not too many miles from where we lived. The shootings were wholly random – a man at a gas station, a woman at a craft store, a man at a bus stop, a child leaving school, a woman in a Home Depot parking lot. Schools cancelled after school events; no sports were played. We ducked behind pillars when we filled our cars with gas. We held our breath until our kids got home from school.

The shooter was executed this week, and at the same time people in Europe were celebrating the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Just twenty years ago! Is that really all? I visited East Berlin in the 60s and went through check point Charlie, saw the wall dividing a free West Berlin and an enslaved East Berlin. Somewhere – I can’t find it – I have a piece of the wall, a souvenir, and a reminder of how precious freedom is, and how easily walls between people are built and maintained.

An army psychiatrist kills 13 people at Fort Hood. The US Congress can hardly seem to function and can barely address the fact that millions in our nation have little or no access to health care. Women’s ability to make decisions about their own body may be severely limited. Our schools are crumbling. I expect that if we increase our efforts in Afghanistan, money will be appropriated without the blink of an eye. We cannot spend money for health care but can for foolish and unnecessary wars.

So these are my thoughts these days. Maine decides that it is still OK to discriminate against the LGBT community and climate change legislation stalls.

But in spite of all of that, how lucky and blessed we are, I think, to live in freedom and so far from the fear that

hovers over much of the world. How blessed we are here in this beloved community, surrounded each Sunday by people who care, who believe in the power of compassion, who work for justice. How blessed we are to be surrounded by parents, gay and straight, who care for their children, and all the adults who support them. How lucky we are to have all of these wonderful children running around this campus.

How blessed we are.

These are my thoughts.

This sermon has its origins in the Question and Answer service a couple of weeks back, and with one question in particular. Someone asked 'How long is the leap of faith?' My answer, fumbled a bit, was that it was life-long, that faith is dynamic, in our tradition, and something we expect will grow and change as we grow and change.

The phrase 'leap of faith' comes from Soren Kierkegaard, the melancholy Danish theologian and philosopher, sometimes called the father of existentialism. He was a master at book titles: *The Sickness Unto Death*, *Either/Or*, *Fear and Trembling*, *A Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, most published under pseudonyms. I read a lot of Kierkegaard when I was young – it has been a long time since. I understood him – something very Scandinavian about Kierkegaard that resonated with my Minnesota-Lutheran-Norwegian spirit.

He lived from 1813-1855, exactly during the time Unitarianism and Universalism were flourishing here in the US. It is interesting to wonder what a conversation between Emerson and Kierkegaard would have been. Both emphasized the primacy of the individual and the subjective nature of truth, and, in a way, both emphasized that faith grew out of experience and was not entirely rational. As Mari said last week, quite rightly, both made a distinction between faith and belief, but both thought that faith had to do with who we are or might become rather than what we held to be true about the nature of reality.

They both struggled with faith, with depression and melancholy, and both held that honesty with the self was a critical virtue, and they both affirmed that all humans share essential elements. As much as Kierkegaard and Emerson emphasized the individual, they also held that we are all essentially human and share similar struggles and triumphs alike. We all ask the question of meaning, and all face the mystery of suffering and death; we are all confronted with questions of good and evil, and with justice and compassion. They would say we are each particular rather than each of us being unique. They would argue that as much connects us as divides us.

And this is the boundary over which the leap of faith occurs – this boundary between and connecting the self and the other. Remember that the word religion means to re-connect; it has to do with relationship. The leap of faith is the leap to something other than the self; it is the leap into relationship.

How long is that leap? How far? Depends. It is the leap between the self and other, between individual and community; faith is the leap of relationship. It is the risk of love; it is the risk of empathy and compassion.

Two studies about the writing and thought of Ayn Rand have just recently been published and her books are apparently enjoying a bit of a revival – several Fox news commentators have trumpeted her thought [though we need to think of 'thought' in its broadest sense possible]. Certainly one of the worst writers ever – matched peerlessly by writers like Dan Brown in the ability to write a fluid and coherent sentence – Ayn Rand said that all that mattered was the self – the lonely separated, egotistical self. Others were irrelevant. Of course her actual life depended on others, but never mind that. Taking a cue from Nietzsche – he of the syphilitic brain – she said that what mattered in life was the will to power. That is it.

Emerson and Kierkegaard knew that the will to self mattered, but they also knew that life is far more complex than that and that to be wholly a self is to be related with others. They knew that life is filled with paradox – the more you give of yourself the more you receive. Both her characters and Ayn Rand's own self were empty shells – all bottle and no beer, all hat, no cowboy.

These paradoxes – to find your self, you give yourself away. To gain your life, you must lose it, to be a whole self, you must be connected – these are the dynamics of faith, of a life lived in spite of, or instead of, and because of. Kierkegaard's leap of faith is the one Emerson made – the one I hope we all make. It is the leap that in spite of fear, in spite of worry, in spite of all the concerns arrayed around us, we take a step out into the world.

Ayn Rand's characters, she herself and her followers, I believe, are singularly lacking in courage. Hers was/is a cowardly philosophy – one that draws back wholly into the self, like a fortified castle [or prison] and risks almost nothing. It is faith – the trust and courage to step forward into life that is the stuff of a full life.

Paul Tillich said that courage has two parts – the courage to be as a self and the courage to be as a part. Unless both are present, courage is lacking. It is the leap into the paradox of self and relationship that shows courage – the in spite of from Kierkegaard.

All those things I started with in the sermon - all the tragedies, the worries, the fear – all those things of the world that press in on me – on you too perhaps – well, there is enough to create the desire to crawl back into bed and pull the covers up over my head. 'The world is too much with us,' Wordsworth wrote, and though he meant something a little different, sometimes the world does seem too much.

So we leap, by faith, with courage.

When I was a kid in Minneapolis, at the end of the long and cold winter – as much as I loved winter – we were always ready for it to end. Spring came and then the promise of summer – the promise of long and lazier days [we believed less in those days in salvation through hyperactivity! – we did not think we had to be ALWAYS doing something]. One of the markers that summer had really arrived was the first time we jumped into a lake. Typically, we would walk out to the end of a dock and stick our toes in – you all know this don't you? – and it was always cold.

But the day was hot and we were at the lake in our swimsuits. There was usually four or five of us, and we knew that sometime, in the not too distant future the water would be perfect. And so one of us, or all of us, or a couple of us, would go back to the shore, look at each other, and run and jump.

It was always one the best things we did all year, that leap. Nothing after it, no jump or leap or twist into the water, was quite as good as that first leap into the water.

So it goes, we leap by faith, with courage, most often with others, and discover a new world. We have faith, in our courage, that together, we might do some good for ourselves and for our community. We take risks. We find courage. We find the courage of compassion.

To do that, we need to retreat from time to time to gather strength and to rest. It is not for nothing that we call this room a sanctuary - a place to retreat and fill the spirit so that we might re-enter the world and take those leaps of faith. It is not for nothing that we call this day the Sabbath – the day of rest from the regular duties of the world so that we can re-energize ourselves before we take the leap back into the world of self and other, to re-connect.

Before we would jump into the lake in Minneapolis, we would hesitate, and gather our strength – we would take a brief Sabbath moment before we took off and jumped. This is what my sabbatical is meant to be – a moment's rest, a time away to gather strength, to catch my spiritual breath before I leap into our future.

So, how long is the leap of faith? I guess as long as it needs to be – from me to you, from you to me, from us to the world, from fear to courage, from worry to compassion, from indifference to love.

Let's jump!