



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

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Wandering in the Wilderness

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Several weeks ago, in a meeting with two of our Board members, one suggested I think about finishing this sentence 'Neighborhood is the church that I have been puzzling over this since then. I asked our executive staff team – that is me, Hannah, Alyssa our administrator, and Sara our religious educator – to do it. Neighborhood is the church that ... engages the spirit, that works for justice, that saved my life – these were some of the completions.

Outside, on the patio you will find a banner – you complete the sentence – ten words or less please – and we'll see what we get. Or email me. Neighborhood is the church that

It is the church that leads us out of the wilderness.

That is the metaphor today – the wilderness, and I mean by that both positive and the negative – the wilderness as place of renewal and freedom and the wilderness as a place where we are lost and confronted with fears, where we are cut off from relationship and the place where we can find our selves anew. Internal and external wildernesses; wildernesses as places we pass through. Think of the ancient Israelites who had to pass through a wilderness to become a people; think of John Muir who entered the wilderness to hear their glad tidings.

[Maybe it is especially appropriate today to talk of wilderness, what with the deaths of Davey Crockett, I mean Fess Parker – yes, I did have a coonskin hat – and Stewart Udall]. Or maybe the wilderness of the US Congress and possibility of much needed health care legislation.

Here is another wilderness: this last week was the 7th anniversary of the beginning of the Iraq war, now one of the longest wars in American History, at a cost of around 900 billion dollars [about the current estimate of health reform under which 31 million more Americans would have health coverage] in which about 4300 US soldiers have been killed and up to 600,000 civilian casualties. Over 2 million Iraqis have been displaced by the war and it remains unclear when and how US military involvement will end, or whether there is any real peace ahead for Iraq.

Is it an irony that Iraq is the traditional place of the Garden of Eden, and one of the birthplaces of civilization? Imagine if you could take the longest view possible and look down on Iraq from some great distant perspective – what would you see and what kind of story would it tell? What would it say about us – about humans – and our history? Triumph and tragedy, good and evil, beauty and horror? A tale full of sound and fury, signifying nothing – the wilderness of human folly and violence?

War, loss, emptiness, sorrow – these are a part of all of our lives.

And here we are on the first full day of Spring, as the great world turns again in its journey through time. The hills above us are coming back to life. I look out my window at home where I write and the leaves on our fig tree are emerging, the blossoms on the peach tree are fading to fruit and the red bud is beautiful. Out the back our wisteria is blooming and the first of the seasons poppies are California gold.

War and spring, death and life – the whole ball of wax.

So, at this point, you might be asking, what is this sermon about? In a word, it is about our spiritual life, our spiritual health. Forrest Church claimed that religion was the dual response to our being alive and knowing we will die. Knowing that, what do we make of our life? How do we give our life meaning? This is a religious question at minimum. If we don't address that here – Neighborhood is the church that explores life's meaning – we aren't worth much.

Spiritual health. We are pretty good at understanding what we mean by physical health, and even emotional health, but spiritual health? What is that? I walk regularly and have lost some needed weight; I try to keep relationships good for my emotional health. In other words, I exercise in the physical and emotional areas. I see experts – doctors and therapists when needed. But spiritual health?

I imagine most of you are aware of the pain scale. If you have been in a hospital or had surgery, you may have seen the chart or been asked, on a scale of 1-10, what is the level of pain now? The chart shows a smiley face at one changing to a frowny face at 10 – one being little or no pain and ten to be unbearable pain. The day after my hip surgery, and after the initial pain meds had worn off, the nurse asked me where I was on that scale. I was about a 5 at that point and welcomed some relief.

This is widely used now and is a recognition that pain is subjective, entirely so – there is no common standard – something hurts, or hurts a lot or a little, or does not. It has nothing to do with physical strength or moral courage – pain is pain and there is no way to objectively measure it. What you feel is what you feel.

Of course, pain is necessary to our physical or emotional well-being. It alerts us to something being wrong. As much as we might wish a world or life without pain, that comes to none of us. It is a reminder that life is a mix of curses and blessings, joys and sorrows, triumphs and tragedy, even good and evil.

We all try and avoid it, of course – but pain is a part of living. Carl Jung said that ALL neuroses and psychoses were caused by our unwillingness to accept necessary suffering. We experience sorrow often – at the death of someone we love, at other losses, at illnesses, for tragedies small and large. We hope to protect our children from pain and suffering, but know that we cannot. We celebrate spring and we mourn war.

The central teaching of Buddhism is that all life is suffering; the stories of Judaism and Christianity and Islam are suffused with stories of pain and sorrow. In our own tradition, the stories of Emerson grieving the loss of his wife and child from pneumonia are both poignant and all so human.

Sorrow, pain, suffering. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger it is said. Life is a veil of tears. In Jerusalem there is a museum that has a collection of tiny cups – cups used to hold tears, the tears collected so that the memories of sorrow would not be forgotten.

Would we have religion if there were no sorrow, no pain, no suffering, no tragedy? Perhaps not. Would there be any art? Maybe, maybe not. I believe that all religion and art, all philosophy is built on the experience of beauty [or joy] and loss, or pain, trying to understand how there can be good and evil, beauty and the ugly, pleasure and pain.

So think of that scale and let me ask: on a scale of one to ten, how is your spiritual health, one being good and ten being pretty bad?

What I mean by this is fairly simple – how close are you living to your own life? How centered are you? How deep is the well of peace within you? If you are in a wilderness, or suffering, do you know how to get out?

The great Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, has claimed that religion has little if anything to do with thought or idea, that it is all practice, it is all discipline, and so my sermon today is another call for all of us to engage in the spiritual practices that bring about spiritual health.

And by practice I mean any regular activity that has the purpose of helping us find or hear and experience our spirit, our soul, our deepest self. The entire purpose of any spiritual discipline or practice is to learn how to better listen; the purpose of spiritual practice is to be able to hear.

The old Quaker admonition is 'Let your Life Speak.' Parker Palmer adds: before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent.'

Hearing, listening – hearing what your life speaks. This is why spiritual discipline almost always involve stillness or silence, listening in some way.

I know that lots of UUs do not like traditional religious language – and for lots of reasons and for lots of good reasons. But here I want us to get used to two very specific words – spirit and soul. They are interchangeable – my spirit, my soul – good words. They refer to that part of me, deep within me that is the heart of who I am, that if it is violated, I am violated, that if it is affirmed, I am affirmed. It is the me without which I am not. It is the self – not the psychological self, but the self that we seek when we come to places like this; it is that part of us that responds at the very deepest level to the world. It is the loss of which brings not so much depression but despair.

My soul, my spirit. It is not a thing, probably, not some physical thing inside me. Let me make a distinction between the ego and the soul. This comes from Gerald May, a psychiatrist who has done a great deal of work with spiritual direction and discipline. May claims – and this is so very useful I think – that psychology has to do with finding a creating the will – the self that can be distinguished from other selves. I am me and not you. It has to do with willfulness. If you have ever been in therapy you know this is true. I worked in a psychiatric hospital for two years and many of the patients had little sense of sense – the boundary between them and the world was porous and ill-defined.

Religion has to do with willingness, with surrender, with connection. The soul is that part of us that allows us to connect and the deepest level with the world – when awe and wonder take over, when we seem to merge with the world, when the ego is lost. Both are necessary for a whole life.

The purpose of spiritual discipline is to lose the ego, so that we might become more whole and hear our deepest voice. The purpose is to get rid of all of the distractions, even if just for a bit, so that we can hear the sound our soul makes.

The purpose of going into the wilderness is to come out more whole. It is not to be lost but to be lost so that we can be found. Religion is filled with paradox.

In the wilderness, we have to listen. You know this is true. John Muir went into the wilderness to hear its glad tidings. I asked my daughter Claire once why she loved Joshua Tree so much, and she said that she loved the desert because you had to listen so closely.

If you want to be physically healthy, you need to exercise – the more you do, the healthier. If you want to do anything well, you have to practice. If you want to be spiritually healthy, you need to exercise. Maybe a lot, maybe a little – sometimes more, sometimes less. There is no other way. Gandhi spent one day a week, always, spinning cotton; Thich Nhat Hanh took one entire day each week to mediate and practices mindfulness as often as he can. Notice that he always says he practices.

The wilderness in you, the wilderness out there is where, as my daughter said, we can listen more closely. If we listen well, and do it often, we might hear the voice of our own life, the voice of our spirit. And maybe get better at it after some time.

Pablo Casals was perhaps the greatest cellist ever. His father made him a cello out of a gourd when he was little. He got his first real cello at age 11. When he was 13, he discovered a copy of Bach's six cello suites in a sheet music store in Barcelona. He spent the next 13 years practicing them every day before he would perform them in public for the first time. He played for both President Teddy Roosevelt and John Kennedy.

When he was 93 he was asked why he continued to practice the cello three hours a day, Casals replied "I'm beginning to notice some improvement. I notice myself getting better at this."

Sh – be quiet. Listen to your life.

