



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Your Heart’s Desire,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on May 11, 2014

Like some of you I grew up in a different faith tradition than this one. Like some of you, there were things I loved about that tradition. And like some of you, there came a time when I needed to find a new church. A place that would, as Theodore Rozak says, “invite you to become yourself without shame or fear.”

I found that community, that home, in Unitarian Universalism. And I hope you are finding it too, here in this place, among these good people. Because we need places where we can become ourselves, where we can be free.

In the church of my childhood we’d sometimes say a unison confession. And confession is good for the soul; it’s good to confess when we made mistakes and hurt people. But there was a line in that confession which said, “we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts.” This says a lot about how that tradition understood human nature. It’s saying the human heart is not to be trusted.

There’s was nothing in that confession about humans having worth and dignity, as we assert in our first principle. Nothing about humans coming into this world with “original blessing,” as Matthew Fox puts it. No, the assumption was that our hearts, if we listen to them, will lead us down the road to ruin.

Central to this theology is a split between body and spirit, between heaven and earth, between God and humans. The primary religious work of this age is to heal this split, to get beyond these false dichotomies. We religious liberals can help with this.

But let me say that Unitarian Universalists have often been too optimistic about human nature. A hundred years ago, religious liberals had a saying: “onward and upward for ever and ever.” Our forebears believed that, with every generation, humankind was going to become more reasonable and more humane,. But then came the trench warfare and chemical weapons of the First World War. Then came Nazism and Auschwitz and the Holocaust. Then came Hiroshima and Nagasaki and age of “mutually assured destruction.” Then came the killing fields of Cambodia and the tribal massacres of Rwanda. I could go on.

Our human history is no cause for optimism. But that is not the whole story. In the midst of every tragedy, in the worst of times, you see examples of the human spirit rising, like the phoenix, from

the ashes. The lifelong work and powerful testimony of Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel. What Anne Frank wrote in her diary, “Despite everything, I believe that people are really good at heart.”

That’s what we affirm in this church--not a sunny, unrealistic optimism, but the conviction, in spite of everything, that our human nature is for good. That we want to be good and do good.

Sara Ascher, minister of the UU Church in Wellesley, recently went to Burundi, in Africa, to visit a new UU congregation there. The people she met there testified to her about their new UU faith. They told her “this is the faith where I can be free in my mind, so I can be free in my heart.”

Isn’t that the test of any faith--does it set people free? Does it help them to lead happy and helpful lives?

Central to my theology is the belief that we are particular people, with gifts and talents; that we are here to discover those gifts, develop and refine them. We are here to live fully and boldly who we were born to be--that is how we help heal and bless our world. And if we aren’t doing this--if we are being untrue to our deepest selves, then we are doing harm, to ourselves and others.

But becoming yourself isn’t so easy. Few of us grow up being told to follow our hearts. No, we’re taught things like, “Big boys don’t have tantrums,” and “Good girls do what they’re told.” We make all kinds of choices to live and get along in this world, and by the time we’re adults many of us have lost track of our hopes and dreams. We’ve put our hearts in a box and lost the key.

When I worked as a freelance photographer, I did mostly commercial work. My clients told me what they wanted, and I did what they told me to do. Over time, I lost track of my own ideas, my vision and passion. Then one day I got an assignment from Yankee magazine to photograph some farmers up in Maine. The picture editor said she expected this would take several trips. She said, “Go up there and make pictures, then send them to me and we’ll talk.”

So I did. When she got the pictures, she said, “I see what’s happening here. You’re making the pictures you think Yankee will want. But what I want is for you to make pictures like the ones in your portfolio. Send me pictures that make you happy, and I’ll be thrilled.”

This picture editor became my favorite client. Over the next few years, I got some great assignments from Yankee, and did some good work for them. I had lost touch with my own vision, and she helped me to find it. This was about more than photography. It was about learning how to look inside, how to trust my own instincts and ideas, being true to my own heart; something this picture editor trusted when I didn’t trust it myself. I wonder if her encouragement was the first step in what eventually led me away from photography and toward the ministry.

It’s easy to lost track of who you are, your hopes and dreams. We are taught to mistrust our desires, our longings. But what if we turned that around? What if we started with a different proposition: that our desires are good things, designed to point us toward our true and authentic selves? What if you trusted that your desires will lead you where you need to go?

If you tell me your deepest desire is to drive a fancy car, or to get back at someone who's wronged you, I'll say, "Really? Try going deeper."

Some desires are too big and vague. Probably all of us hope for world peace, but if that truly is your heart's desire, how are you going to work on that? How are you going to change your heart, and what steps are you going to take, to make this more than just wishful thinking?

Some desires are too small. Most every day I desire something sweet to eat, but that is not what I'm talking about today. Tell me what your heart aches for, what you long for--what you get up in the morning thinking about, what keeps you up at night. Those dreams you've tried to forget that keep coming back. The kind of person you long to be.

I love our reading this morning, those words from Ronald Rolheiser. I've put copies at the back of the sanctuary and on the table at coffee hour, in case you want to take this home with you. I love his assertion that to be human is to feel that unquenchable fire of longing and desire; that "spirituality is, ultimately, about what we do with that desire."¹

On this day when we remember and celebrate mothers, let's think about our relationships for a minute. How many of us long for healing and wholeness, in our families and with our friends? How many of us hope to be reconciled with those we feel distant from?

On this Mother's Day, how many of us need to go deeper than "Happy Mother's Day!" and say something like, "I was not an easy child, but you still loved me." Or, "I certainly made many mistakes as a parent, but I hope you know how much I love you. Can you forgive me for my failures?"

My challenge to you this week is to spend some time getting in touch with your own heart's desire. Start by asking yourself. "What do I long for? What is my deep desire?" The answer may not come quickly. It may be buried under years of making your way in the world. But if you make the space for your heart's desire, it will bubble up. It's in there, I promise. Meditation and journaling can help. Just asking yourself the question, every day, "What is my heart's desire?" that will, in time, make things happen.

About two months ago I had a mystical experience in, of all places, a Starbucks in Mt. Kisco, NY. My wife and I were on our way home from a road trip down the east coast. We'd stopped to get her a cup of tea, and I was standing there, dunking her teabag in a cup of hot water, while she used the restroom. It was such an everyday scene there, morning in a coffee shop somewhere in America. A mom with her toddler in a stroller. Someone reading the paper; people looking at their smartphones. Two friends meeting unexpectedly, sitting down to catch up over coffee.

I took it all in, and was struck by how beautiful it was, in its utter ordinariness. I saw with new eyes the simple beauty of that moment, in that place; felt the joy of being present to it. I realized, in that moment in the middle of my sabbatical, that I was free. And it came to me: that was the work of my sabbatical, and the deep desire of my heart--to be free.

¹ Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality*.

Not a running away kind of free, not a “you can’t tell me what to do” kind of free. No, simply free to be who I was born to be. To more deeply, more boldly, live this life I have been given. To embrace who I am, not who I wish I could be, or think I ought to be. That is my heart’s desire--to be free.

What about you? What is your heart’s desire?

At the start I told you about a confession from the church of my childhood that assumed our hearts are not to be trusted. So listen now to this confession by the poet and farmer Wendell Berry:

To the sky, to the wind, then,
and to the faithful trees, I confess
my sins: that I have not been happy
enough, considering my good luck,
have listened to too much noise,
have been inattentive to wonders,
have lusted after praise.

I confess that I have lost track of my heart’s desire. I have not be happy enough, considering my good luck. I have forgotten that I am a beloved child of God.

The good news is that it’s never too late to come home to yourself. To rediscover what has been with you from the start. To re-member that you are a precious soul, beloved on this earth.

You don’t have to do this all alone. We have this faith, here to help us be free in our minds, so we can be free in our hearts.

There is a land, not far from here, where love and justice reign, where souls are free. You can get there. We can get there. You get there by listening to and following your heart’s desire.

Here’s the question: will you follow your heart where it leads? Will you come and go with me to that land, where we’re bound?

Amen.