



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“Welcome Home: Containment and Freedom,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on March 11, 2012

Last Sunday I talked about journeying to a place you’ve never been, seeking after what you are longing for. The spiritual life is so often described as a journey, and I tend to see it that way, and use words like seeking and pilgrimage and quest.

But there’s a companion to this metaphor of journey, one that’s often neglected. I’m all for seeking and journeying, but there’s a cost to this too. Our tendency as Americans is to be on the move. Especially when things get difficult or when you are bored or disappointed, you move on. “When the going gets tough,” the saying goes, “the tough get get going.” Or as a more recent version says, “the tough go shopping.” Shopping for something new and better.

The companion for the metaphor of journey is the metaphor of home.<sup>1</sup> There is wisdom and solace to be found in staying home, in learning to live with what you’ve been given, in working through challenges rather than running away from them.

It seems a paradox to me--the religious life calls us both to seek after what is not yet--to listen to our longings and to follow where they lead--but also it calls us to be here now, to understand that if we are going to meet the holy anywhere, it is right here, in this present moment. It’s not a case of either or; rather it’s both/and, both journey and home. If we are going to do some healthy journeying, then we need a home that nurtures us and sends us out, and also a place that we can return to, a place to tell our stories and be strengthened and renewed.<sup>2</sup>

What makes this church different than most is that Unitarian Universalism is a liberal faith. As far as I know, we’re the only religiously liberal church in Haverhill. Just to be clear, liberal religion is not the same thing as liberal politics. We have a diversity of political perspectives here--we’re not all political liberals, and that’s a good thing. When it comes to religion, being liberal doesn’t describe your social or political views--liberalism in religion is about who and what you give authority to. Most religious traditions give authority to holy scriptures and to the traditions of the past. Some, like the Roman Catholic church, also give authority to its highest leaders, the Pope, cardinals and bishops. Religious liberals do give some authority to sacred texts and to tradition, and even a bit

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<sup>1</sup> Sharon Daloz Parks, “Home and Pilgrimage: Companion Metaphors for Personal and Social Transformation,” *Soundings* 72:2-3 (1989) : 297.

<sup>2</sup> I’m grateful to church members Pam Katz and Megan Shea, whose thoughts and wisdom helped inspire and shape this sermon.

to leaders, but where we really put our hope and trust is in the hearts and minds of you, the people. When we list the sources of our faith, the first one is this: "Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and openness to the forces which create and uphold life."

We say that the basis of our religious life is not found primarily in a book or a tradition, even though those are important, but in our own direct experiences of the holy. We believe that people should be free to make their own search for truth and meaning, and that is where the word liberal comes from, it means free, as in liberty. The fact that we put our trust in your own deep experiences; that you are free and encouraged to seek your own understandings, that is what makes us religious liberals.

The word liberal may have fallen out of favor, at least in the political context. But if you came here because you wanted to be part of a church where you could think for yourself, if you wanted a religion that makes room for both your faith and your doubts, that invites you to bring both your heart and your mind, then you were seeking a liberal faith. Years ago I was in church one Sunday when I heard a teenager give one of the best descriptions I've ever heard of our free faith. He said, "This church doesn't damn me to hell for believing what I can't help but believe."

What he can't help but believe. And what you and I can't help but believe. And what we do, together, because of those beliefs. That's our religion. And I am so grateful for it, and the opportunities our liberal, that is free, faith gives us to help and to heal and bless one another, and to leave this world better than we found it.

But I have to warn you that freedom isn't everything. You hear a lot about freedom these days, especially since it's an election year. I'm dismayed that you hear so much about freedom and so little about justice. What worries me is that so often the freedom people talk about is a self-centered freedom which really means "don't tell me what to do." This kind of freedom implies we are here only to serve our individual wants and needs, and have no responsibility to each other. That if everyone acts out of their own self-interest, then somehow that will make us a great nation. I've come to the conclusion that the dominant religion of this country isn't Christianity, but capitalism. It may be a good way to create wealth, at least for some, but it's a lousy religion. It's the opposite of what religion is supposed to be.

So when I talk about our liberal tradition and the freedom it affords us, I want to put an asterisk next to that, and say that freedom doesn't mean, "I can do whatever I want with no regard for anyone else." That's not freedom, it's self-centeredness, and it's not a virtue in the religious life. For us freedom means we have the right and the responsibility to go where the Spirit and our conscience lead us. One of our hymns describes our free faith this way: "a freedom that reveres the past, but trusts the dawning future more; and bids the soul, in search of truth, adventure boldly and explore."<sup>3</sup>

This is not something best done on your own. In our reading this morning, Elaine Prevallet says, "We need a community... we need (a community) to keep us accountable and honest and steady

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<sup>3</sup> Marion Franklin Ham, "As Tranquil Streams," #145 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

in a culture geared toward constant change.” She says, “The pull of individualism is so strong that we cannot afford to go it alone. We have to find or create communities – containers – if we are to be faithful to God’s call.” <sup>4</sup>

Now some of us don’t like the idea of containers, or at least not the idea of living in them. I know a guy who likes to make a tired old toast at weddings. He stands up and, quoting Groucho Marx, says, “Marriage is a wonderful institution. But who wants to live in an institution?”

But that’s what this community is, and what I recommend to you today. I come to speak in praise of containers.

I know, you may chafe at the idea of being constrained and contained. You want to sing that old cowboy song, “Give me land, lots of land, under starry skies above, don’t fence me in.” We idolize this idea of rugged individualism, we want to be those color outside the lines, we see boundaries and containers as repressive.

But what if they aren’t? What if containers actually provide the space within which we can find our freedom? Have you ever seen a child whose parents are unwilling to assert any boundaries? The child is running the show, throwing tantrums, staying up too late--everyone is miserable. But if the parents set some ground rules, and stick with them, order returns, and everyone is happier.

Thomas Merton, who joined the Trappist order of monks at age 26, called the monastery, “the four walls of my new freedom.” Elaine Prevallet, in another part of her essay, says, “Containers are organic vessels; they are nice to think about but difficult to create. Breaking a commitment, leaving a church or community or a marriage, or being unable to make a commitment in the first place means holes in the container. Too many holes will weaken and eventually destroy the container.”

She says, “I have leaned ... to appreciate (gentle) boundaries and containment. I have learned that community is essential to discerning a call and staying faithful. And I believe commitments, at least some of them, can last a lifetime. Happily.”

In a world where so many things are falling apart, we need some good and worthy containers. We don’t have a rigid belief system here that says there’s only one way. We say there are multiple paths. And so some people don’t understand us, and say we don’t stand for anything. But that’s not true. What we have is a tradition of faithful people who have sought what is true and good, who have trusted their hearts and minds to interpret and make meaning, who have chosen to heal and not to harm, to bless and not to curse, to serve that spirit of love and justice which some of us name God, and some of us call by other names, and some of us leave unnamed.

What binds us together is not a book or a creed but rather a covenant--an agreement that we are in this together. That’s what holds our container together--our covenant to journey together, and to make a home together. But it depends on us--to show up, to care, to do our part--to make it so.

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<sup>4</sup> Elaine M. Prevallet, S.L., “Minding the Call,” *Weavings* 11:3 (May-June 1995): 13.

The poet Marge Piercy describes what can happen when people come together:

“Two people can keep each other  
sane, can give support, conviction,  
love...

Three people are a delegation,  
a committee, a wedge. With four  
you can play bridge and start  
an organisation. With six  
you can rent a whole house,  
eat pie for dinner with no  
seconds, and hold a fund raising party.  
A dozen make a demonstration.  
A hundred fill a hall...”

And a church, I’d say. She continues,

“It goes on one at a time,  
it starts when you care  
to act,”

I’d add that it starts when you show up, and open your heart, and reach out your hands. When you plant your feet and make a commitment; because you’ve said to yourself, “Here I am, where I ought to be.” <sup>5</sup>

Marge Piercy concludes,

“it starts when you say We  
and know who you mean, and each  
day you mean one more.” <sup>6</sup>

Look around you. It starts when you say We, and know who you mean, and each day you mean one more. Here we are, in this lovely and imperfect and evolving container we call church. Can you see that it is good? That is is very good?

Welcome home, I say to you. Welcome home! Now will you please say Amen?

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<sup>5</sup> Isak Dinesen, *Out of Africa*: “Up in this high air you breathed easily, drawing in a vital assurance and lightness of heart. In the highlands, you woke up in the morning and thought: Here I am, where I ought to be.”

<sup>6</sup> Marge Piercy, “The Low Road.”