



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“The Longing for Home,”¹
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on March 4, 2012

Today I want to ask you to look inside yourself. To search your heart, and seek that place where you can be in touch your own hunger, and be aware of your heart's desire. Will you try to do that? Will you take a moment, right now, to ask yourself, and to listen for the response, “What am I longing for, hoping for, hungry for?”

I ask you this because I trust that our longings are holy--that they are messages, calling us to pay attention to what matters, and what is real. As the choir sang a few minutes ago, calling us “to be more whole, to hear God's music in our very soul.”²

Now I know this is not as simple as I make it sound. It can take time to get in touch with your longings, because many of us grew up being taught to distrust what we desire. Being taught if it is something you want, then it must be bad, or bad for you. But there are good and healthy desires. What if you began to trust them, and befriend them, and ask them, “What are you trying to tell me and teach me?”

I expect, for some of you at least, it is a longing that brings you here on Sunday. A longing to be connected with others, and perhaps a longing to be in touch with something more--that force that pulses through life and creation, that we catch glimpses of from time to time. Yes, our longings are holy. They invite us to turn toward what matters most, to be open to the miracle of being alive.

I love the words from Starhawk we began our service with today: “We are all longing to go home to some place we have never been--a place, half-remembered, and half-envisioned we can only catch glimpses of from time to time.” Going home to a place we have never been. Does that make sense to you? It's not going back to the place where you grew up, not a nostalgic journey back to a time and place where life was simpler and made more sense. No, what she's talking about is going forward, going on to a new country.

A few weeks ago, Sally and I were at a workshop for ministers and directors of religious education, and our assignment over lunch was to reflect on our particular church culture. We were given a number of different images to consider--was the church we serve like the tower of

¹ *The Longing for Home* is also the title of a book by the Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner.

² Joyce Poley, “All of Life is Calling Me.”

Babel, or like people following a Pied Piper, or like villagers making stone soup?--and we were asked to pick the one that felt like the best fit for this congregation.

The story we picked was about Jacob, who left his family in order to make a fresh start somewhere else. You may remember Jacob and his twin Esau, and the story about Jacob tricking his father in order to get his blessing. For today those details don't really matter. What matters is that Sally and I identified this story as the one that story seemed to fit. We sense that this church is one in which a number of people have, like Jacob, left home--some of you the religious home of your childhood, others a dysfunctional or abusive family situation. Many of us here are like Jacob, seeking a new country, a new place to call home.

Do you see that this is a religious impulse--this desire for a new homeland? It's what our first reading (Hebrews 11:13-16) described, how the matriarchs and patriarchs of Israel left what they knew, and didn't try to go back, because they desired a better country. It's what our Puritan forebears did when they left England in small boats to cross the north Atlantic in search of religious freedom. It's what many of you did, when you left religious traditions that no longer served you, and crossed the threshold here, seeking a new home.

It was a deep longing that led me, at midlife, to head off to divinity school. For three years I commuted from Portsmouth to Cambridge. I'm friends with a man who's a monk at the Episcopal monastery near Harvard Square. He offered that I could spend some nights in the monastery guest house, if I wanted. So most semesters, one day a week, I'd walk over to the monastery after class. I'd settle in to my room and study until chapel at 6, then eat dinner in silence with the monks and the other guests, then go back to my room until the 10 o'clock service. The next morning, I'd be up for chapel at 6, then eat breakfast in silence before heading back to school. One night, near the end of those three years, I was sitting in the chapel, waiting for the service to begin, when a feeling of gratitude and sadness came over me. I realized how much I was going to miss those nights in the monastery, how it had become for me a home away from home.

Some Wednesdays when we have Vespers here, and we are sitting together in the dark and silence, I'm reminded of how it felt there in the monastery chapel. I love that we are offering this space for silence and contemplation here. For me, this kind of time is sacred and essential; it holds me and helps me to find my way home. I'm reminded of those words from St. Augustine: "You have made us for yourself, God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

We are taught to push away our hunger and restlessness, as if it is an enemy, because it makes us uncomfortable. But what if you sat with those things that stir you up, that are stirring in you, for a while? This is a good season for that. These waning days of winter are a good time to touch what your heart is longing for, to try to identify that. And then to follow where your longing leads. I believe that your longing will lead you home.

As Starhawk says, "Somewhere, there are people to whom we can speak with passion without having the words catch in our throats. Somewhere a circle of hands will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter, voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power."

So I ask you, what is keeping you from getting there? What is holding you back, separating you from your heart's desire, keeping you from being more whole,? This is a good time to begin to let go of those things that are keeping you from who you long to be.

I know that's easier said than done. But it's also easy to make excuses, and procrastinate, and wait for someone else to take the lead. The truth is, most of us prefer the uneasy security of what we know over the risk of what lies over the horizon. We're inclined to make excuses, to say, "If I had more money, or more time, maybe when my children are older, or when I retire..." And these reflect real concerns, I know that. But I tell you, you can spend a whole life putting off what you want and need to do. At some point, you just have to just start. And isn't today a good day for that?

"One day you finally knew what you had to do, and began," Mary Oliver says,

though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice --
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
'Mend my life!'
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do.³

My question for you is this: have you started this journey home? If not, what are you waiting for? Are there things you need to let go of? Are there voices in your head or in your life, giving you bad advice, you need to ignore or say no to? Are there habits that you've grown accustomed to that are insulating you from a life of meaning and purpose, things that are dragging you down, that you need to stop doing? Are there parts of yourself that you need to give up, parts you need to let die, so you can live more fully and more faithfully?

These are questions you can't answer in a minute. But I hope you will hold on to them in the coming days. I hope you will pay attention to your longings, and what is keeping you from listening to them. I hope and pray that you know this is not a solo journey; that you have companions here, and you will have companions on the way.

Listen to this testimony by Burton Carley, minister of the Church of the River in Memphis, Tennessee. He says, "I want to be counted among (those) people, strangers in a strange land, seeking the way to a home not yet built, faithful to a vision of a better dwelling place, faithful to the power that comes from we know not where that gives us dreams to guide us home, faithful to the power that stirs our imagination to reveal the way home." We need, he says, "to take heart, to see the promise of home, to give out our lives to find the way there, to give in to the power that calls

³ Mary Oliver, "The Journey."

us there, and to give up the habits of distraction, abstraction, and preoccupation that keep us from being on our way.”

If you do this, you will find your way. It’s like the poet says:

...little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do --
determined to save
the only life you could save.⁴

The journey home is a life-saving journey. It's what religion, at its best, is all about. Being transformed, liberated, made whole, so you can then do your part to help heal and bless the world.

This longing for home is as old as humanity itself. Through the ages people have sought what is true and good, what is worthy of spending a life on. There is no guarantee that you will get there, but I assure you that listening to your own longing and then following it leads, is a holy and liberating journey, and worth everything it costs.

The longing for home is a holy longing. May we be blessed with the grace to hear and heed that longing. May we have the strength and courage to follow it, wherever it leads, whatever it costs, all the way home.

Amen.

⁴ Mary Oliver, “The Journey.”