



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Tending the Sacred”

a sermon given by Kimberly Cloutier Green and the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on September 23, 2012

Frank: Back in the summer of 1999, when our children were little--six and four years old, our family spent a week on a little lake in Maine. We'd bought that week at a church auction. The description had said it was “a rustic cabin, for the family that doesn't mind roughing it a bit.” They weren't kidding--to tell the truth, it was a dump! But that didn't really matter--we spent our days sitting by the lake, Tracey and I trying to read or talk while we watched our kids play on the beach and in the shallow water.

That summer I was reading *The Cloister Walk*, by Kathleen Norris, an eclectic account of one woman's religious exploration. Not your typical vacation book. But that was not a typical summer. You see, for several years I'd felt restless in my work as a commercial photographer. I was about to turn forty, and wondered if there was something else I was supposed to be doing with my life. I sensed something needed to change, but I felt stuck and didn't know what to do about it.

So, while we sat by that lake, Tracey listened to me talk about my struggles. I think she was used to this--hearing me talk about work when we were on vacation. I'm grateful for all the listening she's done over the years, and for her wise counsel.

At some point in that conversation Tracey cut to the chase. “You aren't happy in your work anymore, are you?” I admitted that I wasn't. “Then what are you going to do about it?” I didn't have an answer for that.

Kimberly: Like Frank, I have my own narrative of coming to feel, at a certain point in my life, that there was more I wanted to understand about my walk in the world. As a poet and teacher, I had learned to pay close attention to everyday beauty and brokenness – and I was grateful life's revelations and mysteries... but I was aware, too, of a “great homesickness” similar to what Rilke speaks of in his poem from *The Book of Hours*. Listen to these beautiful words:

I love you, gentlest of Ways,
who ripened us as we wrestled with you.
You, the great homesickness we could never shake off,
you, the forest that always surrounded us,
you, the song we sang in every silence,
your dark net threading through us

I was experiencing that kind of 'homesickness'... and I understood it as a hunger, a yearning for deeper connection with what I sensed but couldn't fully articulate. I knew I needed spiritual companionship to help me notice, name, and nurture a relationship with that mystery. I imagined that a witness might support me in my desire to deepen my contemplative life...

Frank: Our vacation ended, we came home, I went back to work. I pushed away those feelings of unhappiness and longing. I tried to bury them under the day to day cares of running a business and being a father. But Tracey reminded me of our conversation; she kept asking, "What are you going to do about it?"

That fall my minister suggested I speak with a spiritual director, and told me about a woman named Mary. I met her one day at a church. We sat in a small room, facing one another. She asked what brought me there. I told her about my restlessness, my desire to live a life with more meaning and purpose; and about my fears of what might change if I heeded those longings.

She listened, and told me how spiritual direction works; that it's not direction, really, more like companionship. That it's about helping someone to sense the presence of God or Spirit in their life, helping them to learn how to be more attuned to that presence, that inner life, helping them, as Rilke said, "live the questions."

Kimberly: So... What is this thing called spiritual direction? If you don't mind, I'll step out my personal narrative here for a moment to give you a little background that you might find helpful in understanding its history and current practice.

Many people dislike the term "spiritual direction" because it sounds like one person gives directions, or orders, to another. They prefer "spiritual companionship," or "tending the holy" because these more clearly describe what happens when two or more people commit to a practice of noticing, naming, and nurturing the sacred in our lives.

The practice is an old one. In the ancient texts of the Hebrew, Christian, and Islamic traditions, we read about people seeking spiritual counsel. The Buddhist tradition, too, has its forms of spiritual mentoring. Today, spiritual directors practice within and across many religious traditions. There is even a UU Spiritual Directors Network!

Spiritual Directors, lay or ordained, prepare for the work in training programs or seminaries... or they are wise and trusted friends whom you seek out because you value their experience and wisdom.

A spiritual director usually begins the practice by asking a few opening questions. The first questions that my own spiritual director asked me in our discernment session were these:

What draws you to the Holy? What gives you life?

And...What draws you away from the Holy? What drains life from you?

During the course of the next ten years, with my spiritual companion's witness and good questions, her suggestions for reading and teachings on prayer, I learned to nurture my experiences of the Holy, and found in the process a language and a path for my spiritual life.

And as I "wrestled," as Rilke puts it, with "the great homesickness I could never shake off"... as I examined my relationships with family and friends, my work and leisure time... the choices I make every day as I strive to speak and act out of my sense of God's desire for me and for my life... I felt myself being, as Rilke puts it, ripened by that examination.

Once we know who and what we belong to, what we are grounded in, we can't help ordering our work and leisure, our study and our prayer, according to that compass...in such a way that our outward lives reflect our inward loves.

Frank: I've been seeing Mary for a long time now. Back when we started, she helped me to establish a daily prayer practice, and that discipline is what made it possible for me to hear the call to go off to seminary, and, eventually, to say yes to it. Over the years, her companionship has enriched and deepened my spiritual life, has kept me grounded and honest, has strengthened and sustained me.

About once a month, on my day off, I drive half an hour to meet with Mary at a women's retreat center on the North Shore. It's like going to see an old friend. I may begin by telling her about what's happening here at church, or something I've read, or something I'm struggling with. I've learned to trust that, wherever we start, it's an opening that will point toward where we need to go.

One day I told Mary that my work with her had taught me how to drop down into God. By this I meant that I had learned how to touch what is holy and real; how to be still and open and expectant, how to put myself in the presence of that source of life and love.

Seeing her on a regular basis reminds me of that Presence; that it is always available, if I will just slow down and pay attention. These monthly meetings remind me of how I crave that Presence, and how it nourishes and sustains me.

Spiritual direction has blessed me; has invited me to participate in a long conversation about what matters, and what is real. It has supported and challenged me to be true to my own aspirations and to God's call. It has made me a better minister, husband, father and friend.

Though solitude is important on this journey, the spiritual life is not a solo pursuit. Alone, none of us can see the whole picture. In my experience, having a companion like Mary is essential if you want to go deeper in the spiritual life. We need the wider perspective others can offer. We need the wisdom of those who have traveled the way before us. The truth is, we can see ourselves most clearly when someone else holds up the mirror. We need companions on the way, who will support us and keep us accountable.

Kimberly: Spiritual direction is not a psychotherapeutic process, but it is concerned with the soul's journey through life. It is a practice, like prayer, of inviting the spirit, of penetrating beneath the surface of our lives to bring out "our inner spiritual freedom and inmost truth."

The words to one of my favorite UU hymns come to mind here:
Come spirit come, our hearts control, our spirits long to be made whole.
Let inward love guide every deed. By this we worship and are freed...¹

Come spirit, come...

What is God calling you to? What gives you life? How we answer these questions becomes the light we steer by.

Frank: Come spirit, come. Be our companion and guide. Bless us and keep us, this day, and in the days to come.

Amen.

Kimberly: And Amen.

¹ *Though I May Speak with Bravest Fire*, words by Hal Hopson, hymn #34 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.