



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“Where I’m Bound,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on February 20, 2011

My friend Curtis is a monk, in a monastery. He used to be a parish priest. But he found that too much of his time was spent attending cocktail parties and meetings. He entered the monastery, he says, because he wanted a life that was more intense.

It took me a while to understand this. The life of a monk, on the surface, seems anything but intense. Contemplative, peaceful, removed--that’s the stereotype. But imagine living in close community, praying together five times a day, plus time in solitary prayer and serving others. A monastery is no place to hide, but rather, an intense place to encounter the spirit and your own light and shadow.

Last week I was away at a ministers’ conference at a lovely place in California. It was great getting a respite from winter for five days, being with my colleagues, attending worship each morning and vespers several nights and not being responsible for any of it. And I missed you. I thought about you and our church every day. It was good to have the perspective that going away provides. It both made me even more grateful for what we have here, and it made me want to make some changes in how I practice my ministry.

The seminar I signed up for was on leadership, and was designed to be an intense experience. The instructors intentionally turned up the heat--not literally, but they did things to take us out of our comfort zones, to make us stretch and grow. An intense seminar in a laid back setting--it was a good combination and a transformative experience. And that was what it was supposed to be. The advance materials exhorted us: “Come and be changed!” And I was.

My friend Curtis left parish ministry because he wanted a life that was more intense. He must have figured out early on that there’s something about an institution that seeks equilibrium and stability, that tries to keep things as they are. This was one of Martin Luther King’s criticisms of the church, that way too often the church, rather than offering a prophetic witness, is a defender of the status quo. But this is the nature of any institution, any system, from a family to a nation--it seeks balance and stability, whether that is what’s needed or not. You could look at last fall’s elections and our country’s current swing to the right as the system’s response to the change that President Obama’s election brought. Systems seek equilibrium--that’s what systems do. To bring about real and lasting change is hard work.

As I said, the overarching theme of the conference I attended was transformation. We wrestled with how our tradition needs to change in order to thrive and better serve our mission. There is no more important place to do this work than right here, at the level of the local congregation. That's what the church is--a place where people come to be changed, a place to try out living in a new way--with more hope and less fear, with more courage and commitment. And with a good kind of intensity.

I'm not saying that you need to give up who you are and become someone completely different. The kind of transformation I'm talking about is becoming more truly who you are, waking up to the particular life you have been given, with both its light and its shadow.

Some years ago, when I had the crazy idea to leave what I knew and go off to seminary, the prospect of this big change shook things up at home. My wife and kids weren't so sure it was a good idea. Tracey said, "You know, I didn't marry a minister." This troubled me, because I knew I couldn't do this work without my family's support. We struggled with this, but we kept talking, even when it was tough. Several years later, we were out for a walk, and I said, "Remember what you said about not marrying a minister? Well, I see now that I didn't trade my old life in for a new one. I've just become more of who I was born to be. It turns out you did marry a minister after all. It's just that, back then, neither of knew it yet."

We are never all in the same place at the same time. Some of you are here seeking solace from pain and loss. Some of you want to build stronger connections with the world outside our walls. Some of you have been through so much upheaval that even the mention of change will annoy you. Some of you are looking for a place to stretch your wings and fly. Here we are together, where we need one another--the different perspectives, the different gifts and passions and longings we bring.

I'm convinced we need to be a community on the move, resisting that force that wants to hold us back; that pulls us toward what is familiar, what is tried and true. In a world that is changing so fast, I understand and appreciate that some things should stay the same. But I share Ted Loder's<sup>1</sup> prayer that we will be people who seek to be pried off dead center. Who know that life is too short and too important to spend it running in place.

I have a friend who, some years ago, made some big changes in her life. Listen to what she wrote to me in an e-mail back then. She wrote, "I remember so clearly when I set out on this adventure, that I said to people who asked me what I was doing: 'I don't know. I just know that I could do what I'm doing blind. And I don't want that. I want to be scared again.' I felt such a CALL then to let go of everything that was familiar, tried, easy, comfortable. Even of those things that I was 'good at.' Well, here I am a year and a half later. I've been more scared, lonely, lost and AT HOME with myself than I have been since I was a child... feeling that I was in some profound way both lost AND found, at home with myself."

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<sup>1</sup> "Pry Me Off Dead Center," by Ted Loder (from *Guerillas of Grace*) available online at <http://francenter.wordpress.com/2011/01/02/sunday-prayer-pry-me-off-dead-center/>

That's what the religious life, the engaged life, the life that's worth living, is about--being both lost and found, at home and on the transformative journey to the home we can't even see just yet. That same friend told me of when she felt lost and in despair. She shared this with her husband, and he said, "Oh, I know where you are. I have this image of you as rowing in a boat. You're pushed off from shore, from all that's familiar and known to you. And you've been rowing for long enough now that you can't even see the shore you came from, and you know you can't go back there. But the place you're rowing to is still over the horizon. You can't see it yet. But you have to keep on rowing, and you will get there."

My friend was on the way, and at a critical point, and she turned to someone who didn't urge her to go back, but rather to keep risking herself, to keep on rowing. This is what our reading today is all about. Being willing to take that risk that is calling to you--to face what you fear, to "endure the suffering and pass courageously through it, thus making of it 'a raft that leads to the far shore.'"

I don't know what that is for you in your life. I encourage you, I implore you, to make time to listen for that voice that is calling to you. The one that urges you on, that challenges you. The voice you may be scared to listen to, because it may be calling you to make changes you think you're not ready for, changes that seem risky or costly.

But what's the alternative? You don't have all the time in the world. If there are changes to be made, the time to start is now. The way of transformation is risky, yes. But what kind of life is it, hanging out in the shallows? You want to be on the way, don't you? Isn't that why you're here? To be on the way toward becoming who you were born to be. To be a community on the way. On the way to living out our mission more fully. Being a place where people come alive, where individual lives are strengthened and transformed so we can do our part to heal and transform our community and the world.

Hear again some of our reading this morning about this way of transformation:

"The first necessity is that we should have the courage to face life and encounter all that is most perilous in the world. Only if we risk what seems like destruction can our contact with Divine Being, which is beyond destruction, become firm and stable."<sup>2</sup>

I hope this is a place that you experience as safe enough that you can take some risks. A place to try on new ways of being, a place to stretch and grow. Where you might push away from a familiar shore and start rowing.

I came back from California aware that I want to practice my ministry with greater intensity--to bring to it more passion, to take more risks, to really focus on the work I'm here to do and the work we're here to do. Will you join me? Are you ready to turn up the intensity level here? So that we might move toward being more real?

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<sup>2</sup> *The Way of Transformation* by Karlfried Graf von Dürckheim.

Will you today, after church or at coffee hour, try something? Ask one person, “Are there risks you need to take, changes you want to make?” And if you’re feeling really nervy, ask them, “Where are you? Out there rowing, or hanging close to shore?”

How about today we begin a wide and deep conversation about becoming a community of transformation and liberation? Let’s make it a habit to challenge one another: “Tell me what is saving your life right now,<sup>3</sup> and how you are being transformed, what is stirring in your soul, and where you are being called. Tell me how I can support you in your risk taking.”

You’ve heard of that outdoor education program called Outward Bound. Their name comes from a nautical term that describes the moment a ship leaves the dock; when they cast off the lines and push away, the ship is said to be “outward bound.” I’m all for the inward journey, because it takes us into the depths, that place of transformation where we are pulled off our safe moorings, given the strength and the courage to face what we fear and move towards it. The inward journey shapes us into people who are outward bound.

That’s where I want to go--toward that land the prophets describe, where mercy and justice reign. Where we are in touch with what is real and who our sisters and brothers are. Are you with me? Will you come with me? Will you come and go with me to that land, where we’re bound?

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> This question is from an essay by the preacher and writer. Barbara Brown Taylor in *An Altar in the World*.