



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“The Deep End,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on October 3, 2010

Last week I started this conversation with you about being a real church. I said a real church is one that welcomes people in, that throws the doors open wide. And once you are here, that provides opportunities and support for going deeper. And then, that sends you out, to heal and bless the world. Those three--welcoming, going deeper and doing works of charity and justice--are what church is all about. Today I'm on part two--going deeper.

You know what an invocation is--a prayer, usually at the start of a gathering, that invites God in. But God is already here, is always present, whether we are aware of it or not. So an invocation is really an invitation to us to be mindful that the holy is in our midst. When I arrived here, I started a practice of inviting the folks who are participating in worship on Sunday morning to gather in my office about ten minutes before the service begins, to have a moment to be still and remember why we are here. We stand in a little circle, sometimes we hold hands, and I say a prayer. I offer this sermon as an invitation to you to go deeper. So let's begin with an invocation. Will you pray with me?

Come holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your people. Kindle in us the fire of your love, help us to sense your presence in our midst, and make us bearers of your peace. Amen.¹

I got into the ministry because I wanted to lead a holy life.² By that I don't mean a pious life, or a holier-than-thou life. I wanted a life that was more intentional, more intense, more real. I decided to end my career as a commercial photographer when one day I looked up from my desk and realized what I was really doing was running a small business. There was nothing wrong with that--it was a good life, but it wasn't my life. A couple of years later, in a divinity school class on congregational leadership, I told them what I just told you, and then said “I have this fear that some day I'll look up from my desk at the church and realize I'm just running another small business.”

I'm not saying that all the good institutional work we're doing isn't important, or that I don't enjoy being part of that work. I just want to say focused on why we're here.

Two weeks ago I shared with you Wendell Berry's words of confession:

¹ This invocation is adapted from a lovely one I've heard used by Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

² See Nora Gallagher, *Practicing Resurrection* (New York: Random House, 2003), p. 151.

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.³

That's why I see my spiritual director, and why I work on my prayer life, and why I make time for silence. Because I can be inattentive to wonders, and can listen to too much noise. We live in a world that offers so many invitations to distraction: "Pay attention to me!" they call out from their shiny packages. This may be more of a male affliction, but if I'm somewhere, and there's a TV in the room, that flickering screen is like a magnet, pulling my eyes away from what is right in front of me. My family could tell you, I'm easily distracted. I'm also hungry for what is real and I want to lead a holy life. And I wonder about you. What are you seeking? What is your heart's desire?

I have to tell you, that when I came here two years ago, what I sensed most strongly was that you were hungry too. Hungry for community, for depth, for the presence of what some of us call God, or Spirit of Life or Love; whatever you call it, hungry for something More. And this made my heart glad. You are why I went into the ministry--it's my heart's desire to be with other longing, thirsty souls, to be a companion and a guide on this journey into the depths--that's why I'm here.

But the church is a very human institution, and ironically, not always the best place for deep soul work. There are so many things to pay attention to! An Anglican theologian⁴ once observed that the church is like a swimming pool. All the noise, he said, "comes from the shallow end." The shallow end--that's not where I want to be, and my sense is that's not where you want to be either.

One day I was talking to my spiritual director, telling her that my prayer life is inconsistent and unconventional and easily interrupted. Then I said, "But I have learned how to drop down into God." This has taken a long time. It didn't happen overnight. There have been times of dryness and doubt and skepticism. But I've kept on praying and kept on listening. And I have felt a presence, a companionship. I've learned how to be open to that spirit, and now it feels like a long conversation we've been having, one I hope will continue all the days of my life.

If you are someone who is skeptical about all this, then please don't think I am trying to convince or exhort you that this going deeper is something you have to do. You may be happy just as you are. But if you have a longing for more, if you ever wonder, "Is this all there is?" if something you can't even name or explain drew you here and brought you through these doors, then let's get on with it!

First thing, make some time in your life for practice. Set aside a time and a place to be still. May time to pray or meditate, and don't be afraid to experiment. If sitting still doesn't work, try meditative yoga or walking meditation or chanting. The thing is, to listen. Listen for what bubbles up. Pay attention to images that come to mind, to your hints and guesses. Try writing or drawing

³ Wendell Berry, "A Purification."

⁴ W.H. Vanstone

or playing an instrument as a spiritual practice. As Rumi said, “There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground. There are a hundred ways to go home again.”

I know someone who tried to pray, but kept getting stuck on who she was praying to. She shared her struggles with a friend who said, “You believe in trees, don’t you? Try praying to them.” And she did, and it worked. She would love our reading this morning; which reminds us that we are like the trees; that reminds us, the way a spiritual practice does, that we have come into this world “to go easy, to be filled with light, and to shine.”⁵

So first you find a practice, a way to pay attention. Next, find some companions. Join a small group here, or participate in some of our classes and offerings. Come talk with me about your spiritual life; ask someone to be your spiritual companion. Consider working with a spiritual director, or singing in the choir or joining the next session of *The Artist’s Way*. Something that makes your heart glad.

One of you warmed my heart recently when you said you hoped our small groups will feel less like discussion groups and more like worship. That sounds right--more time that feels sacred, more ways to be connected and to go deeper.

We’re about to start a regular Bible study here, that will meet one night a month. On another week, for an hour before church, you’re invited to gather in my office for *lexio divina*, a different way to engage with the Bible that is more contemplative and worshipful. During the month of December, in that season when nights are getting long, we’ll offer a midweek evening service; a quiet time to be together in the presence of the spirit, a time for music and lighting candles and very few words

For some of us, they way deeper is through study and learning. For others, it’s through silence. For some, it’s through communion with other people. And for others, it’s through action and service. It’s up to you to find the way that is yours, to listen for what is calling to you. To turn in the direction of what excites you, or intrigues you, or comforts you.

But I have to warn you, this going deeper will not lead directly to a life of bliss. You may encounter things that are uncomfortable or unsettling on the way. That’s part of the process--as you move closer to the light, the shadows can intensify too. The mystic Rainer Maria Rilke, knew about this, and said those who undertake this journey need courage. He wrote that “the only kind of courage that is required of us (is) the courage to face the strangest, most unusual, most inexplicable experiences that can meet us.” Rilke said that we have been cowardly and too well-defended, that we have pushed away “the whole so-called ‘spirit world,’ death, all these Things that are so closely related to us,” and by doing so, “the senses with which we might have been able to grasp them have atrophied. To say nothing of God.”⁶

One of the afflictions of the modern age is that our ability to sense of the mysterious has atrophied, because we have not exercised those senses that help us to go deeper. We have

⁵ Mary Oliver, “When I Am Among the Trees,” *Thirst* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), p. 4.

⁶ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, letter #8.

surrounded ourselves with too much noise, too much work, too many distractions. We have forgotten how to bear witness to the beautiful, the sacred, the divine. A hundred years ago the Welsh poet William Henry Davies wrote, "What is this life if, full of care, We have no time to stand and stare." We can strengthen those senses that open us to the depths. It just takes desire, and practice.

One of the better things my wife Tracey and I did as parents was years ago, when our children were in elementary school. One night in mid-November, we woke them up in the middle of the night to see the Leonid meteor shower. We spread blankets out on the frosty ground in our back yard. We lay on our backs under more blankets, and looked up into the heavens and watched one shooting star after another streak across the sky. We lay there as long as we could, until we were all freezing and we ran back to bed.

A few weeks ago, our Board of Trustees and the church staff had dinner together at the start of our Board retreat weekend. The idea is that those of us working closely together will benefit from knowing each other better. Over dinner I invited folks to share something about themselves that no one else knew, and we heard some poignant and some hilarious stories. At times we were laughing so hard other folks in the restaurant must have wondered about that crazy church group. I can't tell you what we were laughing about--you know what they say: "What happens at the Roma stays at the Roma."

But I was struck by the depth of trust that allowed this sharing among us. It was on the eve of September 11, and one of us shared how a personal loss coincided with the terrible events of that day nine years ago. As this person spoke, tears began to flow, for which this person apologized. Later I said what I wished I had said at the moment, that I hope we will be a community where no one ever feels the need to apologize for sharing their feelings openly and honestly; that those words and those tears had been a gift to the rest of us.

That's what it's like in the deep end--where we can laugh and cry, where we can be ourselves without shame or fear. Where we listen for the longings of our own hearts and sense the leadings of the Spirit. Where we can be still and know who we are and whose we are, and that we are all in this together, in the deep end, where we want to be.

Amen.