



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“No Guru, No Guide,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on September 16, 2012

Some of you know I love to fly fish. I love standing in a river, I love the beautiful places where trout live, I love packing up for a day and going off all by myself, I love catching a fish and holding it for a moment, and then watching it swim away.

I’m friends with several other guys who like to fish as much as I do. One of them arranges an annual trip out West, and I’ve gone on one of these extravaganzas, He books guides for the whole week, and they make sure we catch plenty of fish, and it’s a lot of fun.

I have another friend, a closer friend, that I fish with a lot. He’s more of a do--it-yourself-er. Every now and then, we talk about hiring a guide, but we’ve never done it. We like each other’s company, and don’t want anyone else along. Over the years, I’ve realized this is how I like to fish.

This summer I re-read an essay about this, by David James Duncan, called “In Praise of No Guide.”¹ It begins, “My reservations about the average fly fishing guide are a lot like my reservations about the average spiritual guru. Both can be highly entertaining. Both can also be any of several types of idiot. Both usually charge for their services in either case. Why risk rewarding idiocy in hope of a little guidance?”

He goes on, “Fly fishing at its best is an unmediated, one-on-one music played by a body of flesh and blood upon a body of water; it is a satisfying duet, till a fish makes it an even more satisfying trio. The average guide renders duo and trio inaudible. The average guide mediates so relentlessly between you and your fishing that it feels as if you and the river are divorcing and trying to split up the property.

As UUs, we affirm seven principles that we try to live by, and name six sources on which our religious tradition rests. We list those principles and sources in the inside of the bulletin--which I wonder if anyone ever reads! Our first source is this: “Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.”

¹ This essay is found in *My Story as Told by Water*, by David James Duncan.

We say this direct experience is central to being a person of faith. For many of us, it's what feeds us and keeps us going. You have these experiences, all on your own, out in the world. When you come here, it's like Alice Walker says, "not to find God, but to share God."

Some other religious traditions see it differently, and say that people need the church and clergy to mediate between them and the divine. Like you are not capable of it all on your own. But that's not what we believe. In this church we affirm that you have a direct line to the holy; you don't need anyone else in the way.

I don't take this to mean you are in it all alone, or that it's all up to you, and I certainly hope that clergy have some role to play. I like to think that I might help you to be in touch with what is holy and real. I love my work, and am grateful I am that I get to do it with you--that I get to lead worship here, that I get to know your stories, and be part of your lives.

Last year there was a meme going around internet, showing different perspectives on some vocations. There was one about pastors, that had four photographs. One picture showed priests in fancy vestments, presiding behind an altar table. The caption said, "What I think I'm doing." The next showed a pastor at a hospital bedside, with the caption, "What my Mom thinks I'm doing." The third picture showed a person sleeping in a hammock, with the caption, "What my friends think I'm doing." And the fourth showed a person at a desk, buried under a mountain of paperwork, with the words, "What I'm actually doing." That made me laugh.

I love the varied ways I get to minister, both within and outside our walls. And I hope you see that you have a ministry here too. I want to invite you to discover your ministry, if you haven't already. Isn't that why you're here? To be in touch with that source of transcending mystery and wonder, so that it feeds and inspires you, and so that you live a life that matters, a life in touch with, as the Methodist minister Ted Loder said, who you are, and who God is, and who your sisters and brothers are.

So how do you do this? My message to you this morning is that you don't do it by outsourcing it, by handing off the responsibility for your spiritual life to a guru or guide who will tell you what you need to do. No, it's your life, and your journey. It's your work to do. Your mission, should you choose to accept it.

A few years ago, a friend and I were fishing on the Yellowstone River in Montana, floating down the river with guide I happen to like. I was having a tough afternoon. Plenty of fish were rising to my dry fly, but my timing was off--I was striking too soon or too late, and not hooking many fish. We came upon another boat of fisherman, who were friends of our guide. Just then a trout rose to my fly. I struck, but missed it, and said a bad word. Our guide said, "Hey, you're making me look bad in front of my friends." He was kidding, but I wish I'd said back to him, "Oh right--this is all about you, isn't it?"

A good guide, whether she's a fishing guide or a spiritual guide, knows it's not about her. It's about something much bigger. When I say, "no guru, no guide" I am advising you to stay away from anyone with all the answers; from books like *Spirituality for Dummies* or anyone with a sure-

fire method, like those to help you lose weight or make a fortune and at the same time, and find God--in six easy steps! I am saying, if you want to go deeper in the spiritual life, you have to do the work. No one else can do it for you.

Going deeper is like coming home to yourself; getting in touch with and becoming more fully who you are. The paradox is, though some of this is solitary work, responding to this call leads not toward isolation and individualism, but into deeper connections with others. That's certainly been my experience.

This fall we're launching what we're calling "Spiritual Exploration at UUCH." You'll find flyers about it on the tables at our potluck lunch today, and on the table at the back of the sanctuary if you can't stay for lunch. Next Sunday I'll be preaching with my friend Kimberly Cloutier Green, who's a UU spiritual director. Kimberly and I will be leading a workshop here on Saturday, September 29, and, in October, two spiritual direction small groups. I'm excited by these new ways we're offering you to connect with others and with the spirit, and I hope you'll want to take advantage of them.

I want to emphasize the difference between a companion and a guide. I've been seeing a spiritual director since before I started seminary, over eleven years now. This relationship has been instrumental in helping me to hear, and say yes to, and be faithful to, my call. She's never told me what to do or where to go. She's been my companion as I made my way into what felt like a new country. But it is my work and my journey--not hers.

On the other hand, a guide or guru is someone you hire to show you the way, sometimes even to do the work for you. When I've fished with a guide, he selects the fly, and even ties it to my leader. He doesn't want to lose a fish because I tied a bad knot. He takes me to his favorite spots and tells me where to cast. When I hook a fish, he nets it, maybe even takes a picture. How different it is go to out and find a good place to fish all on my own, to try and figure out what the fish are eating and how to imitate it, to catch and release a fish by myself.

In that essay I read from at the start, David James Duncan says, "Fly-fishing guides accept payment in order to help clients circumvent their ignorance. But ignorance is one of the most crucial pieces of equipment any fly fisher will ever own. Ignorance is a fertile but unplanted interior field. Solitary fly fishing isolates us in this field, and leaves us no choice but to try to cultivate and plant and grow things in it."

You can say the same thing about the spiritual life: Ignorance is a fertile but unplanted interior field. Solitary spiritual exploration isolates us in this field, and leaves us no choice but to be there and try to cultivate and plant and grow things in it. Think of the Zen Buddhist concept of "beginner's mind." It's an invitation to set aside the fear and expectations that are associated with the ego. When you do this, when you see yourself as a beginner, you can experiment and play and try things out, and all kind of possibilities emerge.

Most of us want to be seen as accomplished at what we do. But when you let down your guard, and say, "I'm just a beginner," when you enter into something with an open heart and mind and a spirit of exploration, then good things seem to happen. When fishing in unfamiliar territory, with no

expectations or special knowledge, I've found that things often turn out ok. Maybe it's what they call "beginner's luck." Fortune seems to shine on those who are willing to risk, experiment and explore.

Do you trust that you have your own internal compass, and that if you pay attention to it, it will point you in the right direction? That's what Walt Whitman was saying in our reading this morning: "re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul; and your very flesh shall be a great poem."

David James Duncan sounds like a contemporary Whitman. "We are a nation plagued with self-anointed experts, pundits, middle-persons. Away with them! Dare to be the bumbling hero of your own fish story!... Read like a fiend, practice like a fool, find the best possible river on the best possible map; read about it, explore it, stick your body in it; cast into it. If you fall in, get out. If you hook yourself, unhook yourself. Make mistakes! It doesn't matter! Make a half-drowned, half-thrashed rat of yourself. Forgive yourself. Regroup. Do it all over again."

He's talking about fishing, but the same applies to life, and to the spiritual journey. It's your life, so take charge of it! Jump in with both feet! Don't be afraid to get lost, or get wet, or get your hands dirty. And for God's sake, do what makes your heart and soul glad.

I hope and trust that this community, this gathering of spiritual companions, helps you--gives you strength and courage to be who you were born to be. Though some of this work must be done in solitude, you're not in it alone--we are in this together. Do you want to go deeper? Do want to touch that mystery and wonder? Are you are ready to do the work?

Then let's say Amen, and let's sing about it about it. Let's sing "I'm On My Way."