



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“Life is a Journey,”  
a sermon given by Julie Lombard  
on September 29, 2013

I am talking about journeys today because I figure, since we are all on journeys, our lives are journeys, this is a topic we must all consider from time to time. You could also say that this is my way of theologically agreeing with Rev. Clarkson. He jokingly said he could preach on the theme of “journey and home” for an entire year. Today I offer you my journey. Our journeys say a lot about who we are and what we feel called to do while we are here on this planet. They reflect our values and even secrets we hide in our hearts.

Like you, I am on a journey and that journey has brought me here to co-exist with you. I am here to be a Ministerial Intern for the next two years. Where I will learn from this community how to be a minister and gain the vital experience needed to become a minister.

I haven’t always wanted to be a minister and I don’t mind telling you that I have spent years avoiding being one. But like in the Shannon Spaunburg reading earlier that Connor read, it reminded us, “Along the way, we may stumble upon obstacles that will come between us and the paths that we are destined to take. In order to follow the right path, we must overcome these obstacles. Sometimes these obstacles are really blessings in disguise, only we don’t realize that at the time.”

Seminary and my various internships are examples of what I think are my obstacles which are really blessings in disguise. I say that because I feel I will never be able to fully appreciate them as blessings until they are in my rear view mirror and behind me.

Let me warn you, I am breaking the most important rule that my preaching teachers have taught me over the years... don’t talk too much about yourself. Since you are stuck with me, I thought it was important that you know about me. I hope you extend me some grace as I move forward with today’s message and I talk too much about myself.

I inherited my Roman Catholic faith after being born the youngest of four children to a family in southern NH. So, growing up I never thought of becoming a minister and I certainly knew I wasn’t suitable to become a nun. I’ve had many obstacles; I had speech impediments and other learning challenges that made it unlikely that I would be able to go to college never the less, graduate school or seminary.

I left the Catholic Church when I was 17 and became the nursery care provider at the Milford UU Church in Milford, NH. I couldn't keep going to a church that I disagreed with, the Catholic Church. Working in the nursery at that local UU church, I found myself surrounded by mini UU-babies and toddlers that were accepting and inclusive. I instantly felt like I belonged there, so I stayed. I call it home until age 19 when I headed off to college.

And after I graduated from the University of NH, I moved to the Baltimore area and attended a UU church in Towson, MD. Eventually, I returned to NH again and met the love of my life and the man I would come to marry. Upon contemplating marriage with my husband-to-be, we asked Rev. Olav Nieuwejaar of the Milford, NH UU church if he would officiate our wedding ceremony. He said he would despite how he hated to do weddings. But what I remember most was that he made me promise to return to a UU church after our wedding. Although it took me a little while, I kept my promise to him. The next church I attended was the Concord UU Church. I even saw Olav there sometime when he was visiting our church as the District Executive and I was able to say, "See, I kept my promise. Here I am!" Little did I know how the promise would keep me.

Attending the Concord UU Church was one of the most important parts of my journey into ministry. I thought I was merely attending church and finally as a full fledged adult, yet instead that church was like a primer education for ministry, teaching me through my volunteering experiences as a lay-leader.

There, my teachers were people like Rev. Marcel and Ellie Duhamel, and a long list of loving lay-people. I was surrounded by wonderful guidance there and they constantly encouraged me to grow. These people pushed me to try new things and my shed old ways. Folks saw in me where I was going long before I had the courage to even whisper it out loud. I feared the coming journey ahead of me. I thought I could keep it a secret, buried deep inside my heart, yet some truths we cannot hide.

I will never forget the day someone asked me, "Julie, are you on the path to ministry?" My eyes grew so wide, how could she tell? My response to her was, "Funny you say that Jane, I think I am." By that time, I had already spilled the beans to my husband that I was interested in becoming a minister and I had been shopping for seminaries.

My fellow church members helped me to gain the courage I needed to begin the hard journey towards ministry. They showed me an image of myself that I had never seen.

Another member from CUU has been calling me Rev. Lombard long before I ever even applied to seminary. He also was the one that sat me down and told me I wasn't dreaming big enough. He nearly dragged me to seminary. I am ultimately grateful to these folks. I couldn't have started this journey without them and their faith in me. They have offered me much needed smiles and support as I struggle through seminary.

My journey took me to Andover Newton Theological School and away from serving CUU to serve a bunch of other churches and communities. First, I served First UU of Milford (MA), then last year during my second year at school I served the UU Church of Manchester, NH, and over the summer I learned how to be a chaplain while doing a chaplaincy internship at Havenwood -

Heritage Heights, an Eldercare Community in Concord, NH, and now this fall I have started a two year internship serving you. I am collecting the experience I will need, yet it's difficult to believe that anything can ever fully prepare me for ministry.

Now that this journey has brought me here for another internship to learn about being a minister in a Universalist Unitarian church, I lovingly report that I already feel at home here after our short month together. Thank you for your warm welcome.

I plan to graduate from Andover Newton Theological School in the spring of 2014 with my Masters of Divinity and stay with you for another year beyond graduation. I am well on my way to becoming a minister and I am fortunate to have done this with the blessing of my family and many faith communities standing behind me. I do this not alone, rather I do it with the loving support of many folks. I have an army of supporters. I have had mentors galore and I have many more yet to meet. My bigger dream is to someday serve a congregation as their parish minister where I might help them to achieve their mission and vision while I share with them my many passions.

What are my passions, you might ask? I am passionate about any form of education, refugee resettlement, Restorative Circles- a restorative process for communities dealing with conflict, and sharing our fabulous faith with the world. So, that's my journey and why I am with you now.

I am not the only sojourner. There are many, maybe even you? Dr. Gordon Livingston talks about that in his 2012 book titled: "The Things You Think You Cannot Do: Thirty Truths about Fear and Courage." In his book there are thirty chapters telling stories of various types of journeys. Each chapter's title sounds like a great sermon title. In the final chapter called "The quest for courage is a journey within", Dr. Livingston tells the tale of his return to Vietnam as a veteran of the 11<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment, Blackhorse.

He claimed that along with the group he was traveling with, they were retracing their journey into a war that was never fully understood, then or now. Today, you can find .50-caliber ammunition boxed serving as flower pots in the peaceful backyards of Vietnam. My favorite part of his journey comes in the conclusion of his story, there he states: "The years have leached from us the passions of youth- misdirected as they were into war. On our journey, we failed at recapturing what we were and felt. The shape of the land has changed, as has the topography of our spirits. We vainly tried to orient ourselves with old maps, which no longer fit the ground on which we walked. The young people who took us from place to place must have wondered what we were looking for, not knowing what it is we remember.

We carried the burden of time and fate and our hearts were weighted with the knowledge of those who cannot return and who stories are lost to all those who loved them." Here we witness as he confronts his fears. He believes that fear- of change, of intimacy, of loss, of the unknown- has become a corrosive influence in modern life, eroding our ability to think clearly. Overcoming fear, he says, constitutes the most difficult struggle we face. This is the journey. Where we find peace after this journey is our sanctuary, a place we call home. I think Dr. Livingston is on to something, but what is more important is what do you believe?

Each of us are on a life's journey, each rich with joys and sorrows, filled with opportunities and misfortune, which have handed us hardships and moments of ease. It is only when we look back can we see the steady progression in a certain direction. Then we can see how the story of our journey unfolds like a divine plan. For me, my journey has never felt like a divine plan as I live it. Day by day, I continue moving forward through life's steep hills and around the blind bends with as much courage as I can muster and with the hope I am on the correct path.

And when I am lucky enough, I realize something that is ultimately important- I am not alone. I march on, one step at a time, and I look beside me, as you look to your neighbor right now, and see a friendly, familiar face, ones that smile at you, ones that reminds us of these wise words: The mystery is that we are connected even when we feel apart. Let us rejoice in the common life that makes of the many, One.

Spiritual Siblings, I welcome you to join me in the year ahead to reflect on your life's journey, where it has taken you and where you find yourself at home. I encourage you to ask yourselves: what led you here now, and who shares this path with you as you progress? Where do you find yourself feeling at home? Take some time to think about journey and home and how these themes are present in your own lives. How do they connect you to this sanctuary we know as UUCH? Most importantly, where do you find the courage to face your coming journey? Remember, at times when you feel apart and disconnected, it is this common life that unites us all. You only need to turn to your neighbor to find the smile and the love you need to encourage you to move forward on your life's journey. This road we travel together may be long and treacherous; thank goodness we have each other to aid us on our journeys. Let us fully comprehend our obstacles and unveil their disguise and see them as blessings.

So may it be. Amen.