



**“The Travel of Our Days”**  
**Rev. Jan K. Nielsen**  
**The Unitarian Universalist Church of Little Rock**  
**August 16, 2015**

**Opening Words**

From the writings of Wendell Berry, poet, essayist, novelist and farmer, who travelled far and wide before he returned home to write and farm and live in his native Kentucky: “. . . *the world cannot be discovered by a journey of miles, no matter how long, but only by a spiritual journey, a journey of one inch, very arduous and humbling and joyful, by which we arrive at the ground at our feet and learn to be at home.*”

**Reading**

“The Summer Day” by Mary Oliver *Who made the world?  
Who made the swan, and the black bear?  
Who made the grasshopper?  
This grasshopper, I mean—  
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,  
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,  
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—  
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.  
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.  
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.  
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?*

“The Summer Day” by Mary Oliver, from *House of Light*. © Beacon Press, 1992.

**Sermon**

“So, you all settled in yet?” It’s a question I’ve heard more than a few times lately. “Not quite yet,” I say, as I see flashing through my mind piles of books and boxes, a list of unfinished tasks and -- still more boxes. When I last stood before you in the spring, our family’s big move from New England to Arkansas was only a dream, a possibility, but just after you voted that bright day in May to call me to serve alongside you as your minister, our family’s journey began for real (for I heard “Little Rock Calling” – thanks Kathy and Isaac) with “to do” lists, project plans and lots of boxes. I was in the midst of putting the minister’s study in order, when one August day Karen walked in and said, with a good-hearted laugh, “It looks like a library exploded in here!” She was right and the truth is: it’s still not quite in order. Not long ago, someone, knowing that I soon would be starting a new ministry here with all of you, kindly inquired, “Are you ready?”

Humans are either nomads or farmers, wrote the Swiss poet Hermann Hesse; we humans, he said, are people whose nature it is either to wander or to put down roots. Though my calling to ministry has led me to wander at times like a

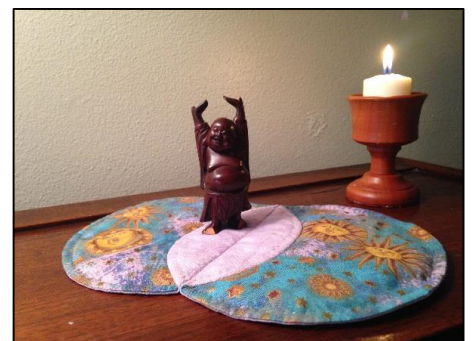
nomad (so that I could go to divinity school and then serve a congregation), I am, in my soul, more of a farmer, a roots person, someone who likes to settle in, to have my books all lined up on the shelves, my writing chair by the window, and the flame of a candle glowing nearby. So now, even with my feet on Arkansas soil (and I want y'all to know that feels so right) I am, in truth, still a bit unsettled, and that feels to me a little – unsettling. I have come to realize, though, that's just how it is: farmer or not, roots person or not, life will sometimes unsettle us – and that can be a good thing. As Ralph Waldo Emerson, our spiritual ancestor, once said: *“People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them.”*

Emerson's words speak an essential truth: our hope lies in our willingness to live with open minds and open hearts – to let go of what has been and to ask what might be. We can be farmers dedicated to tending our roots in the soil from which we came, and maybe never move an inch from where we were born, but still live with our minds and hearts open to change – to being, at times, unsettled. When we open ourselves to being unsettled, our feet may move far or not at all but, either way, our souls can travel the journey of a lifetime and, in so doing, we may discover the world. For it is that state of allowing ourselves to be unsettled that can lead us to question and to learn, to change and to grow -- and therein lies our hope.

*“Tell me,”* asks the poet, Mary Oliver, *“what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”* The poet's question has the power to unsettle, and it is a question that unsettled my soul all those years ago and led me to unsettle my life to prepare for the ministry, and then to unsettle it again, so many years later, when I felt a powerful calling to follow my heart, and to travel a journey of many miles, so that I might minister here, alongside all of you. I am so glad to be here. It is an honor to serve with you in this ministry.

Each of us has this one wild and precious life, a finite set of days we have been given to journey this earth. The word “journey,” of course, comes from the French root which means “day.” Our life's journey is what we do with each of our days; our journey is the travel of our days. How will you travel this day that has been given to you? Will you strive to journey with kindness? Along your path, will you live with attention to this beautiful Arkansas summer day? Will you live this day with a loving heart? And what about tomorrow - and the rest of your days? How will you travel the rest of your days? The way I see it, what matters most on life's journey is how well we love. As Native American wisdom teaches, *“We will be known forever by the tracks we leave.”* What will your tracks say about you?

When I look out and watch events in our world, I fear that our tracks, as a people, won't speak well for our time here on earth. It's been a hard summer to follow the news. From Charleston to Lafayette to Ferguson (a second time), the news is hard and harsh and heart-breaking – and our problems with race, as big and bad as they are, are only a part of what needs to change. Too many have too little and too few have enough. Too many of young people are struggling to find their way. The way I see it, so much in our world could use a little unsettling. There is much work we can do together here to lift up our shared voice against hate and division and exclusion and to stand together firmly and proudly on the side of love. I believe we are called, you and I, to do what we can to make this world more loving and more just, a little more homelike for all beings. After all, what hurts one of us, hurts us all. Today we begin the travel of our days together, our journey together, a spiritual journey that may be at times, as Wendell Berry says, “arduous” and “humbling” but a journey that will also surely be filled with joy and love. I offer a few things for us to remember along the way, some things we will want in our spiritual “backpacks” as, together, we lay our tracks: We will keep open minds and open hearts. There is always more to learn and more love inside us to give away. I am sure of it. We will be open to the journey. Our journey may at times unsettle things, and leave us feeling unsettled. That's okay; it will mean we are growing together as we walk this journey -- and then, to paraphrase Dr. Suess, “who knows the places we will go?” We are all in this together. We're walking together for the good of one another. If one of us falls, we all fall. If one of us shines, we all shine. I am your minister, here to walk by your side, not in front of you nor behind you, but alongside you. I make no claim whatsoever to being any sort of messiah. Like my mother's broken footed Buddha, I am imperfect -- woefully imperfect, with my own metaphorical “broken feet.” Even with



broken feet and imperfections aplenty, still, I can walk, and I have chosen to walk with all of you. Do not expect perfection of one another. Just as I am imperfect, so too, I imagine are you. All of us are. Let's all allow one another to be human. After all, the spiritual journey is about becoming more fully and deeply human. Don't get too concerned about the turns in the road, and there will be some, for as the poet Mark Nepo writes, ". . . there are no wrong turns, only unexpected paths." When in doubt, assume good intentions. Err on the side of kindness. Walk always with great love.

And so, I circle back to the questions with which we began. Am I all settled in yet? No way. Am I *ready*? Am I ready to walk alongside you? I am ready, ready to walk, ready to run, ready to fly with you. On this day, I give you my heart.

I leave you on this summer day with words from the late poet, Jane Kenyon, who died of leukemia at the age of 47. This is her poem called "Otherwise", words I offer as a meditation on the travel of our days, yours and mine, and also the days we will share:

*I got out of bed  
on two strong legs.  
It might have been  
otherwise. I ate  
cereal, sweet  
milk, ripe, flawless  
peach. It might  
have been otherwise.  
I took the dog uphill  
to the birch wood.  
All morning I did  
the work I love.*

*At noon I lay down  
with my mate. It might  
have been otherwise.  
We ate dinner together  
at a table with silver  
candlesticks. It might  
have been otherwise.  
I slept in a bed  
in a room with paintings  
on the walls, and  
planned another day  
just like this day.  
But one day, I know,  
it will be otherwise.*

Today is a gift, and it is a blessing, nothing less than a miracle, that we are here, together, on this summer day, ready to share in the travel of our days.