

“Finding Our Way Home”
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 The Unitarian Universalist Church of Little Rock
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*“Without the rich heart, wealth is an ugly beggar.”
 -Ralph Waldo Emerson*

Every time I sing Siyahamba, I think of my mother, the pilot.
 I remember it was about this time of year when I was maybe 6 or so
 that she came home from a flight, safe and sound,
 but I could tell something in her had changed and wasn't quite right.
 It was like a shadow had fallen across her face;
 the spark was gone from her eyes. She seemed really tired.
 The next day I overheard her telling one of her flying friends
 that she'd been out just before dusk for a solo flight
 and had, for a time, lost her way.
 I have no way of knowing all the facts of that journey
 but I do remember my mother's face
 when she saw the gift my father brought home.
 Just as she opened the plain cardboard box,
 I saw the light return to her face
 as she shouted with unmistakable joy,
 “A rotating beacon! It's a rotating beacon!”
 I was pretty sure not too many other moms on Mother's Day
 were getting a flashing airplane light gadget – and happy about it.
 So now when I sing Siyahamba, I can almost hear my mother,
 though she's been gone many years now, singing along with me:
 “We are flying . . . we are flying in the light of God.”

I almost can't believe I'm finally here.
 For a long time now,
 and long before your search committee even knew my name,
 I had hoped that one day I might stand in your pulpit --
 and now it feels so good, and so right,
 to be with all of you, here in Little Rock, on this day.
 Thank you all for your warm welcome.
 I'm grateful, and honored, to be your ministerial candidate.

I come to you from the Ozark hills north of Van Buren,
 by way of New England,
 with a stop in Cambridge where I went to school,
 a stop in Concord where I first tried my ministerial wings,
 and then a thirteen-year stop at our West Hartford church
 where, to continue the aviation metaphor, I learned to fly.
 (I should tell you now, right up front,
 that my mother, the pilot, and “flying talk”
 both sometimes find their way into my sermons,

usually when I least expect either of them to show up.)
 Anyway, several years into my “flight,”
 an old yearning began again to stir deep inside me,
 a longing to do the work I love – to minister –
 in a place I love, a place where my soul resides and,
 for me, that is right here in Arkansas.
 It is good to be home.

This journey has been an adventure so far,
 and I’ve learned a few things along the way--
 but the truth is: there is much I still do not know,
 about both church life and life itself.
 I am still learning how to fly.
 I come to you neither with an agenda
 nor with ready-made answers about anything.
 I come to you, instead, with an open mind and an open heart.
 I come here ready to learn and also to grow,
 both as a minister and as a human being.

I am here this week so that we can get to know one another—
 so that we can decide whether we’re ready,
 you and I, to take off together and to fly.
 I want to learn who you are—
 to learn where your journey, so far, has taken you.
 I want to know both what you’ve learned along the way
 and also the questions for which you still have no answers.
 I want to hear your ideas
 – your vision, your hopes and your dreams for your church.
 I want to know what about our world breaks your heart
 and how you feel our faith calls us to respond.
 I hope to come to know your stories –
 your triumphs and your struggles, your losses and your joys.

Over the next week, and always, I promise you this:
 I will be who I am.
 I will answer your questions the best I can;
 as the good folks in West Hartford know,
 I try to “say it plain.”
 And if you ask me a question I can’t answer,
 I’ll say so and tell you: “I don’t know” or “I’m not sure.”
 And I ask nothing more of you than this:
 to be who you are,
 to say what you think and feel,
 and if there’s something you’re not sure of, to just say so.
 All of this is good practice,
 both for deciding whether to start a ministry journey together,
 and also for life itself:
 we have to learn in this life to be real,

both with ourselves and with one another.

Our world too often would have us
 keep our true selves hidden and silent
 behind the masks and facades life sometimes asks us to wear.
 The spiritual life, though, calls us to be honest and real,
 to take a hard, inward look at who we are and how we live.
 The spiritual life calls us also to look outward,
 to look at how we treat one another in this world –
 even if it breaks our hearts – and then to ask how we might do better.
 And the spiritual life calls us to look toward one another,
 to turn toward each other, to listen and to learn from one another –
 for these are the first steps toward learning
 the single most important lesson in life:
 how to love and how to let ourselves be loved.
 Before we can love, we first have to be real,
 both with ourselves and with one another.
 All of this that I have named a part of the spiritual life –
 the looking inward and outward,
 the looking toward one another to listen and learn,
 the learning to love and the learning to be real –
 all of this is a part of what it means to be human.
 What I have named “the spiritual life” has less to do with
 what we may or may not believe
 but everything to do with
 the journey of becoming more fully human.

The way I see it, that’s what church is about
 and that’s why we gather week after week—
 to share together in the often joyful and fun,
 and sometimes hard and messy work
 of learning what it means to be human.
 We’re here to learn to live for something larger than ourselves.
 We’re here to learn to be kind even when life is not.
 We’re here to learn to find within ourselves the courage
 to face the pain and uncertainty
 that can come with the living of any life.
 Life will ask plenty of us and we can,
 if we are determined enough,
 endure some things on our own.
 “You can,” writes Frederick Buechner, “grow strong on your own.
 You can prevail on your own.
 But you cannot,” he concludes “become human on your own.”
 The truth is: we need one another.
 We need a gathering of souls,
 people of all ages and abilities,
 people who bring different ways of understanding life,
 people who know different ways of naming the holy,

to “stretch our hearts,” as the poet says, “beyond their littleness,”
to stretch our hearts open and wide
so that we might be more real, more loving and more fully human.

I think none of us, as long as we are breathing,
is ever finished with the task of learning how to be more fully human;
it is spiritual work and it is the work of a lifetime.

A lifetime, A. Powell Davies reminds us
is both “short” and “precarious,”
so right now, this very moment, seems as good a time as any
to place this question upon your heart:
when your days are done, what will people say about you?

This question requires
that we be nothing less than real with ourselves,
that we look with clear eyes at ourselves as we are
rather than as we wish we might be.
This means that I have to own up to the ways I fall short –
the times I am less than patient and kind,
the times I don’t do what I can to help,
the times I let the ways of the world rule the way of my heart.

We can in this life acquire and accumulate and achieve
all manner of things and still be poor in heart.

“Without the rich heart,” Emerson said,

“wealth is an ugly beggar.”

How will you live so that people remember the riches of your heart?

When it comes to the work of becoming more fully human,
this journey of growing a richer heart,
there is no faking it, David Brooks reminds us,
for people who radiate an inner light
hold what he names “an unfakeable inner virtue.”

I hear both truth-telling and wisdom in his reminder to be real
and I also hear hope, and good theology, in his reminder
that the “incandescent souls” of our world are,
as he says, “made, not born.”

That means there is hope for all of us,
no matter how often we fall short,
no matter how wide and far we’ve strayed.

Any of us, at times, can lose our way.

Even the shiniest and smartest resumes won’t protect us
and even best flight plans can go awry.

Not a one of us in this life will travel an always easy journey
nor will our paths always be clearly marked or well lit.

At times, our paths may seem to disappear entirely
and sometimes all around us will be darkness.

Life may ask that we journey through stormy skies.

Changes in our relationships or in our work can leave us feeling lost.

We love someone who dies too soon
 and the loss of their light in our lives leaves us
 with a longing that will never die.
 Despite all our planning and preparation,
 we may stumble and fall and feel forever lost –
 but I am here today to say that none of us is forever lost.
 Whatever happens,
 we can find our way by looking for the light.

I remember hearing my mother and her flying friends
 talk about sometimes having to find their way
 through the darkened Ozark skies by looking for the light –
 maybe the lights of the cars and trucks on highway 71,
 or the lights of a train,
 or, when civilization was in sight, the lights of a town
 or, even better, the lights of a landing strip.

We, too, can find our way by looking for the light.
 We can look for the light in ourselves.
 No matter what happens,
 our light, however small, is always there and ready to shine brighter.
 We can look for the light in one another,
 for each of us, our poet and preacher, A. Powell Davies reminds us,
 are “lighted by the same precarious, flickering flame of life.”
 We can look for the light right here, in gatherings like this one,
 communities of people who join together
 to “follow a brighter light,” as Annie Lamott tells us,
 “than the glimmer of their own candle,
 (and) are part of something beautiful.”

The light of our gatherings is indeed “something beautiful.”
 My light shines brighter when I am part of something larger –
 when I am with other people who are following their light
 as we sing hymns, or feed hungry people, or learn to be still and silent.
 When I work the breakfast shift at the community kitchen
 and see the faces of both guests and volunteers light up with joy,
 I look out at the crowd and I remember that unusual Mother’s Day gift so long ago,
 that rotating beacon and my mother’s face –
 both shining bright for all to see.
 The work we do together,
 this work of becoming more human and growing richer hearts,
 is, in this world that we humans sometimes cause to grow darker,
 like a shining beacon of hope.

It is that beacon of hope that has led me to give my life
 to serving our Unitarian Universalist tradition
 and it is why Roger and I made our kids go to church,
 and why we raised our now young adult children in this faith.

We have tried to give them what
Anne Lamott wanted for her son, Sam:
“a path and a little light to see by.”
When we sing of marching or flying in the “light of God,”
I believe we are singing not about light from afar;
I believe we are singing about the power of our shared light –
that larger light we create when we join together in the journey
of becoming more fully human and growing richer hearts.
Together, our lights can create a brighter light,
a light that might help all of us,
whoever we are,
to find our way home.