

Familiar Strangers

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The Unitarian Church in Summit

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Out along the Delaware Water Gap, there where the river flows swiftly through the mountains on its way to the sea, November has come to the woods. The colors of the hillside are brown and amber and old gold. And on the highest hills, the trees are bare, their bristly branches stretching upward into the cloud-strewn sky. On the ground, at the base of the trees, there where the bole emerges from the earth, the last of autumn's glory lies like a brightly colored shawl draped across an old man's knees. The sun is lower in the sky and casts a peculiar light across a transitional scene.

Here and there, flocks of small birds come pouring across the sky, wheeling and darting as if controlled by a single intelligence. They settle for a moment in the branches of the leafless trees. Then, at some unknown urging, they rise and dart across the sky again, to string themselves out on the power lines, like notes on a scale, suggesting some archaic melody that I can half- hear, but only when I am not trying. Then, the music ended for the moment, the restless birds rise as one and fly on across the sky. Are they heading to warmer climes, or are they scouting the territory for winter shelter? Or perhaps they give no thought to what lies ahead and are simply delighting in updrafts of wind and the play of cloud and light across a world no longer summer, not yet winter.

Human beings are not so casual. In rest areas along the highway, the snow fences have begun to appear, those slatted orange fences unrolled and erected across open areas, designed to confine the drifting snow to some minimal order. In modest homes along the road, storm windows now replace the screens of summer. In farmers' fields, the bounty of the year has been stacked and stored and baled -- gathered against the coming of the winter, while the excess is displayed for sale along narrow byroads. And in suburban areas, the bags of raked leaves now stand sentinel along the curbs, waiting to be hauled away, even as more leaves fall to cover immaculate lawns. It is November.

Every year, this is for me a time for reflection -- for you see, November is my natal month. This is the time when I cut another notch on the calendar- stick of my life. I watch the years piling on; I monitor the constant, minor, irritating changes in my body that record the passage of time; I think on how the world has changed in this interval during which I have been privileged to be part of its endless process. Some things, of course, do not change. Always someone, often an offspring, will chant the magic number -- this year 62 -- as if no one had ever lived so long. And always someone -- never an offspring -- will warble the magic number -- this year 62 -- and insist that in all truth, I am only a child, a mere babe. And I, I understand the full truth of both of those remarks, as I reflect on the reality of this adolescent spirit trapped in an aging body, this dreamer who is returned to reality by small aches and minor pains.

In November I think of the people who have been part of my life over the decades, and I understand the full truth of the small poem from Ogden Nash:

When I remember bygone days
I think how evening follows morn;
So many I loved were not yet dead,
So many I love were not yet born.

This year, as my birthday has approached, I have had even more occasion to think about the people who have been woven into my life, who have had their part in making me what I am. In August, I received a phone call from my oldest sister. Since her retirement from her career as a librarian, she has been busy with a second career teaching weaving and researching our family tree -- well, actually, as it turns out, it is more an unpruned bush than it is a tree. This latter activity has brought her into contact with family members I never knew we had, and as a result, she had received an invitation to a reunion of the Watson clan, the offspring of my mother's parents. The reunion was to be held on a Sunday early in September. Could we attend?

I thought quickly. My mother had died when I was 9 months old. I had lost contact with her family almost immediately. Although I lived only a few miles from most of them, no one in my mother's family had tried to keep in contact with her youngest child and only son. I knew none of her siblings as I grew up. I did not meet my grandparents until I was in junior high school. I knew none of my cousins. It would not be a reunion for me -- it would be a matter of first contact. Did I want to spend a Sunday afternoon with strangers with whom I happened to share a tenuous family connection? The decision was easily made. That Sunday was opening Sunday here at the church. There was no way we could make it to Pennsylvania for a family reunion.

Several days later, we received a letter from my sister. She had talked with the organizers of the reunion. Understanding my situation, they had decided to reschedule the reunion for a Saturday in September. Could we come? I dug out the calendar. There was a wedding scheduled for the middle of that Saturday. Just as I was preparing to respond to my sister's letter, telling her that it would not be possible for us to attend the reunion, I received a phone call. A solemn groom was telling me that the wedding had been postponed indefinitely. OK. Someone seemed to be telling me something. I changed the message and agreed that we would come to the reunion. And just for support, we would bring along our daughter and our eldest son.

On the designated Saturday, we piled into the car and, following the directions, made our way to the gathering -- at a cabin up an unpaved, rutted road, high above Newtown in Pennsylvania. Apparently the cabin had been in the family for a very long time. (I later learned that my mother and father had been to the cabin shortly before her death; that she had been very thirsty that hot summer day and had drunk from the nearby stream; that it was possible, indeed probable, that it was here that she contracted the typhoid which killed her.)

As we pulled into the driveway lined with cars and vans and pickup trucks, I could see that a large group had already gathered. We got out of the car and were greeted by our host, who welcomed us warmly. Turning, I saw similar faces -- both of my sisters were there, with their husbands. I knew no one else. Suddenly, I felt like that shy, uncertain youngster who had spent most of his youth trying to be invisible in these kinds of situations. I chatted with my sisters, and smiled politely to the rest of these strangers who were my family. They in turn were polite and pleasant, introduced themselves to me, but obviously did not know what to say to one another. Blood may be thicker than water, but it is not thick enough to create a bridge across the void of years of unshared experience.

Following my usual pattern, I found myself a place in a corner, on the fringes of the group, where I could observe what was going on. Something about this gathering was tugging at the corners of my mind -- something I could feel, but could not define. I listened to people I did not know discussing circumstances and events in their lives, remembering times and places and people who had no meaning in my experience. The conversations flowed around me. Sometimes someone would recognize my presence and attempt to include me in the conversation, but it was clear that I was an alien in the world they shared, that they were talking of events and individuals related to me that were totally unknown to me. I didn't know John; I didn't know cousin Bill; I didn't know their children or the history of their lives. The only tie between us was an accident of birth.

Soon it was time to eat. Someone remembered that I was a minister. The other minister in the family was not present. Would I say a grace? I did. There was silence for a moment. Then we all fell to and began to eat. It was good to have something to do, something to focus on, something in common to comment on. The food was familiar -- some of the same Pennsylvania Dutch fare I had known as a child. As I ate, and allowed my self-consciousness to abate, I was suddenly aware of what it was that had been tugging at the edges of my consciousness. I looked around at the faces on the porch -- children and adults and elders, a few older than I, most younger than I. And suddenly they began to look familiar. I saw features shared in common across the generations, like images of women and men long dead, playing across the faces of the living gathered there.

And I heard their voices -- not what they were saying, but the music, the cadence, the lilt, the timbre of their voices, and something in that sound was so familiar, called to me, embraced me. And then it struck me. Here, in about half of the people who had gathered on that warm September Saturday afternoon, the lives of our ancestors, of women and men we had never met, who had died long before many of us were born, were making themselves known. In the curve of a smile, in the sound of laughter, the glint of an eye, in the sprouting of an eyebrow, in the tone of a voice, people none of us ever knew and few of us could name were living and moving among us. While each of us had done different things with the heritage from the past, all of us were, in significant ways, shaped and molded by gifts from those unknown hands. It was not a new or profound insight, but this time it hit with visceral certainty.

I spent the rest of that afternoon looking for my grandfather and my grandmother in the faces of those around me. And I found them everywhere -- in the coy smiles of the

youngest of the children, in the exuberance of the adolescents, in the laughter of young parents, in the hairline and the facial structure of my generation. And I found myself wondering how many other characteristics we shared, gifts of those other ancestors I only know from faded and sepia-toned photos sent me by my sister, the family genealogist.

And then another thought struck me -- it is said that none of us is separated from anyone we meet by more than six degrees of separation. All of us are one vast family. And so, every human gathering -- even the mobs in shopping malls -- represent, in some sense, a family reunion. All of those strangers I encounter on the street are gifts from the same unknown progenitors whose labors and hopes and dreams and failures and confusions produced me. Our comings and our goings are all of them family reunions.

Sitting there on that porch, a place where once my parents and my grandparents and who knows how many others had sat and watched the seasons march across the hillside, the clouds moving across the sky, the birds in their flight, I found myself overwhelmed with a deep sense of awe at all that daily works itself out in my life. Though I do not know their names, cannot recount their stories, I knew that their hopes and dreams, their struggles and disappointments, their joys and delights, their pain and sorrow did not end with their lives, but all flowed into my life, endowing me with gifts and strengths and possibilities, defining my margins and my limits. In the midst of that family reunion, I saw myself, briefly, as part of a great river of being that flows from generation to generation, shaping our lives in ways we only vaguely understand.

Of all those attending the reunion, we had the longest drive home, and so we were the first to leave the gathering. Laughing and joking, these familiar strangers maneuvered their cars and trucks and vans out of the way so our car could begin the drive home. Down the steep, rutted road we went, out onto the paved highway and on to the interstate and back to Summit. We didn't talk much on the way home. Each of us seemed absorbed by this encounter with strangers who, by a quirk of tradition and genetic destiny, had been defined as family. As road led on to road and way led on to way, I found myself thinking how unlikely it is that all of us would ever be together again in one place. But then, it occurred to me, all of life is made up of unlikely, improbable moments. And for a moment I was overwhelmed by the implausibility of my own existence, of any individual existence. All those unknown, unnamed, unnameable women and men whose lives have been poured into mine -- they lived their own lives, sought their own goals, followed their own paths, wept their own tears, and gloried in their own accomplishments, seldom thinking of the future they were shaping and molding. And yet, improbable as it is, I, driving along this road, following this path, seeking out my destiny, am the recipient of their gifts and the outworking of all their labor and effort. And that effort and that labor and those gifts still work out their improbable destiny in my life and in the lives of my children in ways I can only occasionally glimpse.

As we drove into familiar territory, coming into Summit, it struck me that this sense of gratitude for the familiar strangers who created and graced and shaped my existence was appropriate, but narrow -- far too narrow. Throughout my life, I have received gifts from the hands of strangers, nameless, faceless strangers, at crucial moments. I do not know

who created the work-study program which allowed me to attend college at a time when my family had no resources to pour into that risky and extravagant adventure. I do not know who first suggested my name to the Universalist official who was seeking a student to serve a small Ohio congregation. I do not know who drew up the class list in high school which placed Beverly and me in the same class. I do not know who trained the doctors who attended Beverly at the birth of our children. I do not know the young man and the young woman whose indiscretion produced my adopted son, Stephen. So much of my life is the improbable result of the efforts, the work, the sometimes painful work of women and men whom I have never met and will never be able to name. And yet, without their faithfulness, my life would have been radically different; I would have been radically different.

Driving into town, I found myself thinking of this church. I know the names of some of the major movers and shakers in its history. The ministers are listed on a plaque in the rear of the room. We can name the architect of the building. We have, somewhere, a list of the charter members. Every one of them was important. But at every point, their efforts were supported and sustained and amplified by hundreds of women and men whom few if any of us could name. The people who raised the money, who dreamed the dreams, who gave of their time and their resources, who cleaned and cared for the place, who made the coffee, who stayed with the institution, joyfully in good times and stubbornly in bad times -- these are the people whose dreams and hopes shaped this institution fully as much as those whose words we remember, whose deeds we celebrate, whose names we engrave on plaques. They -- the unnamed and often unnameable -- are the real spirit of this place and it is their lives which continue to shape our history. They made us the people we are; they make us the people we are going to be, and we forget that fact at our peril.

For, in truth, in remembering all those silent voices that call to us, day after day in our blood and week after week in this place, we remind ourselves that we, too, are part of a destiny that is larger than we can envision, than we can possibly know. We do not know where our labors will lead, or what will be the outworking of our dreams and our struggles, our passions and our disappointments. But all around us is the evidence that our lives participate in a process that has meaning and scope and purpose beyond our ability to see it or to name it. The world will be different because of who we are and the faithfulness and integrity with which we live our lives, just as we are different because of the lives of countless women and men, unnamed and unnameable, who flow through us and through the institutions they created and sustained.

It is November. The asters are beginning to fade; the trees are showing their essential form as the disguising foliage falls away; the squirrels and chipmunks cherish every warm moment as a fleeting gift, allowing them to store still more resources against the coming winter. It is November, a time when the gifts of the year are gathered and stored in safe places, protected from the snows and winds and frosts to come. It is November, a time when a future no one can quite see, but nothing in nature doubts, is nurtured and incubated. It is November, a time for us to think with gratitude of all those familiar strangers who have graced our lives and sustained our existence in ways past knowing,

all those familiar strangers who will receive from our hands the gifts of our efforts, our dreams, our labors and in whom our lives will find ongoing meaning and purpose, long after our names and our stories have dropped from memory. It is November, a time to see and to celebrate the great river of being which flows out of the past, and into our lives and on into the future, world without end. Amen.