

Notes Toward a Spiritual Autobiography: Growing Up Unitarian Universalist

Rev. Dr. George Kimmich Beach

The Unitarian Church in Summit

May 21, 2000

In his *Greek Myths*, Robert Graves tells:

"Before he left Crete, Daedalus gave Ariadne a magic ball of thread, and instructed her how to enter and leave the Labyrinth. She must tie the loose end of the thread to the lintel of the entrance door; the ball would then roll along, diminishing as it went and making, with devious turns and twists, for the innermost recess where the Minotaur was lodged. This ball Ariadne gave to Theseus ..." [Vol. I, p. 339].

I began in Richmond, at Stuart Circle Hospital, with Jeb Stuart himself on horseback just outside the window. So my roots are in old Virginia, although my father and mother were Ohio-bred Yankees -- or, more precisely, Clevelanders. To cleave: Does it mean to cling to or to split apart? It means either, or both. Such is Ariadne's red thread of my story: a double awareness, an inner dividedness, a long journey away from myself in order to find myself. I heard "Carry Me Back to Old Virginie" in grade school (my parents never went for such mawkish music!), and here I am, responding to it even now.

Childhood in Richmond is a misty realm, a dreaming innocence. The piney woods beyond our home, a new house on the outskirts, were deep-scented and prickly, a place of freedom. There Monkey and I roamed free, and laid low in my beloved Army surplus wall tent. There I saw my first copperhead. Pine tar stains the fingers. So does road tar on a hot summer's day. Pungent memories. We fought invading armies from ancient trenches, still there (literally) from "the War Between the States." We explored great, bowl-shaped holes, now dotted with trees. They were cannon emplacements, I think, but we called them elephant graves.

The family went to church, always, no choice. My father was (no kidding) a devout Unitarian. His grandfather Beach, my great-grandfather -- Meadville Theological School, Class of 1861 -- was a Unitarian minister, and an abolitionist, and served several small-town churches (including one in New Jersey), which seem no longer to exist. My mother, of vaguely Lutheran upbringing, followed Dad's lead. In religion, anyway. I remember her glowing words about going to Star Island and sitting at the feet of Sophia Lyon Fahs, the patron saint of Unitarian religious education.

Many early memories cleave to the old, red brick First Unitarian Church on Floyd Avenue in Richmond -- singing "I Would Be True" and "Hearts Like Flowers." We were more sentimental in those days. But think -- what will your children remember about "growing up Unitarian Universalist"? And you parents who are "come-outers," consider

how radically different your children's religious sensibility will be from your own. How deeply rooted will they feel in our "covenant of spiritual freedom"?

There was an old foot-pumped organ behind the social hall stage, and Rev. Mackinnon's front porch, next door, was always welcoming. By comparison, public school was distant and strange. Bobby, an overgrown first-grader, once denounced me to the teacher: I drew some swastikas and hid them in my desk. These were World War II days, and I guess he thought he'd caught a German spy. Let me tell you about Bobby: He ate the paste right out of the jar.

The family went places together. In Williamsburg, my big sister Ann and I ran through the boxwood labyrinth behind the Governor's Mansion, until it dead-ended us no more. In the museum once, I got my head stuck between two huge display cases. The more I cried, the bigger my head swelled, and they had to call the fire department to get me out. Oh, shame! I'd almost forgotten this incident until, a couple of years ago, a little boy across the street got his head stuck between the bars of a steel handrail. His grandmother called me over and, this time, hacksaw in hand, I was the rescuer. My memory bank was further stocked with images of Mr. Jefferson's Monticello and the Blue Ridge Mountains, pure Virginia mystique.

I remember a few "friends," but my best friend was Monkey. One day in the store, I told my mother I wanted him, and she said I was too old for stuffed animals. But then on Christmas morning, there was Monkey, in a box from "Santa." (I knew whose idea it was; we had no myth of Santa Claus in our house -- after all, we were Unitarians.) So I was stuck: too old for such a childish toy. But to me, Monkey was no toy, but a companion. So no one must ever know of our adventures together, deep in the piney woods. At the center of my maze was loneliness and shame, waiting to devour me, unless I slew the Minotaur first.

Shortly after my ninth birthday, on D-Day, to be precise -- a proud day for a wartime child to call his birthday -- the family moved back to Cleveland. For me it was a new world, with a grand new home on the verge of Lake Erie: an inland sea with storms and calms and, in winter, vast, crackling ice floes. To this day, when family ties take me back to these haunts, I want to go beachcombing: a solitary pursuit of "found art." No wonder I write a column called "Beachcombings."

With my father, who grew up on an Ohio farm, I gardened. With my mother, whose art still enhances our home, I painted. No wonder I am a potter and a farmer today. With my big sister, I fought. With the school band, I played baritone horn (no, I haven't taken it up again, but I've got it on my mind), and with the boys in the 'hood, I played baseball, football, hockey -- all the sports from which the high school progressively alienated me, because I was never good enough to "make the team." Except in track: For dogged persistence if not for speed, the coach decided I'd make a passable half-miler. Hence my only athletic letter.

I think about this when I think about tragedies like Columbine. In high school, I was mostly the outsider, with a few close buddies and looking for a group to be inside. That the church provided it is the most obvious explanation for my becoming, in due course, a Unitarian minister. Already in grade school, at church our class was known as "the Gas-house Gang." How we loved our rowdy reputation! We stuck together for years.

In 1951 -- I had just turned 16 -- two carloads of us journeyed in tandem all the way across New York on old U.S. 20, then up to Lake Winnepesaukee, in New Hampshire. We were off to the first-ever joint, continental convention of Unitarian and Universalist youth. We were merging, but the main thing was, this was our own show. The camp on Cow Island was our utopia for a week. I was Theseus bound for Minoan Crete, and I did not know it, nor how it would test me. To me it was new and amazing: suddenly to be liberated from the protective world of childhood, and find myself in a wonderland where we ourselves ran everything -- albeit with a little advice from our adult advisers, Sam and Eileen and Alice.

This will always be the golden age of LRY -- Liberal Religious Youth -- a community of seriousness and fun. Here I learned about "the Silent Generation" -- from which we in no uncertain terms declared our independence. And raucous songs: "Oh, the game was played on Saturday, in heaven's own back yard, with Jesus playing quarterback, and Moses playing guard ..." Only some of our songs were sacrilegious. Some rang with liberal idealism, like Sam Wright's LRY hymn, "We Would Be One," to the tune of "Finlandia." We were different from "the culture of conformity" and were no "silent generation." Best of all, here I could be me, and here I belonged.

We were, in fact, years ahead of our cautious elders, for the new LRY merged the Unitarian and Universalist youth organizations. That was **the** item on our business agenda -- and yes, we were sticklers for *Robert's Rules of Order*. I hardly knew what a Universalist was, but looking on comely Roselle Royal, a lanky North Carolinian in white shorts, I got the idea they were O.K. I could call her Ariadne, except I never even got a chance to abandon her on Naxos.

We ranged in age from 15 to 25, a heady mix for a youth organization. We did what were to me outrageously daring things: a softball game with boys dressed as girls (one pregnant with a basketball), singing militant union songs ("Solidarity Forever"), and, when Frederick May Eliot came out to visit and praise our merger, parodying this proper Bostonian president of the Unitarian Association to his face. (That's two syllables -- Eliot -- he instructed us.) Best of all, we ran our own show: The only rules were the rules we ourselves made. Or so we thought. I thought I had died and gone to a coming-of-age heaven.

We had, for instance, no curfew. So naturally, why call a halt when the night is young? Alcohol was strictly against the rules, of course, but when two young men rowed to shore and came back with a case of beer, a crisis loomed. Would we also enforce our own rules? We did, but in a temporizing way: How could they expel this fellow who was our own driver from Cleveland? Then the camp management lowered the boom. They

demanded a curfew. When the word came down, there was consternation in the assembly. Would we knuckle under like naughty children? It was an awful moment for our vaunted tradition of "youth autonomy."

Then gaunt, charismatic Stretch Grayton -- one of our own -- stepped forward and spoke. It was a Marc-Antony-before-the-Roman-populace sort of moment. He spoke gravely of the work we had before us -- to take first, decisive steps toward an historic merger -- and how our reputation as a self-responsible youth organization was at stake. He ended with a question I've never forgotten: "Do we have a job to do?" We knew the answer. We must show our elders that we could discipline ourselves and lead the way. I know better, now, what it means to come of age.

I have wanted to believe in myself, and to believe that I was part of something great. I have wanted a sense of unconstraint and spontaneity and participation, beyond the reach of self-consciousness and self-doubt. I found that whatever has held me back was within me. And whatever set me at liberty came as a gift, a grace mediated by the hands of others.

We are mysteries to ourselves. We are drawn forward by meanings and motives that remain obscure to us. I seek, then, to tell my story in a way that reveals me to myself. And if to myself, then perhaps also to you. How odd if it should turn out that, in the end, not I (by my own efforts) but you (by your kindness) must tell me who I am! Maybe that's the answer. Maybe that's the reason for this community of the Spirit: a place to tell our stories, that we might learn from one another whence we come and whither we are bound.