

The Places We Have Been, The People We Have Known, The Times We Have Shared

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September 8, 1996

It was a morning in August.

We had returned from most of our traveling. We had been to Indianapolis for the General Assembly--over three thousand Unitarian Universalist gathered for an extended week-end to conduct business, to worship together, to hear reports, to participate in workshops, and to establish and renew friendships.

We had been to Ohio to visit an old college friend. We had taken an international cruise--from Sandusky, Ohio, to a Canadian island in Lake Erie--going through customs and all the rest. We had visited Chautauqua, in western New York State, where we had conducted a service for the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship. We had been to Cape Cod for five delightful and restful days with the Spragues. Now we were home, hoping that several weeks of painting and papering and scrubbing might rescue the house from years of benign neglect.

It was a morning in August, and I was aware that the summer was slipping away and that before I was prepared for it, the autumn, with its special excitements and possibilities and inescapable press of responsibility would be upon us. As I started out with the dog on my morning walk, the sky was gray, and it matched my state of mind. I was brooding over the state of the world. The season of political conventions was upon us--a fact which always darkens my mood. The President of the United States had just announced that he would sign the bill which he said would end welfare as we know it, but which I saw as a moral retreat from the nation's commitment to care for its children and for those among us who have been caught up and spit out by an economy and a society which has no need of them. My inner skies were as clouded as the heavens under which I was walking.

The dog, as is his habit, stopped by the telephone pole to sniff, moved on to the post supporting the stop sign, and then trotted slowly up the street, taking in vast amounts of information, and leaving traces of his own passing. Up the street we went, my mind closed off and focused on a world of problems and disappointments. I was composing mental letters to the President, expressing my anger and my fury as what I considered a bitter betrayal. Up the street we went, the dog with all his senses open to the world integrated in and integrating the larger reality.

We reached the point in our walk where every morning the dog pauses, sniffs the air, turns around and begins the journey back home. Blindly I followed him, turning down the hill, allowing him to lead the way, only resisting when I became aware of the fact that the

dog, intoxicated with the great, wide world, was wandering into the middle of the street.

And then, half way down the hill, something happened. Without warning, there was a sudden shift in my vision. A leaf on a tree in front of me began to dance. I suppose there must have been some air current which had caught it. But of all the leaves on that tree, only one was dancing. Caught in some wordless ecstasy it twisted and bounced on its stem, as if it were inviting me to join the dance. I stopped in my tracks. My dog, Bart, tugged at the leash and then wandered into the brush to sniff a bit while waiting for me to proceed. Watching that leaf I became aware of the song of a single bird--fluid, graceful notes bubbling out of a small creature I could not see or identify. And then the gray sky above opened and in the rift of the clouds blue sky and bright sunlight appeared.

In that moment, on that August morning, it was as if some healing hand had reach out to touch my soul. The inner clouds dispersed and I remember thinking, "This is the day I have been given; I will rejoice and be glad in it." My anger and my sense of betrayal, my deep frustration at the direction the world seems to have chosen remain as strong as ever. But the sense of impotence in the face of monumental, impersonal forces faded away. Once more the world of nature had reached out to calm my troubled soul. Once more I felt at home in this world. Once more I felt empowered to speak the truth that is in me. Once more I knew that my responsibility is to that deep, underlying truth, that I am not required to win, but rather to keep faith.

The dog and I went on home and I changed into my work clothes and went back to painting the wood-work, my mind continuing to draft a careful letter to the President of the United States. It was a very small, very quiet, very personal moment. But when I think of the summer of 1996, this will be the defining event--the moment when a dancing leaf and a singing bird invited to rejoin the dance, to ground myself in the gracious world that is our home, to focus upon what I am called to do and be and to trust the process in all things.