

PASSING THE BATON

A Sermon by Rev. Fritz Hudson

Presented June 11, 2017—First Unitarian Universalist Church, Rochester, MN

Interlude: "Deportee" by Woody Guthrie

"Good bye. Good bye." Already over these past few weeks, I've said good-bye quite a few times--mostly to those of our members whose summer travels away from Rochester have already begun. No one as yet has bid me "*adios*." For a minister that would be a most fitting farewell, I think: *a dios* - to God. In our *Venture* newsletter this month I shared some thoughts on the why and the how of our saying good-bye to one another well. We still have two weeks yet for this pursuit of spiritual growth.

My leaving here, though, is entirely unlike *Juan's*, *Roselita's*, *Jesus y Maria's*. My work contract is "out," like theirs. But I'm not being chased. No one thinks I'm an outlaw. I have a name. I am not a deportee.

Most graciously, unlike these "*mis amigos*," I'm even given this chance to leave something behind as I go. Like a runner in a relay race, I'm actually expected, invited, to pass on something, some energizing momentum, to those who've chosen, and who've been chosen, to run beyond me.

So this morning,

- I want to recall with you the baton as it was shaped when I first grasped it to start running with you two years ago.

And then

- I want to carefully consider the shape of the baton I now find in my hand as I reach it out before me, so that you, and others who may run with you, may know what it carries. The baton was handed to me most directly by Carol, *mi amiga*, your prior minister. And it will pass from my hand most directly to Luke, *mi amigo*, your coming minister. But its path to my hand was also guided by a wind you all created, a wind that I've continued to feel at my back as I've run. And as I extend the baton now toward Luke's hand, I feel that same wind fairly pulling it from my hand. That wind, the wind of your spirit, can give it energy, give it direction, if you will gather yourselves into it with conscious care.

Two years ago, many of us first spent time together on a weeknight in August. It was a dessert, as I recall, with a question and answer session. I remember one of you asking me then what attracted me to share interim ministry with you. The answer fairly leapt from my lips. "That's easy," I said. "Your 150th anniversary celebration!" When I've been asked to give myself a theological label, to name the God I worship, I have sometimes called myself a "cultural evolutionist." What I worship is the continuing adventure of shared conscious life, transmitted and transformed from generation to generation. In particular, I worship the evolving culture of our faith's institutions as I've been privileged to serve them. Your 150th celebration (now I'll say our 150th celebration) in all of its many expressions--from Dillman Sorrell's return, to our historical hymn sing, to our Founders' Sunday, to Peter Morales' dedication of our stained-glass window creation--that was about as much fun as I've had in

any of my 40 years in ministry. Thank you. And, in finding and feeling and following our growth up from the seeds planted here by Rev. I.M. Westfall, in those first Universalist sermons preached here in Rochester in the early 1860s, I now realize we re-connected ourselves last year, we grasped again, the baton as it was handed forward to us by that spiritual forebear, Henry David Thoreau. He died in Concord in 1862.

And that's because something else happened in the midst of all that retrospective revelry. Do you remember? On the Sunday, November 22, 18 months ago, when most of us were having a ball singing such golden Universalist oldies as "Love for Sunday School" and "Touch Not the Cup," one of us just couldn't get in the spirit. I told you the story two Sundays later. One among us had come to our singing Sunday, in pain,

- seared by the plight of Belgians, locked in their houses, after the violent terrorist attack that ripped through the Brussels airport that week,
- scorched by the plight of Syrians seeking safe harbor from their country's war, waiting years in camps or dying in futile flight, while nations such as ours blustered and cowered in fear.

Through those eyes that Sunday, our church was debauching itself in nostalgic isolation, oblivious, callous, within our safe walls. When we talked in the week that followed, you asked, "Can we not do better, somehow, for someone beyond ourselves?"

My response was to lead us in worship asking the question: "Would You Harbor Me?" Drawing on the legacy of the UU Service Committee, which came to birth to aid refugees from Nazi Germany, that service initiated the formation of our Refugee Response Task Group. Elizabeth Katzmann and Cynthia Daube have served as its co-chairs. Amidst my ministry for connecting with our past, it was that service which really began the "ministry for now" that I had promised you when I came. It was the near turn in my tour of the track, in my leg of our race together.

The far turn came a year later. It came upon us with the election of a President for our country who had promised us even more restricted admission of people in pain as refugees, particularly people whose only "crime" was being born in an Islam-inspired nation. He promised us higher walls to prevent unpermitted economic immigration and more punitive enforcement of the laws that empower the President to deport immigrants already within our borders. My response was to lead us in worship asking whether our mission was now calling us to go "Beyond Welcoming." I invoked the spirit of Margaret Fuller, Thoreau's and Emerson's friend and partner, who once wrote to her Unitarian Boston Brahmin father:

Your reluctance to go 'among strangers' cannot be too soon overcome;
(And) the way to overcome it, is not to remain at home, but to go among them and (to) resolve to deserve & obtain the love & esteem of those who have never before known you. With them you have a fair opportunity to begin the world anew. (Mark Harris. *Elite: Uncovering Classism in Unitarian Universalist History*. p.9)

I followed the lead of our Welcoming Committee co-chairs Patty Trnka and Paulette DeMers that morning, placing a "Safety Pin" inside the heart of my "Standing on the Side of Love" stole. I transferred that pin to my coat as I made my way through our community in the following weeks, to proclaim my commitment to protect the safety of those threatened by the spirit of these times--Muslims and Mexicans prominent among them.

The Welcoming Committee's lead helped energize several connections we've made with our Muslim neighbors in the months since. They've joined us for food, taught us to cook, and helped us worship in their spirit of *jihad*, of faithful struggle. We've joined discussions at their mosques, we've publically joined in the spirit of their Blessed Ramadan, and now we've been invited to join in their Iftar feast, in the breaking of their fast, next Saturday evening. 8:30 at the Mayo High School Cafeteria. I hope many of us will make our reservations, as requested, by this coming Wednesday.

And, at the same time, ignited by our Racial Justice Task Group, our move "Beyond Welcoming" has now engaged us in a careful, thorough consideration of whether to join the over 700 religious congregations across our land in declaring ourselves a Sanctuary for "deportable immigrants": for constructive participants in our nation's economy and community, threatened with deportation, whose only "crime" is unauthorized presence in our country.

Let me tell you, first of all, how privileged I feel simply to have been a participant in this careful process you created years ago to structure your consideration of such an important public commitment to act for justice. This was a piece of the baton handed me by those of you who shaped it with *mi amiga* Carol years ago. It is thorough, respectful, deliberate, and radically democratic. Like Moses on Mount Pisgah, I'm not permitted to pass with you into the land it promises, but I will be, from afar, a most appreciative witness and a celebrant of your vote--and the work with which you follow it--however you choose to shape it.

And second, let me tell you what I've learned in my work on the Task Group's Sanctuary Study Team, very much as just a player in the band, as our leader of both, Phil Wheeler, has allowed me to be this morning.

I've consulted with several clergy and lay leaders in the three declared Unitarian Universalist Sanctuary churches in our state: First Universalist of Minneapolis, Unity-Unitarian of St. Paul, and White Bear UU of Mahtomedi.

- I have learned from them that the monetary costs to the church of making some kind of temporary living quarters--as temporary perhaps as a few days, just long enough to get the immigrant sufficient legal support to find them a basis for continued authorized residence--those costs are minimal.
- I have learned from them that the legal risks to the church and its members of providing the sanctuary are known in theory; they are specified in statute and regulation, but they are very hard to assess in practice. What seems clear is that no church staff member, no church member, can be placed at risk who does not personally decide to take that risk.
- And I have learned from them that the spiritual rewards, the community cohesion generated in taking the leap of faith to enter into relationship with congregations of various faiths and with the immigrant communities themselves in this work--those rewards are enormous!

Here in Rochester, I have consulted with the clergy of Peace United Church of Christ. Their membership has already voted to put themselves on the path toward offering Sanctuary. I have consulted as well with the clergy of two large Lutheran churches and one large Methodist church. Those clergy are eager to lead their congregations into Sanctuary, but they sense in their memberships enough resistance that effective advocacy must be quiet and personal at this stage. I asked them, "Might your work be facilitated by energized Unitarian

Universalists talking with their good Lutheran or Methodist neighbors, telling them of our work here, urging them to get in on the joy of justice work with us?" The clergy said, "You bet!"

Talk to your neighbors!

Finally I have consulted in depth with attorney Jean Binkovitz, who spoke so well at our forum three weeks ago. She has assured me of her continuing availability to us to help any immigrant we consider sheltering to get the legal support to maximize their opportunity to acquire the authorization to continue their residency in our country.

I am not neutral in this effort. My advocacy for immigrants began with my entry into ministry, as a newly returned Peace Corps volunteer, over 40 years ago. It led me through law school and eventually into volunteer practice as an immigration lawyer, as an expression of my ministry, in Nebraska. I count it a peak satisfaction of my professional life that 10 years ago I was able to accompany Mirna Vergara through the immigration court to win permanent residency so that her 10-year-old daughter Fabiola could continue to receive the special education support provided in her American school, support unheard of in the schools of her native Mexico.

What you call my retirement, I eagerly anticipate as my return to this work in Nebraska, as the core of my next professional investment. And beyond this professional service, I will work politically to change the laws that make this work so difficult and so necessary.

- I will work to vastly broaden the availability of work visas so that our economy is supported by dedicated and protected workers who energize its success and whose cross-fertilizing cultures give ours life itself.
- And I will work to guarantee immigrant workers in our country the right to legal support in determining their eligibility for these visas before they are subject to deportation by any president's whim.

But that is my future ministry. Only you, *con mi amigo* Luke, can choose your future ministry.

In the summer issue of our association's magazine the *UU World*, the cover art depicts Henry David Thoreau's cabin at Walden Pond. The article inside is entitled "The Original None: Thoreau at 200." "Nones," you know, are those who answer survey questions about their religious affiliation as "None." Close to 25% of our American population now describe themselves this way, and it's the fastest growing self-description being claimed. Thoreau is called a None because, though he was raised in Concord's Unitarian Church, he never joined it. We can claim him as our prophet only because we've picked up the baton he pushed toward us over the decades following his death. As the article says "respect for the interdependent web of existence, a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, justice in human relations, the right of conscience as a guide: Thoreau valued and specifically cited them all."

Most pointedly now though, I think, Thoreau's prophecy to us can be found in his revered essay *Civil Disobedience*. Henry started writing it the night in 1846 that he spent in the Concord Jail. He first presented it as a lecture in 1848. Mohandas Gandhi credited it as the guiding spirit for his Satyagraha (Not-Violent) movement for Indian independence. Martin Luther King credited it, through Gandhi, for his non-violent resistance movement for racial equality in our country. And now its spirit is again moving among us, very close to home.

In the *World* article is a statement by the Rev. Victoria Safford, lead minister of White Bear UU Church in Minnesota. Victoria says "(our) church drew on Thoreau's legacy when it decided to join the New Sanctuary Movement. In one of our early discussions one member asked, 'how can we *not* become involved?' I was reminded of the story of Emerson visiting Thoreau in jail and asking what he was doing in there, to which Thoreau is said to have replied, 'What are you doing out there?' I think that's a timely question for us today."

And who has been Associate Minister to Victoria's lead these past 5 years at White Bear UU? The Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer, soon to be your minister. Do you think his hand might be well-shaped already to receive this baton I'm reaching toward him?

In *Civil Disobedience*, Henry David Thoreau wrote

It is not a man's duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous, wrong; he may still properly have other concerns to engage him. but . . . if I devote myself to other pursuits and contemplations, I must first see, at least, that I do not pursue them sitting upon another man's shoulders. I must get off him first, that he may pursue his contemplations too.

Unitarian Universalists of Rochester. are we not even now, "pursuing our contemplations" on the shoulders of unauthorized immigrants?

Jesus of Nazareth was asked: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law." And he answered, "You shall love God with all your heart. This is the first commandment. And the second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

If we're going to worship the law, let it be the highest law, that law by which all lower laws are to be judged and toward which all lower laws are to be improved. Let us listen to our prophets. Let us act by the law of love.