

A Net to Catch My Days

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First Unitarian Universalist Church

Rochester, Minnesota

READINGS

A reading from John Updike

A reading from Annie Dillard

A reading from Jan Richardson

SERMON

It all started with a dream.
Of music and family and hard work.
It started with a vision
of what could be, what might be,
with just the right instrument
and just the right dedication
and just the right invitation.

And somewhere along the way,
things shifted and turned,
went this way and that way,
and now
you're standing in your front yard
with an upright antique piano
it's caster wheels half sunk into the grass
a metal ramp leading up to a makeshift ramp
to lead through the front threshold
into the living room.
And you take a breathe, and you look at the ramp,
then at the piano,
then at the ramp again,
and you think –
this is going to take a miracle.

But it was such a good idea.
Because it isn't just the piano, you know.
It's the story – everything has a story,
holds a story within it.

The memory of places, people, moments
seep into furniture, objects, rooms –
they hold memory, they hold our hearts.

Joyce Sutphen says it this way,

*Everything remembers something.
The rock, its fiery bed,
cooling and fissuring into cracked pieces,
the rub of watery fingers along its edge.*

*The cloud remembers being elephant, camel, giraffe,
remembers being a veil over the face of the sun,
gathering itself together for the fall.*

*The turtle remembers the sea,
sliding over and under its belly,
remembers legs like wings,
escaping down the sand under the beaks of savage birds.*

*The tree remembers the story of each ring,
the years of drought, the floods,
the way things came
walking slowly towards it long ago.*

*And the skin remembers its scars,
and the bone aches where it was broken.
The feet remember the dance,
and the arms remember lifting up the child.*

*The heart remembers everything it loved and gave away,
everything it lost and found again,
and everyone it loved, the heart cannot forget.*

So, too, did the piano have a story –
one that we didn't know, or forgot along the way,
and was shared and recast as testimony
as living family scripture.

Grandma Swartz had bought it
in Des Moines, IA,
with her first paycheck for work outside the house
in the 1950s.

She believed it was important for her children
to learn music –
so she bought this instrument
which may have been one of the most beautiful things
in their humble home.

Well, her children excelled in many things,
piano not the premiere skill,
but the piano was still there –
and it travelled –
and found a place in a new home
with shared dreams of musical children
that may or may not have come to full fruition –
the piano was re-stained with deeply warm wood tones
and it held the space, and held the music,
of holidays and lessons – like an old friend
just there, ready, to fill the space with sound.

And then, it seemed right,
for the piano to find a new home –
a place where someone, who married into the family,
would play it often,
and children's hands would find it and help it sing.

So there we were.
On the next page of the story –
with an antique piano
caster-wheel deep in the soft front lawn
on 16th street.

And then you remember
when you're trying to push it up the rental ramp –
you need help.
So we called a friend,
and we said to each other – “we got this – let's go”
And we pushed it up the ramp
and muscled it over the threshold
with only one board breaking underfoot
because when we say to each other,
I need your help –
then we push the story along
and keep things going
and say, “well, that was a lot easier with all these hands”
and we travel from sinking ground
into the house which is becoming a home –
because we just pushed
50 years of memory and story and music
into the living room.

As Amy shared these words from Jan Richardson,

*If you could see the journey whole
you might never undertake it;
might never dare the first step that propels you
from the place you have known toward the place you know not.*

*...take the vows the pilgrim takes:
to be faithful to the next step;
to rely on more than the map;
to heed the signposts of intuition and dream;
to follow the star that only you will recognize;
to keep an open eye for the wonders that attend the path;
to press on beyond distractions
beyond fatigue*

Heed the signposts of intuition and dream,
rely on more than the map –
press on beyond distractions and fatigue.

Part of a good journey
is knowing your connection to something beyond yourself.
Often it's another person or a group of people
on a shared path.
Sometimes, even when we think we're travelling solo,
it is the ground beneath us,
the air surrounding us,
the beauty of the landscape and the stories
upon the path that we find along the way –
and we know we are, indeed, not alone.

Can you think of those moments in your own life -
those moments when you have moved from the place you know
to the place you know not?

Who have been your traveling companions?

What has sustained you through the journey,
encouraged you, guided you, questioned you
so that you could make the journey and make it your own?

What has held you through it?
The transition from one home to another,
one city to another
one person to another –
transitions in work, in love, in life –
transitions in identity, in a vision of what your life was or could be
what has held you through it?

As we have moved over this summer from St. Paul to Rochester,
packing and unpacking –
and I mean that comprehensively –
packing and unpacking
boxes
and stories
and hearts and minds
and memories
and joys and sadness –
and finding where to walk the dog,
where to buy groceries,
where to put the socks...
how to angle the chair, and re-angle the chair,
then get a new chair,
and how to make a house into a home.

In the packing and unpacking of items from our house –
you are quickly reminded
they are not just items, just things -
they are filled with stories.
Not only objects –
but rooms, and places, and sidewalks...

At the threshold moments in life
it seems people begin to take a different inventory –
like putting on different lenses
of noticing each place and interaction
in a different way, when you are about to leave,
or have just arrived someplace
within the context of its story –
its story within your own life –
the moments and memories there,
and how to carry that forward.
There is something in that piano,
in that chair;
it's like every box,
as much as at the time it feels like a weight,
a burden,
they are like little treasure chests –
and all of the sudden,
and in particular if you had a good night sleep
and a good cup of coffee,
you can begin to interact with these boxes
as a bounty of memory and miracle –
recalling and reminding you
of who you are, who are your people,
what makes a house into a home.

Pat Schneider writes,

*It is a kind of love, is it not?
How the cup holds the tea,
how the chair stands sturdy and foursquare,
how the floor receives the bottoms of shoes or toes.
How soles of feet know where they're supposed to be.*

*I've been thinking about the patience of ordinary things,
how clothes wait respectfully in closets
and soap dries quietly in the dish,
and towels drink the wet from the skin of the back.
And the lovely repetition of stairs.
And what is more generous than a window?*

Sometimes it is the most ordinary,
the most mundane things
that hold the space for you – that hold - you.

It happens box by box –
you begin to unpack.

As I was unpacking my boxes and boxes and boxes
of books – one of you kindly joked:
Looks like you come with a lot of baggage.

True enough...we all do, don't we.
We travel through this world,
whether we move across the world
or our heart shifts a thousand miles
in a moment's transformation,
never moving from the ground just beneath you –
we travel with our boxes,
this container we call a soul
that holds within us all that we have been, will be,
all the memory, the stories, the moments
that have made us into who we are, and who we are becoming.

A series of incremental movement –
a way of moving and being in the world
that requires time and patience
and a chance for the soul to catch up to the mind, the body, heart.

For some, thresholds are exciting and exhilarating,
god bless you -
for others they are terrifying and hard,
and it's a really big deal to move
from one Minnesota town to another -
and I think for many of us
they are somewhere in the middle –
depending on the when, the why, the how.

As much as we often try to express strength and independence –
and we want to muscle something up the ramp on our own -
and offer to the world a calm, cool, collected, facebook-esque version of
ourselves as self-confident,
self-actualized,
self-fulfilled...

We know that we need each other.
We know, deep down, we live in relationship –
with one another, with family, with friends,
with ancestors and our best hopes for our own lives –
we live in a constant living, dynamic, dialogue
about who we are not only as an individual,
but as part of a larger whole,
the larger fabric of things,
the community of beings.

We need things to hold us –
ordinary, everyday moments and places,
as well as places to help hold, together,
the largest questions of life
about love and justice and sorrow and grief and hope
and god and death and beauty and evil and resilience.

We need places, and people,
who put pen to paper and sign their name
as each other's people –
who promise to each other
I got you – we got you – we've got this
as messy as life is,
and as much as we fail –
we've got this
because our success at creating a more just
and beautiful and equitable world
is only as powerful and as sustained as our humility
in our need
for community, for nourishment of spirit,
to be part of something
larger than ourselves –
larger than our own interests,
larger than our own egos,
large enough to help us live into our best self
filled with grace and forgiveness,
encouragement and love.

At our best,
the church –
this old-school sort of thing
with ancient practices and patterns –
where we breathe and sing and serve together
in some sort of common rhythm –
at our best,
we don't pretend to be something other than what we are –
which is a church –
where we hold together large questions –
and we come to a place cared for by generations
and hours upon hours of labor and love –

and we draw from ancient scriptures and practices
that are set in a new key for a modern world –
we believe that many teachers and traditions
have much to teach us
and so, to, does our own life experience -
and we work to grow our spirits
and practice justice
with compassion and hospitality.

What we can be for one another,
and what the church can be for us,
is a haven in the wreck of time.
A scaffold upon which we can labor and work
in the chaos of the wider world.

Church is a net
to catch our days
a glass jar
to catch the light in the summer sky –
to take beauty and struggle right into our heart
and hold the toughest questions together
to know them deeply and closely,
and find that, even when clarity is obscured
and answers don't come easy –
we have a place to hold the ambiguity
and to find something that can hold us.

Charles Blow writes,

*Our church was a humble, wood-framed building
elevated on brick pedestals,
and the earth had settled and shifted beneath it
in a way that left the building slightly warped.*

*It was a bit tattered, but exactly right:
an imperfect outside
made perfect by what was happening inside.
It was the kind of building that remembered things,
deep-down things.
Ushers held the doors like angels at heaven's gate,
directing us to an open pew,
the ends of which had been polished to a shine
by generations of hands using them for support.*

We remember, this church remembers,
a home, a heart remembers
deep-down things.

Generation after generation after generation
we keep turning toward each other,
we keep turning toward the questions
that are larger than ourselves,
looking for something to help us make meaning,
and live in meaningful ways.

I often think of the religious life
as a way to experience your everyday.
It isn't only about coming together and experiencing something on a Sunday
morning – but that's important, don't get any ideas –
but it's like a scaffold,
a framework,
a structure,
a lens,
through which we experience our days.

The filter through which we experience the world
is created by our religious and ethical values –
and at its best, it brings into sharp focus
the moments of beauty
you never expected.

All of the sudden you begin to notice what was always there
but is holy, sacred, sanctified in some way now,
because of the attunement of your heart
to the world in which we live.

The person walking by is no longer a stranger, but kindred.

The story that you hear, different from your own, is no longer something to
be skeptical of, but living scripture.

The path you're walking on
or the tiniest blade of grass
or the way the wind brushes your skin,
is no longer just a "thing" –
it is a sacrament,
a way of experiencing the holy.

All of the sudden,
you realize those around you
are your people
and they say to you, when you most need it –
I got you.

All of the sudden,
as the dusk sky turns from blue
to shades of orange and purple and pink
and the night stars appear
and you think darkness has set –
all around you
there are fireflies –
they've been there all along –
and they are sitting right next to you
right now –
just waiting
because when the path home goes dark,
they will be ready
all around you
helping you remember the deep-down things –
shining
in the darkness of night
to catch you
in a net of light.