

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Peninsula
Sunday July 29th 2018

Sermon: “To Arrive Where We Started”

“Arthur needed a project, and he gave himself one.

“He would find where his cave had been.

“On prehistoric Earth, he had lived in a cave — not a nice cave, a lousy cave, but... There was no but. It had been a totally lousy cave and he had hated it. But he had lived in it for five years which made it a home of some kind, and a person likes to keep track of his homes. Arthur Dent was such a person and so he went to buy a computer.

“That was what he really wanted, of course: a computer. But he felt he ought to have some serious purpose in mind before he simply went and paid money on what people might otherwise mistake as just a thing to play with. So that was his serious purpose: to pinpoint the exact location of a cave on prehistoric Earth. He explained this to the man in the shop.

“‘Why?’ asked the man in the shop.

“This was a tricky one.

“‘Okay, skip that,’ said the man in the shop. ‘How?’

“‘Well, I was hoping you could help me with that.’

“The man in the shop sighed and his shoulders dropped.

“‘Have you much experience of computers?’

“Arthur wondered whether to mention Eddie the computer on the *Heart of Gold* spaceship, who could have done the job in a second, or the mega-computer Deep Thought that spent seven and a half million years calculating the Answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything— but he decided he wouldn’t.

“Instead, he said ‘No.’

“‘Looks like a fun afternoon,’ said the man in the shop, but he only said it to himself.

“Arthur bought the Apple anyway. Over a few days, he also acquired some astronomical software, plotted the movements of stars, drew rough little diagrams of how he seemed to remember the stars to have been in the sky when he looked up out of his cave at night, and worked away busily at it for weeks, cheerfully putting off the conclusion he knew he would inevitably have to come to, which was that the whole project was completely ludicrous.

“Rough drawings from memory were futile. He didn’t even know how long it had been, beyond Ford’s rough guess at the time that it was ‘a couple of million years’ and he simply didn’t have the math skills.

“Still, in the end he worked out a method which would at least produce a result. He decided not to mind the fact that with the extraordinary jumble of ad hoc rules, wild approximations and arcane guesswork he was using, he would be lucky to hit the right galaxy. He just went ahead and got a result.

“He would call it the right result. Who would know?

“As it happened, through the myriad and unfathomable chances of fate, he got it exactly right, though he would never know that. He just went up to London and knocked on the appropriate door.”

This passage comes from *So Long and Thanks for All the Fish*, Douglas Adams’ fourth book in the trilogy that began with *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, and describes events after Arthur Dent has returned to the Earth. This was rather surprising to him, that he had returned to his home planet, because when he last saw it, the Earth was being destroyed by alien spaceships.

So Arthur thought himself homeless, one of the last two human beings in the galaxy, and he’d spent the last eight years wandering through space and time, visiting countless alien worlds where he was often threatened or attacked, from the very end of

the Universe itself to the prehistoric Earth where he lived in a totally lousy cave. But now Arthur's back home, and though he still doesn't understand how that can be, he's trying to figure out how his life can return to normal when he's been through so much that was definitely not normal.

Now there's a popular saying that comes to mind in situations like this, that it's the journey and not the destination that really matters. And there's some wisdom in that, in the sense that even while working toward some goal, we continue to live our lives, we continue to experience the world around us, we continue to learn and grow, and in many ways that all affects us more than simply being able to get to where we were trying to go. It's the process of putting the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle together that's the engaging past-time, not simply opening a box to find a completed picture.

This isn't to say that the destination doesn't matter, of course. There's certainly satisfaction when the jigsaw puzzle is complete.

When it comes to making a decision, for instance, there's nothing more frustrating and tiring than spending so long talking about it — analyzing the pros and cons, considering and reconsidering the arguments for and against, returning to options that had already been ruled out for reasons that have not changed, and so on — there's nothing more frustrating and tiring than spending so long *talking* about making a decision that no decision is ever actually *made*. I think this is one of the reasons why committees have a bad rap these days — not because of any actions they take or decisions they make, but because of our culture's idea that committee meetings are where actions and decisions go to die.

But the opposite extreme is just as much of a problem, and more of a problem than rushing to act or decide is being so fixated on the destination that we fail to appreciate or even enjoy what we're experiencing along the way.

There's even something called the "I'll be happy when" syndrome, to which all of us can succumb from time to time unless we catch ourselves and make a conscious effort to get out of it. After all, if we go through life saying "I'll be happy when I finish school" or "I'll be happy when I get married" or "I'll be happy when I have children" or "I'll be happy when I retire", then the logical conclusion of that train of thought is "I'll be happy when I'm dead" which is obviously senseless. Happiness cannot depend on some

imagined future state alone. I'm not saying that it's as simple as choosing to be happy now, with what we've got now, because if we could choose to be happy, then a whole lot of psychiatrists and pharmacologists would be out of work. Rather, enjoying the journey is a skill — I would say even a spiritual discipline — that often must be learned and practiced.

So about twenty years ago, I decided that I wanted to go to India. Then an opportunity to do so came up, so I took it.

Now as with any such intention to travel, there is more to it than simply reaching the place we want to go. If I had landed at Mumbai airport, had my passport stamped, then said, "Okay, I reached India," and immediately returned home, that would obviously have been ridiculous.

Rather, I wanted to look around, and see the sights, and meet the people, and taste the food. (Indian food, at least in that part of India, is, I was pleased to find, pretty similar to Indian food here. Chinese food in India, on the other hand, is tailored to the tastes of Indians, just as Chinese food in the United States is tailored to the tastes of Americans. I did learn, though, that if you find what looks like a green string bean in a bowl of lentil soup, do not eat it!)

I spent the first few days in Mumbai itself, staying with a friend in a house that no longer had running water. Rather, there was a spigot outside that produced water for one hour a day, so the residents filled buckets and barrels for what they would need to cook and wash and bathe and flush the toilets. The streets were crowded with people, women in bright and somehow spotless saris doing road repair, men in groups sharing jobs that here would be done by just one person, bicycles and three-wheeled taxis and trucks weaving around and past one another, pregnant dogs, wandering cows and even the occasional elephant.

I stayed a few nights outside the city, too, along the coast where there was a beach town that the locals visited. During the day, people would be splashing in the water, fully clothed rather than in any sort of bathing suit that might be considered immodest. During the night, it was very dark and very quiet. It was actually rather unnerving, given that I was used to living in cities and suburbs where there were street lights and the sounds of traffic at all hours. In any case, I discovered the joy of rice fried with

cumin and I drank coconut water — long before it became a thing here in the US — and I learned about asking street vendors to open new bottles of water rather than trusting that they hadn't just refilled an already open bottle from the tap somewhere.

Then I rode a train to Bangalore. I paid extra to be in a cabin with air-conditioning, which was good because it was a twenty-three hour train ride. We passed through the greenest, the most lush countryside I have ever seen, and I tried to wrap my mind around the contrast between the richness of nature and the poverty of so many of the people. At every station, vendors would crowd onto the train to sell food, drinks, newspapers, toys, souvenirs and anything else that the passengers might buy. And every time the train stopped between stations, which wasn't often for any reason that was explained, monkeys would come out of the bushes along the tracks to see what the passengers might give them.

In Bangalore, I stayed with a family. The Miss India pageant was on the television, and they were most embarrassed by that. The contestants were all taller and thinner and more pale of eyes and skin than most Indians. During one commercial break there was even an advert showing a young woman rejected at a job interview, her parents consoling her and giving her a bar of soap to make her skin lighter, and after she uses it and re-interviews, she gets the job. We also visited a Hare Krishna temple, huge with marble walls and gold statues and jeweled decorations, another contrast with the people living in poverty not so far away.

The whole time I was in India, I had no particular agenda. I went with my various hosts to experience the things that they wanted to show me, so I'm sure I saw more than I would have done as a tourist staying in a hotel, and that suited me just fine. I don't know if I'll ever get back there, or if I'll ever go anywhere similarly different from my everyday life here, but it was certainly a couple of weeks that I'll never forget, with a lasting impact that let me see some things with new eyes upon returning to the United States.

Of course, not every journey has to be to a different place in actual space for us to be changed by the time we get back to where we started.

A few years ago, the Sunday Services Committee noticed that our pulpit was falling apart. It was about thirty years old, built at about the same time that this

Sanctuary building was constructed, and it even used some of the same wooden siding. It was big, which in itself wasn't a problem, but that meant it was heavy, which meant that moving it was difficult and because of that it was starting to come apart, which was a problem. It had evidently been repaired a number of times over the years, with glue, with nails, with screws, but when a piece of wood has more old nail holes in it than places where new nails can go, then you know it's time to replace the piece of wood.

So the Sunday Services Committee began a conversation about the pulpit. It was already clear that some members had strong feelings about the pulpit — both positive and negative — which isn't surprising given that it stands in front of everyone for an hour every Sunday morning and is just as much a part of our sense of ourselves as a church as hymn books and our chalice. To learn about how people felt, then, the committee organized some open meetings, inviting people to learn about the challenge and share their own thoughts and feelings. There were e-Flame articles before and after, also shared to Facebook, which invited people to share what they knew and what they thought. Though not everyone wanted to see the pulpit replaced, the general consensus emerged that we needed a new pulpit.

Then the Sunday Services Committee recruited a small group of people to identify what was needed of a possible new pulpit and generate some design ideas. They spoke to some of our congregation's wood-workers and, given a budget for this purpose that the committee had requested from the Policy Board, they determined what would be both practical and aesthetically appealing. Barry Campbell made a scale model of the final design — I don't know who made the scale model of me! — and the Sunday Services Committee approved it for Barry to go ahead and make the full-size version.

When we unveiled and installed the new pulpit, we also paid our respects to the old pulpit. It had served the congregation well for thirty years, and there was a lot of meaning invested in it, including the memories of countless Sunday mornings and Christmas Eves, not to mention child dedications and bridging ceremonies and weddings and memorial services. We preserved part of the old pulpit — the part at the front with a metal silhouette of a flaming chalice — by framing it and mounting it on the wall, which is where it still hangs today.

From start to finish, the whole process took a year, which may sound like a long time but really isn't that long for a deliberate process of engagement. It resulted in a

nice new pulpit, yes, but it was perhaps more important that at every step, the Sunday Services Committee made sure to involve other people, to bring them into the conversation, to listen to opinions and to respect feelings, to really guide this as a community-wide effort, and so I commend the committee for demonstrating what it means to be led by our Unitarian Universalist Principles in these ways.

So yes, the destination matters. It's important to have some sense of where you're going and why. We're getting more clear about that as a congregation, thanks to another year-long process that we just completed that identified our mission to grow in wonder, connect in love, engage in service and inspire generosity. It's good to know what it is that we're actually trying to do. But the journey *really* matters, in that it's not just where we're trying to go but how we're getting there that changes us. And ultimately, every journey we take brings us back to ourselves, allowing us to see ourselves, one another, and the world around us in a new way, given perspectives and experiences that we never had before.

But there's something missing from the saying about journeys and destinations. Or maybe it's implicit, but it would be much better if it were explicit. After all, in both of the examples of journeys that I've given you — my own travels in India and the Sunday Services Committee's pulpit process — it wasn't just myself or the committee that was on the journey. Rather, there were other travelers, other companions along the way, making the trip in whole or in part as well, and it was they who not only made it possible to reach the destination, but also made the journey more pleasurable, more fulfilling, more meaningful. Though the journey may well matter more than the destination, I would argue that it is having travel companions that matters the most. Indeed, there's another saying that comes to mind: If you want to go fast, go alone. But if you want to go far, go together.

Put the two sayings together, in fact, and the conclusion is that it's better to travel far with companions than to merely reach the end quickly and alone.

We have an opportunity to practice that coming up in August. Every Wednesday evening next month, DRE Joanne and I will lead a series of five workshops on the subject of Being a Unitarian Universalist Parent. Each evening will begin with a community dinner, and there will be child-care so that parents with children can participate fully. That's a no-brainer! But it's not just for parents of young children.

This program is open to anyone who is or who has been a parent, or is now a grandparent, or is an uncle or aunt, or who looks after children, or who works with children in any capacity here, or who just wants to understand more about what it means to be an adult Unitarian Universalist in a multigenerational community like ours. The only thing we ask is that you let Joanne or I know that you're coming, because we're providing the dinner on the first Wednesday evening, and then the rest will be pot-luck.

We're offering this program, in the month before the school year and our new programs of Religious Exploration begin, because what we do in RE here on Sunday mornings and monthly youth programs and occasional Saturday events are not enough. As the Reverends Makahah Morriss and David MacPherson, both mainstays of Unitarian Universalism here in Virginia, point out in their introduction to the Being a UU Parent workshops, "parents are continually asking how they can better understand and interpret UU values during the week. They feel under pressure to help their children respond to such questions as: What is the Bible? What do UUs believe about G-d, or about heaven and hell?" As Mananah and Dave have observed through their decades of working with UU parents, "they want to know how they can make their homes stronger centers for UU values."

Being a parent is clearly not a mere destination. Rather, it's a journey that begins even before a child is born, then runs from infancy to adolescence, and of course continues long after the child has become an adult. And it's a journey that cannot be undertaken alone. It needs too much of us individually, and we owe it to our children as their parents, that we must have the support and companionship of others along the way.

It's better to travel far with companions than to merely reach the end quickly and alone. May this be our motto for every path that we take on this journey of the spirit that we call life.