

A Sense of Place

Today is water communion. Mostly, if my informal survey is correct, we bring virtual water. We forget when we are at the ocean or a lake and then it's a quick dash to the kitchen with a pill container and out the door. Or, it's a quick dash to the church bathroom and a small paper cup. I may be guilty of judging others by myself, but that's another story. In any case, we do have a clear idea of where we've been in the last few months and what was important to us in these last few months, what our journeys, inward or outward, have been about, what we want to share with each other. So, if the water we bring is virtual (and probably more sanitary), the journeys we have been on, the places we have been, including our own homes, have been very real.

Real as well is the place we bring them to, this place, this one spot that is not any other place in the world. This church on this ground is real and is the ending point of our journeys today. When I'm here by myself, I sometimes see this as a cup, perhaps I should say a chalice, a beautiful, light filled chalice, holding all our hopes and dreams and longings together, brimming, overflowing with the water of life. In our case, as U-U's, we don't ask to have our thirst quenched. We ask, though, for the inspiration to continue on, to seek, to have our thirst for more understanding sharpened, not slaked.

Searchers are those who journey. In this, we have a lot in common with other Americans. Most Americans change addresses quite often. The idea that movement is progress is built into our national character. From the beginning of this country, most of the people here have come from someplace else and once they got here, they kept on moving. The habit of belonging to the land was broken.

We often venerate Native Americans for whom the land, the very land itself, was sacred. I think we may even envy that sense of belonging, that sense of home, that sense that the very ground we tread is part of us and we are part of it. It is hard to always be a stranger.

At one time, we all belonged to some part of the earth. At one time, our portion of the earth was sacred to us. In the Hebrew Scriptures, that is said over and over again. Each mountain, each well was sacred and to leave the land was a sort of death. Many people in Earth based religions have tried to recapture that sense of the sacredness of the earth.

I recently read Madeline Bunting's book, *Love of Country: A Hebridean Journey*. She is British and writes movingly of the islands that lie off the west coast of Scotland. Arn and I went there on a trip through my seminary and they are indeed beautiful, in an almost unearthly way. But the author is interested in describing more than beauty. She is interested in the passionate love between those

who live there and their land, both those who are natives there, whose roots go back generations, and those who have adopted the islands or been adopted by them. The book was wonderful but when I finished I thought, why doesn't someone write like this about our area, which is also beautiful, yes, even in the bleakness of winter. Why don't we think about our attachment to this piece of ground or any of the multiple pieces of ground that we have called home?

For me, home is always about 80 miles north of here, flat, bleak countryside that is, like here, unbelievably lush and beautiful in the summer, a riot of color in the fall and in the winter is stark and spare, crystal and shimmering. We don't get spring; we get mud. It's not as breathtaking as many, more famous places but for me, something slips into place when I get there. I'm sure that for everyone here there is such a place, somewhere that, as you round a bend, makes your heart lift with recognition and pleasure. At least I hope there is such a place for you.

Increasingly, this is not the case for many. Not only are we a restless, rootless people, we have also contrived to make much of the earth a desert, a desert that looks the same wherever we happen to be. From Sante Fe to Seattle, from Long Island to Los Angeles, one Dunkin' Doughnut looks pretty much like another. Actually, that's the idea behind them. A drive down Rt. 31 gives the template for most of the U.S., for much of the world. A place that is every place

and no place. More and more of the earth is turned into profit making machines, not only in retail outlets but in numerous other enterprises. And there is a logic behind this.

Speaking of the conflict between residents and power companies around wind farms in the Hebrides, Madeline Bunting, says:

“This is the placelessness which capitalism requires to ensure that the flows of capital, people and resources can be ordered to achieve economic efficiency. Local belonging, which impedes or slows down those flows, has to be undermined and eventually eliminated. The dystopian endpoint is that everywhere becomes a kind of anywhere, all distinctive characteristics erased. Metropolitan elites who determine cultural status subject the local and parochial to dismissive contempt.”...

“‘Knowing one’s place’ has become a derogatory comment about class hierarchy, but the local is where people live their history and geography and both are infused with emotional attachment and personal identity.”

How many people can now say they ‘know their place’? And what a loss there is when we can’t. Where we are from, the geographic place, is a huge part of who we are. Even those who have been raised in different places carry some of each of them in their heart or decide which one is the place that has formed their

sense of self, a place they felt most at home, a mother or father's place of origin, a grandparent's house, a place they formed their relationships, raised their children..

We can love many places, but we love most that in which we can recall the feel, the sight, the sounds, the smells; the places that are real and tangible. We are here, in the flesh, the flesh which embeds us in the world around us.

Our building is also in the flesh, so to speak. Like us, it creaks and groans sometimes. It requires maintenance and repair. There is nothing abstract about wood and glass and cement. It is real and it is not going anywhere.

We are in a particular place, near the center of a small community in upstate New York. I believe it is here for a purpose, a purpose that would not be the same if it were someplace else. And, like the places that define us, the fact that we are here and not elsewhere defines us as well.

It is in this building that we create community, that difficult art, and within this building that we create something greater than the sum of all of us. It is in this building that we are in relationship with the people around us, with the village of which we are apart. It is this building that is part of the landscape of this town, the town that has formed us. It is this building that has been part of the history of this town, this building that has housed those who have helped to form the town.

We live in our bodies and our bodies live in a particular place on the ground. This is how it is with us mortals. To think it is otherwise, to become more abstract, is to wander into fantasy. Fantasy is wonderful as literature, as metaphor, as vicarious enjoyment, but it is not a healthy place to live.

As Americans in the twenty first century, however, we have a different sense of place than people of earlier times. We are not medieval serfs, bound to the land. Even in earlier times, there was more movement than what we used to believe. Humans have always been journeyers. But change and movement are increasing, not decreasing. We choose much more than our ancestors did where we will live and for how long. We move to get work. We move to be in a different climate. We move from fear of persecution, to seek freedom. We move for family, for change, for adventure. As the world has changed, we are not as embedded in our environment as we used to be. Each of us are often from a variety of places, a diversity in ourselves. In choosing, in seeking and journeying we have gained some things and lost others. Our treks and migrations have changed the world and go on changing it and it changes us. In the diversity found in all places, our horizons are expanded and we are enriched by the variety of lives around us. As we come to understand our own love for our home, for the place that forms us, let us then think of the love that others have for their homes. We are all the same in our desire to belong.

More than ever we are from a tapestry of places and each thread is part of the pattern of our identity. Bunting quotes anthropologist Tim Ingold who says, “this tangle is the texture of the world...beings do not simply occupy the world, they inhabit it and in so doing—in threading their own paths through the meshwork—they contribute to its ever evolving weave.”

For all our luxury of choice, we are all, still, from someplace. It is impossible to be from nowhere. Chosen or by accident, we are here. We are part of this place, this real and solid spot on the map, with all its problems, sorrows, longing and joys. We make the tapestry that is this church. We are threads in the weave that is Central Square. I firmly believe that we are here because we are supposed to be here. We are supposed to be here because we are needed here. We have something to contribute to this place that no one else can.

We are often what the British call “the loyal opposition.” We bring a different vision to this part of the world. More often than we know, I think it is a welcome vision, if a surprising one. I hear many good things from this community when I say I am part of this church. We are known for our actions, for our participation in different events and we are known as a church which has acceptance and compassion for all. If we are not always in accord, politically or theologically, with our neighbors, it seems as if our neighbors would miss us, if

only as someone to argue with. They would miss the spice and color we bring here. And I think that most welcome the way we speak for others who may be uncertain about speaking for themselves.

We are the loyal opposition. For all our differences, we are much like our neighbors. We are not alien. This is our home and we love it.

We live on a two way street. Because we are at home here, we bring a different vision of what it is to be U-U's to our denomination. Many, many U-U churches are in large cities or college towns. It is all too easy for those who live in a different environment to see the world too abstractly. We are witnesses for a different side of American life, small town, rural, too often ignored or not taken seriously. We add a different thread to the tapestry of Unitarian-Universalism.

This is our home. We are charged with making this the best place we can, with caring for each other, with caring for those around us. There is no one else to do this but us. This is the place where we come together, where we mingle the waters of our lives, of our sacred places. We go out from here to witness, to act, to be refreshed and restored. Here we bring together all our places in a communion of ourselves.