

## **How I Got Here - Why I'm Still Here**

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### **Readings**

from the *Great Learning*, by Confucius (translation James Legge)

First verse:

What the Great Learning teaches is to illustrate illustrious virtue, to care for the people, and to rest in the highest excellence.

Fourth verse:

The ancients who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue throughout the kingdom, first ordered well their own states.

Wishing to order well their own states, the first regulated their families.

Wishing to regulate their families, the first cultivated their persons.

Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts.

Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts.

Wishing to be sincere in their thoughts, they first extended to the utmost their knowledge.

Such extension of knowledge lay in the investigation of things.

from *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.

### **Sermon**

How did I get here?

Well, same as all of us: fourteen billion years of cosmic evolution!

Big bang, hydrogen and helium, stars, galaxies, supernovae... our solar system coalescing, planets, our planet, soup of amino acids, life, several billion years of life's evolution, brain's evolution, human history...

You know the story. More or less.

So, yes, here I am and here you are, the result of all this and of generations of love and trial, joy and sorrow. Here we are. Our lives embedded... inextricably embedded... in the cosmic story, universe story, earth story. And, as I've said on other occasions, I really do think this is worth remembering – that we live our modest stories in the midst of this unimaginably larger story, not just in the midst of, but part of the unfolding of life, star stuff. A little perspective which might be oddly comforting when small things that befall us may begin to seem bigger than they really are. A little perspective to remind us at the same time that the small things we *do* really might matter to this larger story of life.

It is in this larger context then, that as we have completed twenty years of ministry together and begin our twenty-first, I find myself reflecting a little closer to home on how I came to be *here*, here at the Old Ship Church with you, here in Hingham, Massachusetts, here a Unitarian Universalist parish minister.

Our lives are such an interesting blend of choice and chance, aren't they? I know mine is. I expect yours are.

So my first thought is to retrospectively piece together some of this blend of choice and chance.

I know, for example, that I would probably not be here were it not for my parents' exploring away from their Presbyterian roots toward agnosticism and the Unitarianism they embraced when I was about ten years old.

I know I was influenced by the image of the symbols of the world's religions which were printed on the order of worship cover each Sunday at the Unitarian church we first attended as a family – symbols which found their way to this beautiful stole you so generously presented to me five years ago.

I know it made a huge difference to my journey that I was drawn to the study of philosophy and religion in college – what are our lives about... what are our lives for?

And that, after work as an aide on the psychiatric ward of a hospital and four years of teaching music at a school for autistic and other severely learning disabled children, I was drawn back to school, realizing that neither medicine, psychology, or music therapy were paths that attracted me... enough; instead being drawn to theological education – *maybe* ministry I thought... but at least the education to begin with.

(Yes, our journeys have their fits and starts, we often only see a few steps ahead. At least that's how it was with me.)

So seminary in California – with Susan by then, one of the greatest blessings of my life – at the UU school, Starr King School for Religious Leadership. Studies, church internship, and volunteering with the World Citizens Assembly, growing from this strange notion I had – that you have too – that we ought to get along on this one beautiful earth, our home. And this notion another piece of my patchwork journey

Then returning to the east coast, and working for Cambridge Forum, a public affairs radio program which is a project of the First Parish (UU) in Cambridge.

Good work, but after a few years it becoming clear that the funding might not support my position well enough – and our family was growing... (Sandra... Adam...) Not only that, I was discovering that as interesting as the Forum was (and is), as important the work – there were some things missing; for example: a deeper experience of community and adequate time for my own philosophical and religious explorations.

At that moment, then, pushed by practical financial considerations on the one hand, and pulled by what you might call my soul's yearnings on the other, I began to look for a parish.

That was in 1986... when Old Ship was one of the Boston-area churches looking for a new minister. Timing, they say, is everything...

I had never heard of the Old Ship Church. Can you imagine that?

But I met with the Search Committee early in 1987, and the rest is, as they also say, history.

Now, you might be interested to know that someone on the Search Committee had in one of our conversations asked me how long I might stay at Old Ship if I were called here. Having never done anything in my adult life for more than four years, I took a chance and said that if things worked out, maybe... five years.

Well, here we are, Susan and I and our family (for the last eighteen years also including Eliza), in 2007, twenty years later. Still here. Well... except for our children, grown and gone (mostly, most of the time, just about gone – some of you know how that goes).

So among other things – after twenty years we can say... so much for my predictive skills.

So, how *did* I get here? This interesting combination of circumstance, chance, and choice: more like following my nose (maybe your lives have been something like that...) – noticing what it was that drew me along the way of my life: philosophy, religion, the big questions, the opportunity to help another person, the moral call to try to make a difference on this planet during my time here (a call that seems if anything more urgent than ever in this time of a misbegotten war, global warming, etc. etc..)

Perhaps it all rests pretty succinctly in this morning's two readings.

I first read Thoreau one summer during my college years, Thoreau who famously "went to the woods... to live deliberately." Yes, live with a completely open and curious mind in such a way that you might actually discover something about life, about our purpose, about everything. Well, it seems to me that a life in Unitarian Universalist ministry is one way to live in this spirit.

And Confucius – our class spent most of a Haverford College semester with Professor Desjardins on just a few verses of this text, the *Great Learning* – "great" in contrast to all the small learnings of our lives, the "how to" learnings, the facts and figures learnings, all important in their way, but not the Great Learning. The Great Learning? Looking within (like Thoreau at Walden), understanding the interrelatedness of everything, understanding ourselves... so that we might better serve life.

And though I couldn't know it at the time, might have only dimly suspected... that passage, along with several other verses which we learned inside and out, plumbing the meanings of the Chinese characters, along with Thoreau, became guides to me throughout my life, and surely in yet another way drew me without my quite realizing it toward the ministry.

And, yet one more perspective on how I got here: in some mysterious way all along (and maybe not so mysterious) perhaps there is a connection between the fact that my grandfather had been a minister (of the Presbyterian variety) – and that his name became my middle name, given me upon my birth just weeks after he had died. No one ever pushed me in the direction of ministry; but there are these evocative connections.

And... yet more mysterious... what about discovering after I arrived here that I am one of the direct descendents of the first minister of our First Parish, Peter Hobart. What's going on there?

In any case, here I have been for twenty years, here we have been together – some of you, anyway, for all these years.

Why am I *still* here?

To use the language of depth psychology, it seems to me that my soul's work is still here. For all the things that drew me here to begin with seem to be drawing me still, now keeping me here.

For example, having celebrated 187 child dedications and 188 memorial services, along with almost 500 weddings, I have sat with people in the midst of life's most joyful and most sorrowful moments, and I have indeed learned something of what life has to teach, as Thoreau put it, through these shared passages. Learned, to begin with, about the resilience of the human spirit. And learned by experience the presence (a precious wakefulness you might say) we so often have for one another in the midst of these passages. Presence we can try to bring to all the moments of our lives – and why not?

So... one reason I am still here is because here I continue to have the privilege to be with others in the midst of life's trials and joys.

Having led worship here I suppose seven or eight hundred times, and having led I don't know how many classes and discussions, I have learned so much from your wisdom, within our honest conversation and exploration.

So I am also still here because here I can continue to explore the big questions in conversation – conversation about things that matter – with others (you!) who share this questing spirit of mind.

And having worked together to become a congregation welcoming to gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people, having worked together however imperfectly to address racism, having stood with some of you in vigils for peace, having gathered together our shared financial resources on so many occasions to serve the common good of justice and peace, and now working together to create a greener congregation, a greener world, I continue to learn about the power we have when share our passions for justice and peace and sustainability, joining our hands in work that can only be done, certainly can best be done, together.

So I am also still here because here I can participate in loving community to serve life.

To put it all yet another way, bringing my reflections full circle, I am still here because I feel that *here* at Old Ship we can consciously wake up to the awareness that we are part of this fourteen billion year continuing unfolding of universe, of life; in other words, we can really wake up to life... And know from deep within (the "investigation of things" as the translation of Confucius awkwardly put it) that this carries an obligation – to ourselves, to our loved ones, to our communities, to the earth, to life.

To put it as I have many times, knowing that we are blessed by life, we also come to know that we must turn and bless others, bless the world, bless the universe with our lives. And

*here* you and I together have the opportunity to do this. Which is about the most human way to live that I know about. And it's why I'm still here.

Drawing to a close: Twenty years ago my first sermon as your settled minister, September 13, 1987, was titled simply "Beginnings."

In re-reading it, I hear a key point worth recalling today. This is the reminder that however long we have done something – played an instrument, played a game, practiced a profession or craft – we are also always beginners, and that in fact we do our best work when we cultivate what the Zen tradition calls "beginner's mind." When it comes to ministry, shared ministry: open still and always to new learning, to new growing, to new ways of serving one another and serving all life.

With all this in mind, then, the *future* beckons, yes; but perhaps more importantly we are invited more fully into the present. This present moment which holds everything – all that has been in the miraculous and mysterious universe story and in each of our stories of chance and choice – and also all that will be, now a seed, then leaf and fruit and flower of our lives lived as well as we can manage in this sometimes sorrowful, sometimes joyful world.

Well, so far as I can tell it has been – allowing for our human and institutional imperfections (it's real life after all) – a good shared twenty years.

And looking to the years ahead, whatever else we are and might become in the midst of our shared journeys, may we always be a place that shelters those who are hurting, that encourages each journeying soul, that welcomes and encourages free thought and an open heart, and that reaches out to help, to serve, to do our part.

So may it always be.

And... though words cannot adequately express my gratitude: Thank you for welcoming and supporting and sustaining my ministry and our shared ministry for all of these years. May we continue.