

Journey to Here

the Rev. Edmund Robinson
Unitarian Universalist Meeting House
October 9, 2011

It was a crisp fall morning 15 years ago when a band of people gathered at the Creative Arts Center where they had been meeting as a Unitarian Universalist Fellowship for ten years. They had some sort of ceremony involving strings, stood in a circle, held hands, and then marched out into the sunshine behind a bagpiper, with their new minister wheeling their pulpit. They marched down Crowell Road two blocks to this building, which they had just bought, as improbable as that seemed. The names of all those who made the walk that morning are on the Founder's plaque in the rear of the sanctuary.

Our church life thus began with a journey, and I want to reflect this morning on what kind of trip it has been. In August I went on a retreat for the Ballou Channing District Board; Ed Hardy sits on that board with me, and he asked me to lead a certain song for the worship he was planning. It is an African song called Woyaya, which means roughly, "We are going." It has been covered by all kinds of singers and appears, appropriately enough, in the Teal colored paperback hymnal, *Singing the Journey*. I have known the song for several years, but I found it very moving to sing it at this retreat, and the words come back to me as I think of the journey of this church from 1996 to now:

We are going,
Heaven knows where we are going,
But we know within.
And we'll get there,
Heaven knows how we will get there,
But we know we will.
It will be hard, I know,
And the road will be muddy and rough
But we'll get there,
Heaven knows how we will get there,
But we know we will.

I think it is fitting that Ed Hardy asked me to lead this song, for he and I have each been with this church on its journey, which began that morning on Crowell Road.

Heaven knows where we are going. The religious journey of the Jewish people, according to the Torah, began when God asked Abram to leave Ur, the city in Mesopotamia

where he was born. God promised to make of his descendants a great nation, but Abram was still wondering about this promise many years later when he and Sarai were still childless in their eighties and nineties. As improbable as it may seem, they finally had a son.

When I was installed as minister of this church in January of 2009, the Rev. Kim Crawford Harvie preached a wonderful sermon based on the Genesis story of Jacob on his journey wrestling with God all night. Jacob had lain down to sleep with a stone under his head, and after he had wrestled with God, he set the stone up to mark the place. Kim told us that a church was like that stone, both a pillow and a pillar. It is the place from which we march forth to confront the ills of the world, and it is the place to which we return for comfort, strength and inspiration.

The archetypal journey of the Jewish people began when they left slavery in Egypt and wandered in the Sinai desert for forty years. They were promised a land flowing with milk and honey, but for a long time it looked like all they would get was starvation. Oh, and these stone tablets which gave them detailed rules to live by, and which the orthodox among them still try to live by.

Islam marks its beginning from the hijra, or journey of Mohammed and his followers from Mecca to Medina in the year 622 CE. While Mohammed had been receiving revelations from Allah for years before that, the 200-mile trek to Medina put the revelation into action, and in all Muslim history from that time forward, the year is designated AH, after the hijra.

People who make journeys for religious reasons are often called pilgrims. In Europe, people make pilgrimages to religious centers such as Canterbury in England or Santiago de Compostela in Spain, and whole villages sprung up along the pilgrimage routes. Chaucer writes his classic collection of tales from the Canterbury pilgrims.

I am reading Nathaniel Philbrick's book about the Mayflower, and am struck by how driven those pilgrims were to leave England for Holland and then leave Holland for America, largely unprepared for what they would find, just seeking to worship in their own way.

Each leaving involves a kind of death. You lose the people you've grown up with, the places that are so familiar, and you strike out into the unknown. The pilgrim throws herself on the mercy of strangers, both those living along the road and the fellow travelers.

Home then becomes a vexed idea. Is home the place you left, or the place you're going to? And if it's the place you're going to, how will you know when you get there? How do you know when you're home? Or are you ever really at home?

When those pilgrims marched down Crowell Road fifteen years ago, you probably had high hopes and expectations. Certainly it must have seemed that acquiring this magnificent building right in the most visible spot in town had been beyond your wildest dreams only a few

months before, and now it was a reality. If this citadel could be breached, was anything out of reach?

I was pleased and privileged to be called here in 2008, but I wonder whether in the back of some minds there wasn't a hope that a minister named Robinson would be able to do for Chatham what Jim Robinson had done for Brewster a quarter-century earlier. I preached at First Parish Brewster the first year I came here and remember talking to a member of the search committee there at coffee hour. He said they were looking for a candidate who would get the church back up to 700 members. I said, if you get a candidate who will take the job under those conditions, you need to run away from him or her as fast as you can. All any minister can promise to do is his or her best with the situation they walk into.

I am keenly aware as I stand here that as I was called to this pulpit three years ago, many of you probably entertained similar hopes, hopes that this church would get back its youth and young families and get back to the 200-member mark it reached shortly after the Crowell Road journey. Instead, we have a church with no RE program, with a diminishing number of pledge units, a trickle of new members coming in and a larger trickle leaving through death or moves away. Our Finance committee has said in no uncertain terms that we need to bring in new members at an increasing rate, and our Board has made membership growth our top priority.

But let's put this in context. The progress of liberal religion in this part of the world has not been a smooth ascent. Chatham had a Universalist church from 1825, but in 1943, the governing board of that church was faced with a major decision. A hurricane had damaged the building, toppling the steeple, and they had to decide whether to go on with being a church. They investigated selling the whole thing to the town or to another church, but no one was interested. They were tempted to disband altogether, but instead they pulled themselves together, raised some money, rebuilt the church and hired a new minister. For most of the fifty years before that, it had been a summer-only church; now they went year-round. But they fell short of their hopes; they only lasted another dozen years before selling the building to the Episcopalians.

Two decades later, over in Brewster, First Parish faced a similar problem. Their minister left in a dispute, and they called a meeting to discuss whether to go on or disband. They had a membership of about 60. One of the newer members was Dick Soule. As Dick tells it, he was drafted into being President, and as he was a contractor, it was a wise choice: one of his first moves as President was to install an indoor toilet in the church.

They were in need of a minister, and they heard about the assistant minister in Concord, Jim Robinson. They convinced him to relocate to the Cape. Within a few years, the almost-dead congregation was not only revive, but thriving. It was in 1986, four years after

Jim's arrival, that he decided to plant a fellowship in Chatham. We are that rarity among UU churches, a planted church; we were an investment in the future, and a leap of faith. First Parish Brewster not only planted the seed, it also sent over fertilizer and watered us when we needed it. And it paid off, for the congregation marched down Crowell Road ten years later into its new building.

But the point is that churches have their ups and downs. John Lennon said "Life is what happens to you when you're making other plans." Journeys of religious bodies involve twists and turns. Some of the things that happen to a church are from internal factors like decisions made by lay leadership or the minister. Some are due to external factors like demographics and economic cycles.

So it should not surprise us that the reality of the last fifteen years has differed in significant ways from the expectations and dreams which were in the minds of the marchers that October day.

I don't have interviews conducted that day, but I do have two long-range planning reports from 2001 and 2004. Both identified as a major obstacle the lack of space for activities. The congregation had peaked at 200 and there was a vibrant RE program and activities were getting in each other's way. Sharon DaSilva drew up sketches of building additions that we could consider to increase the size for programs, get completely accessible, and have a working kitchen.

Life intervened, of course, and ministerial transition occupied the attention of the congregation from shortly after that last report until 2008. It was a trying time, and the strains of that era sometimes are still felt in the congregation. But two interim ministers largely helped the congregation get through the patch of rough road.

Which brings us to my ministry.

The search committee that brought me here expressed high hopes that with a settled minister the parents and children who had left two years before would return, but it hasn't happened. With the departure of Joan McDonald in 2010, we have had to face life with no children's RE program. Her departure coincided with a budget crunch, so there was simply no money to re-fill the RE position even if we had the children.

This has been painful, and in the long run, I want to keep our options open to find a way to attract young families back to the church. But we have to concentrate on the people who are here and be as welcoming as we can to those in middle and upper ages who might get something out of this church.

Did you see the Cape Cod Times Saturday? Right on the front page was the familiar face of Fran Jones, grinning at the camera from his quahog boat. Fran was the illustration for an

article about an unexpected demographic twist revealed by the census figures. While the number of seventy-somethings is going down, the number of eighty-somethings is going up, and particularly among men. From 2000 to 2010, the number of men between 80 and 84 on the Cape took a 24% jump, while the number 85 and older went up by 42%! The equivalent figures for women were much smaller” 8% increase for the age between 80 and 84, and 23% increase for 85 and up.

Now Fran is not a typical example, in fact he is a rarity: a Chathamite in his eighties who has been here all his life. The more typical story, the story of most of you, is one of coming to the mid-Cape to retire in your sixties or seventies. But the demographic problem of the church is that the economy has put a crimp in retirement, and the steady stream of retirees moving to this area has slowed down somewhat as retirement plans begin to seem uncertain.

Young adults, which we would dearly love to have are demographically most out of reach. The census shows that, between 2000 and last year, the number of people between the ages of 25 and 44 living on Cape Cod fell 26 percent. And you may have noticed the article in the Chronicle that Chatham High has just 29 students in this years’ freshman class.

When I first got here, one of you suggested that the church had considered erecting a play-yard outside to attract kids and their parents would follow. Maybe that’s a good idea, and I don’t want to close any doors. But I think happiness consists in wanting what you have, to use Forrest Church’s mantra, and what we have are some working people and a lot of retirees trying to make sense of their lives and trying to maintain something like home far away from where they grew up or raised their children.

In fact, we would do well to remember all of Forrest Church’s recipe for happiness and peace of mind: want what you have, be who you are, do what you can.

Who we are is a mixed bag, but a lot of us are retirees. In 2004, you took a survey of the congregation. The median age at that point was 71. 12 of you were employed full-time, 10 part-time, and 43 were retired. 20 lived alone, 40 with partner, and only 5 with partner and child. But the most telling statistic, to me, was the answer to the question, where is your nearest family. 31 had family on cape, 35 had nearest family off cape, and for 4 of these the nearest family was over 1000 miles away.

We have journeyed to here from other lives. This is where we are now. I am in the same boat that you are – as I count it, this is segment five of my life, and I keep up irregularly if at all with the people from the first four segments. If it weren’t for Facebook, I wouldn’t keep up with half of them.

You are UUs and you are going to do what you want to do, and that will only be what I have proposed if you are convinced it is a good idea. I am proposing that rather than look at

ways to attract the dwindling number of children and young adults in this area, we try to make the journey of this church responsive to the journeys that we are on the journeys that brought us each here individually. Most of us are far away geographically from where we started. Some of us came here with a nest egg, and all of us are trying to re-nest. Some of us are migratory birds – we have a summer nest here and a winter nest in Florida or Arizona or Oklahoma. How are we doing? Can I borrow some straw?

But we share values even when we're not sharing space. In the Your Journey/Our Journey project last spring, we started from our individual odysseys to try to build a picture of where the church was coming from and where it was going. I was struck by Barbara Waters' description of a dragonfly: she was overcome with curiosity for the natural world, and started a lifelong habit of asking questions: why is it this way, and not another. That was what she considered central to her identity that led her to Unitarian Universalism. And I think it is true of all of us to some extent. Whatever drew us to Unitarian Universalism is a quality we have had for a long time. We are ceaseless explorers.

T.S. Eliot said

“Home is where one starts from. As we grow older
The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated
Of dead and living. Not the intense moment
Isolated, with no before and after,
But a lifetime burning in every moment...¹”

Our common journey is the sum of our individual journeys, but I think we need to ask ourselves how the church could help us deepen and enrich the experience of living in this age, of understanding the changes we are going through, and how we can reach out to and help one another. This is why I proposed a year-long program called Coming of Age for Seniors which will begin in a week. We will explore the spiritual changes which accompany the physical ones as we age.

Some of you may say, but isn't this focus on our aging and our own lives distracting us from the real problems in our community and world? Our journey has included church-wide social witness projects like the crosses on the lawn and the boots on the lawn, and the rainbow flag which kept getting vandalized in the early years. We often wish for a more active social action program now, but this church at present is like a lot of UU churches: the energy in social action is largely in individual efforts. We have Betsy Stevens serving breakfasts to homeless

¹“East Coker,” part of the “Four Quartets”

men at the Methodist Church and Connie Pina organizing meals at the Congregate House. The largest single social action project in Chatham is the Turkey Trot, run by Mary Parsons and Linda Redding. The largest outreach effort of our church is the Thrift Shop, which touches many lives and, not incidentally, helps our budget to balance.

Howard Thurman said, "Do not ask what the world needs, ask what makes you come alive, and then go and do that, for what the world needs is people who have come alive." This church cannot give you more days of your lives, but it can help you live the days you have with intensity, gratitude and joy.

The church is, in Kim Crawford Harvie's words, pillow and pillar; it provides comfort and connectedness, and it provides a base from which to go forth into the world, individually or collectively. We are seeing around us a new protest movement which started in Wall Street and has since spread around the country; it seems to be aimed at a lot of the things many of us find wrong in the country. Many of us are sympathetic with the "occupy" movement; it will soon be coming to Cape Cod, I understand, but any of you who want a more immediate participation are invited to join me this afternoon right after coffee hour as I drive up to Boston to sit in witness and solidarity with the protesters in Dewey Square. I'll be coming back in the late afternoon. We can go forth from this pillar.

The journey which began on Crowell Road has stretched for fifteen years; many of the original pilgrims have died or moved away. We have fought many worthy battles, enjoyed many good laughs, sung many hymns, listened to many sermons, organized many events, sold many goods. The journey has not always been smooth, but I think for most of us it has been interesting and fun.

"We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time."
May we continue to share this road awhile.

Amen.

Readings for October 9
Selections from "Four Quartets" by T.S. Eliot

East Coker

Home is where one starts from. As we grow older

The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated
Of dead and living. Not the intense moment
Isolated, with no before and after,
But a lifetime burning in every moment
And not the lifetime of one man only
But of old stones that cannot be deciphered.
There is a time for the evening under starlight,
A time for the evening under lamplight
(The evening with the photograph album).
Love is most nearly itself
When here and now cease to matter.
Old men ought to be explorers
Here or there does not matter
We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion
Through the dark cold and the empty desolation,
The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters
Of the petrel and the porpoise. In my end is my beginning.

Little Gidding

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.